State organizations and agencies:

A description of the Norwegian survey on organizational autonomy, steering and control

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Introduction

This paper is a short description of the Norwegian survey on organizational autonomy, steering and control in civil service organizations. In March 2004 the Norwegian translation and adaptation of the extensive Belgian (Flanders) survey arrangement was distributed to all civil service organizations in Norway (i.e. all state agencies and bodies outside the ministries, reporting directly to a ministry). The organizations were asked to fill in a web-based questionnaire and the purpose of the survey has been to get systematic knowledge about the following main topics:

- Organizational characteristics
- Autonomy characteristics
- Steering and control characteristics
- Organizational culture
- Other factual information

The paper will briefly discuss how we conducted this survey; who we addressed in the survey (the survey population) and our experiences concerning the accomplishment of the survey. We will also provide some data which describe the response rate. In brief, we will address the following questions:

- Research population.
    - Who is in and who is out?

- How the survey was carried out:
    - Content of the survey
    - How the survey was accomplished in practice
    - Our experiences concerning the survey
    - Data quality

- Response rate
    - Response rate distributed on
        - Parent Ministry
        - Form of affiliation
        - Size
        - Basic type of organization

Research population - who is in and who is out?

In this section we will briefly present some basic organizational information about the units in the survey. In the formal structural arrangements of the Norwegian state apparatus, form of affiliation is a central organizational feature to classify whether an organization is part of civil service, a state owned company or a governmental foundation. Civil service is divided into three main levels – central, regional and local. The central level is divided into quite small ministries with central agencies, other public administration bodies and government administrative enterprises outside the ministries, but reporting to one or more ministry. Civil service organizations at the regional and local level may report directly to a ministry, or through a central agency. All civil service organizations are, legally speaking, government entities subject to ministerial directions and directly subordinated to ministerial control. In contrast to state-owned companies, civil service organizations are regulated through the state budget, the state collective wage agreement, the state pension scheme, the Freedom of Information Act, and the administrative law regulate the civil service. Government administrative enterprises are given enhanced budgetary leeway.[1] In short, form of affiliation grants different sets of formal constraints or freedom of action in the interplay with general governmental regulative frameworks. In this respect, the level of local autonomy and political steering and control to a certain degree at least formally follows as a consequence of form of affiliation. In Norway, semi-autonomous agencies and bodies outside the ministries represent the largest share of the civil service. In 2003, only a small percentage of civil servants were employed by ministries (about 3.900). In comparison, about 120.000[2] civil servants were employed by central agencies, other public administration bodies and government administrative enterprises.

The Norwegian survey addresses all organizations in the civil service outside the ministries in 2003; i.e. organizations which are part of the state as legal entity and who report directly to a ministry. These organizations can be divided into several types (total number of units in 2003 in parenthesis):

- Central agencies/directorates (N = 58)
- Other ordinary public administration bodies (N = 135)
- Central agencies/public administration bodies with special extended authority (N = 29)
- Government administrative enterprises (N = 5)
- Financial institutions (N = 3)

We have not included the ministries in the survey because they have a particular strong connection to the political leadership, and maintain a dual role as political steering instrument in addition to executing tasks. Also state owned companies and governmental foundations

[1] See e.g. P. Lægreid, V. W. Rolland, P. G. Roness and J. E. Ågotnes, (2003): «The Structural Anatomy of the Norwegian State 1947-2003». Bergen: Rokkan Centre. Working Paper 21/2003

[2] Including civil servants at regional and local level. But this picture has changed dramatically the last 10-15 years. In 1990 the number of employees in the agencies and bodies was about 185.000, but some large agencies were transformed into governmental administrative enterprises, and some enterprises were transformed into state owned companies (e.g. The Norwegian State Railway, Norwegian Power Company, Telenor, The Norwegian Post, the airport adminstration (AVINOR), road construction (MESTA)). Other organizations which always have been state owned companies, like Statoil are also not included in the survey.

(units with separate legal entity) were excluded because they differ substantially on core issues regarding autonomy, steering and control.

The organizations in the target group consist of three different types:

- National single civil service organizations without subordinated units (e.g. Norwegian Competition Authority, Government Administration Services, National Office of Building Technology and Administration, The Product Register, The Norwegian Polar Institute, The Directorate for Nature Management, The Ombudsman for Children, The Data Inspectorate).
  All of these were included.
- Integrated civil service organizations that consist of a central unit with regional/local units (e.g. The Norwegian Tax Administration, Norwegian Customs and Excise, The Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB), The Directorate of Fisheries, The National Police Directorate, Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority).
  All central units were included in the survey, and they were asked to answer on behalf of the whole organization.
- Group of similar civil service organizations (group organizations) (e.g. The Norwegian Correctional Service, The County Governors, University Colleges).
  All single units in these groups were included in the survey.

All this information about the organizations is stored in the Norwegian state administration database ('Forvaltningsdatabasen' - NSA). This means that the survey population easily could be extracted from the database. The NSA also provided valuable information about organizational characteristics identifying the organizations (size, age, parent ministry, information about organizational change etc.)

Given these criteria, the population adds up to 230 civil service organizations that in 2003 were reporting directly to one or more ministry. When the survey was distributed in March 2004, the population was reduced to 215. This reduction is due to several reasons which mainly took place at the turn of the year:

- Some organizations were dissolved.
- Some were placed under other organizations (not directly under a ministry any longer).
- Some changed their form of affiliation (ex. transformed into state owned companies)
- In addition, organizations which came into operation late in 2003 were excluded from the survey population, since many questions were related to their experiences during 2003.

Also, organizations which were founded in 2004 were excluded from the survey.

We may also mention that after the survey was distributed, some of the organizations contacted us arguing that they did not think they should take part in the survey; they considered themselves not to fulfil our criteria. We excluded only one of these organizations; the Court Administration Agency because this is a very independent agency not reporting directly to any ministry and beyond ordinary political steering and control.

How the survey was carried out

Content of the survey

We had several meetings where we discussed the translation and adaptation of the extensive Belgian survey arrangement to Norwegian conditions. It was important for us both to stick to the Belgian scheme and to prepare a survey with questions relevant to Norwegian conditions and context and to the specific organizations in question. In that way we kept the core issues from the original Belgian survey, but made some country-specific adjustments to capture the Norwegian context and our specific focus on organizations which are part of the state as legal entity. Eventually we ended up with a questionnaire that consists of about 90 questions - many of them multi-response variables - so the dataset consists of about 275 variables.

The questions were organized in five sections where the main purpose is to throw light on the form and extent of autonomy and control of civil service organizations:

- Organizational characteristics
  - Size
  - Task portfolio
  - Market/competition situation
  - Target groups
  - Networks
- Autonomy characteristics – form and extent of independency – freedom of action
  - Financial autonomy
  - Professional autonomy
  - Personnel autonomy
- Steering and control characteristics
  - Relations to parent ministry and other authorities
  - Different types of regulations and limitations (audit, control, regulation)
  - Sanctions and rewards
  - Board of appeal/appeal committee
  - Reporting of results/achievement of results, result indicators
- Organizational culture
  - General performance
  - Activities
- Other factual information
  - Management
  - Budget information
  - Accounting principles
  - Organizational performance

The main differences between the Belgian and the Norwegian questionnaires can be summarized as follows:

Excluded in the Norwegian survey:

- Some identification and environment information (we could extract this information from the NSA database).

- Some questions concerning hierarchical arrangements (all our units are at sub-ministerial level).
- Some questions concerning legal statute (all our units are part of the state as legal entity).
- Questions about policy field is excluded (this can be derived from parent ministry).

Additional questions in the Norwegian survey:

- We have added some extra questions on steering and control of the organizations (mainly questions about informal steering, steering meetings, performance indicators, reporting and auditing).

Further, some of our questions had different answering alternatives although the questions were similar to the Belgian. This is mainly due to country-specific differences concerning formal structural arrangements between the two countries.

Additional information in English about the Norwegian survey; complete questionnaire, codebook, and data from the survey can be found on this web-address at Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD):
http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/index.cfm?urlname=&lan=eng&institusjonsnr=4&arkivnr=24&MenuItem=N1_4&ChildItem=&State=collapse

How the survey was accomplished in practice

After the survey was adapted to Norwegian conditions, we constructed a database to handle the questions in the survey. Based on this database, the web-form was generated. The web-arrangement was thoroughly tested to make sure the database could handle all the answers and that the whole arrangement with passwords, print versions, help-texts etc was working properly.

The survey was distributed via e-mail sent to the official e-mail address of the organizations. Enclosed in the mail was a description of the survey and a web-link to the electronic questionnaire. Along with contact information, this mail also had the password to access the electronic web-form. We also asked if somebody in the management or someone with extensive information about the organization could fill in the form.

The opening page of the questionnaire consisted of further information about the survey and explanations on how to fill out the form. The form itself was divided into eight web-pages with 10 – 15 questions on each page. Each page had to be filled in, before the responder could proceed to the next page. At the same time, all information from the form was collected and saved in our database. The whole survey didn't have to be filled in at once in one continuous sequence; the responder could log back on to the form pages and continue answering the survey. All information that had been filled in would be on the web pages, and could also be edited and changed.

Also, several of the questions had supplementary helping texts organized in "pop-up windows". In addition, a complete printer-friendly version of the questionnaire was available on the opening page of the form.

Our experiences concerning the survey

The survey was distributed in March 2004. Towards the end of April we called to all the organizations that still hadn't responded or returned an incomplete form. We continued this reminding for almost one year with varying intensity - and with varying success.

In order to have a running summary of how the survey progressed, we set up a web-page which gave us an up to date overview of who had answered the survey, how much of the form they had filled in, how many times each of the eight pages had been accessed/edited along with information about when they had last accessed the form.

Our experiences with the form and the reminding
Table 1 shows that only 31 % of the organizations answered the questionnaire soon after the distribution in March. Calling and reminding raised the response rate to a little more than 54 % as of November 2004. Early 2005 we made a new and extensive effort on calling and reminding, and reached a response rate of 70 % before we stopped in February. This was higher than in Belgium (59 %)

Table 1. Response rate and effect of reminding. N = 215

	# of responses	cumulative %
Result after first distribution of the survey	67	31
After reminding in April	79 (+12)	37
• May	88 (+9)	41
• June	96 (+8)	45
• July	97 (+1)	45
• August	107 (+10)	50
• September	117 (+10)	54
New reminding January-February 2005	150 (+33)	70
No response at all	65	
Total	215	

Our contacts with the organizations during the survey seem to reveal the following reactions on the survey arrangement:

- Some of the organizations claim that "firewalls" or lacking internet access have created problems for answering the questionnaire. Others claim that they haven't received the mail containing the survey link because their mail-system has classified the mail sent from us as "spam". On such occasions it has been sent again to another specific mail-address in the organization.
- Some argue that the survey is too complex and extensive and therefore of little relevance to their specific organization.
- Others say that due to capacity or priority considerations they find it not appropriate to spend valuable time on such a complex questionnaire. They also claim that they often

receive similar requests to take part in different surveys, and for that reason have to select only some.

- A problem we have come across is that it has been difficult to get in touch with the right contact person in the organizations. This problem seems to be bigger the larger the organizations are. And even if we have established contact with a specific person in the organization, it has proven difficult and very time consuming to get this person to actually fill in the form; they are very busy, occupied in meetings, out of office etc.

Still, we think that a better way to distribute the questionnaire perhaps would have been to ask the organizations for a specific contact person who we could then send the form to. This would also facilitate the reminding process.

Data quality

A central person in the organization was asked to fill in the form on behalf of the organization. A general weakness – especially concerning the subjective oriented questions – is that answers can vary from one person to another. This has to be taken into consideration when interpreting the answers and results.

The data set contains two different types of missing data. Firstly, when the responder has read the question, but for some reason neglected to answer it. This type of missing data occurs when the responder has proceeded to the next webpage without filling in all the fields in the form. All these kind of missing data is given the value "0" in our database. Our general impression is that most of the questions have been filled in completely, but with some variation. This may partly be due to the fact that some of the excluding questions were not set up with an "uncertain" choice. This was done to "force" the responder to either answer the question or eventually skip the question.

Second, some responders have quit the registration process without accessing all the eight web pages. This type of missing data is given the value "-1" in the database. In our survey 10 questionnaires (7 %) are incomplete.

Generally, it has been argued that electronic questionnaires are more rigid than postal ones due to lack of scope for the responder. This has been taken into consideration in our survey partly through the possibility to add comments etc in a separate field at the end of the form and partly because many of the complex questions were supported by detailed supplementary help texts.

The possibility to add comments has been used by several respondents and has given us valuable supplementary information.

Response rate

A total of 150 organizations answered the survey before the data collection was completed in February 2005. This constitutes about 70 % of the 215 organizations in the final population.

For almost all organizations in the population we have information of some central characteristics: parent ministry, form of affiliation, size and basic type of agency. This makes it possible to assess the representativeness of our sample.

Table 2 below shows the organizations in the survey distributed on parent ministry. There is some variation across ministries regarding the number of replies. However, the response rate is 50 % or more in all ministries except for the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

Table 2. Organizations in the survey distributed on ministry

Ministry	# of agencies	# of replies	%
Office of the Prime Minister	1	1	100
Ministry of Petroleum and Energy	2	2	100
Ministry of Health and Care Services	7	6	86
Ministry of Transport and Communications	6	6	100
Ministry of the Environment	5	5	83
Ministry of Finance	7	6	86
Ministry of Agriculture and Food	7	5	71
Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	10	7	70
Ministry of Social Affairs	5	4	80
Ministry of Labour and Administration	26	20	77
Ministry of Justice and the Police	19	14	74
Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs	36	24	71
Ministry of Defence	4	3	75
Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs	4	2	50
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2	2	50
Ministry of Education and Research	54	34	63
Ministry of Trade and Industry	9	5	56
Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development	10	4	40
Total	215	150	70

Table 3 shows the organizations in the survey distributed on form of affiliation/legal statute. Even though the number of organizations varies a lot between the different groups, the response rate is quite similar.

Table 3. Organizations in the survey distributed on form of affiliation/legal statute

Form of affiliation	# of agencies	# of replies	%
Central agencies/directorates and other public administration bodies + Financial institutions	182	128	70
Central agencies with special extended authority	28	18	64
Government administrative enterprises	5	4	80
Total	215	150	70

With regard to size we find that small organizations (less than 50 employees) are slightly underrepresented (Table 4).

Table 4. Organizations in the survey distributed on number of employees

Number of employees	# of agencies	# of replies	%
200 employees and more	76	59	78
50-199 employees	67	50	75
Less than 50 employees	60	38	63
Number of employees is missing	12	3	25
Total	215	150	70

For basic type of organization the response rate is mostly the same for all types (Table 5). Within the group organization category, there are no big differences between the single organizations that make up a group except for the dioceses (bishop offices) where only 5 of 11 have answered.

Table 5. Organizations in the survey distributed on basic type of organization

Basic type of organization	# of agencies	# of replies	%
National single organizations without subordinated units	107	76	71
Integrated organizations that consist of a central (national) unit with regional/local offices	40	29	73
Organization which is part of a group of similar organizations (e.g. regional colleges, County Governors)	68	45	66
Total	215	150	54

Summing up, we conclude that the extent of representativeness is quite high.