



Summary:

The Government's gender equality initiative – temporary or permanent improvements?

Audit background

Since 1994 gender mainstreaming is the main strategy for implementing gender equality policy. Somewhat simplified the strategy means that a gender perspective should be incorporated into all decision-making and by all actors that normally participate. In practice this means that the work to achieve the gender equality policy objectives should be conducted within all policy areas.

During the period 2007–2014 the Government set aside SEK 2.6 billion for an initiative aimed at increasing gender equality. The initiative is unique to the extent that never before has so much been set aside for similar measures. About 50 government agencies have been instructed by the Government and the Government has also allocated funds directly to municipalities and county councils and non-profit organisations. The activities have been in the nature of temporary measures and projects that in various ways aimed to stimulate and hasten the development towards gender equality, as well as complementing and strengthening the work of gender mainstreaming.

Reasons

Temporary measures entail a challenge in relation to successfully integrating the results into ordinary activities and making them permanent. Temporary measures do not automatically lead to permanent improvements. Consequently it is central that the Government formulates temporary initiatives in a way that enables long-term results. The investment in specific gender policy measures has also meant a major increase of resources. It is therefore important that the funds are used effectively and efficiently. Against this background the Swedish NAO considers that there is reason to audit the Government's gender equality initiative more closely.

Purpose

The purpose of the audit is to find out whether conditions exist that make the results of specific gender policy measures sustainable and lead to permanent improvements. The ambition is also to evaluate whether the Government's design and management of the initiative was effective. The audit also includes finding out whether there is an institutional framework for acting on the results so that they are sustained over time.

Methodology

The audit findings and conclusions are mainly based on a questionnaire to agencies, interviews with representatives of agencies and the Government Offices, two focus groups with representatives of municipalities and county councils and document studies.

Audit findings

The audit shows that the initiative has put a focus on gender equality in various contexts. The fact that central government has allocated resources has created legitimacy and the Swedish NAO considers that the Government has speeded up gender equality work. However, the Swedish NAO considers that the conditions for making the results permanent are inadequate and that the Government could have designed the initiative to achieve more sustainable results. There is a risk that results obtained through the initiative will be lost. To avoid the results disappearing over time the Swedish NAO considers that the Government needs to strengthen gender mainstreaming in the administration and review how temporary initiatives in the area of gender equality can be designed to achieve lasting results.

The Swedish NAO's overall assessment is that the Government needs to strengthen the long-term gender equality policy perspective in order to effectively implement time-limited initiatives and projects.

Too little focus on sustainability

The audit shows that the Government has not designed the initiative to bring about sustainable results. One way of doing this would be to specify a sustainability requirement in the formulation of the remit to the agencies. Several assignments have

followed a separate procedure (that is beyond the ordinary planning cycle of the agencies) which has affected the agencies' planning assumptions in such a way that it has been difficult to find time to incorporate a long-term perspective when implementing the assignments. The audit also shows that results that are linked to or built into the ordinary system or structures as a rule have better chances of becoming permanent. This may for example be a matter of changes in the management system, introduction of gender disaggregated statistics or new procedures.

The Swedish NAO shares the Government's assessment that efficient and effective work on gender mainstreaming can affect how the results of special measures are dealt with. Consequently it is a reasonable starting point that the special measures – to be effective – should be designed in such a way as to harmonise with the gender mainstreaming strategy. The Swedish NAO considers that the Government would get more from the money spent if the special measures were to a greater extent to permeate the gender mainstreaming strategy.

The Swedish NAO therefore recommends that the Government should to a greater extent proceed from the gender mainstreaming strategy, even when it is a matter of specific gender policy measures. This could entail focusing the assignments on measures that will have more permanent results and requiring sustainability for example in the formulation of remits.

Too little space for strategic thinking

Despite the fact that there is an established strategy for implementation of gender equality policy there has been too little strategic thinking on the specific gender policy measures. The audit shows that short-term thinking is largely built into the initiative. This is partly due to the entire initiative consisting of temporary funds and many government assignments being outside the ordinary planning cycle, which has generated some irregularity and short-termism in planning for the actors accepting assignments or money. The major increase in appropriations combined with unprepared officials also meant that at least during the first mandate period it was difficult to find appropriate measures in a short time. The division for gender equality under the Ministry of Education and Research (and later the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs) was tasked during this period with drafting many government decisions and agency-like duties such as disbursement. The audit shows that this took time from the more strategic work of gender mainstreaming.

The Swedish NAO recommends that the Government provides agencies and other recipient actors with favourable conditions for planning their activities. If a similar initiative is implemented in future it should be preceded by a planning stage and it should be possible to successively increase funds so that the recipient actors have good prospects of planning their activities.

Gap between ambitions and actual governance

The audit shows that governance of agencies as regards implementing gender mainstreaming varies both in level of ambition and scope. There is no clear system associated with which agencies have a gender equality perspective in instructions and appropriation directions. There is no stated concrete objective concerning which agencies should or should not have a gender equality perspective in the policy documents that govern them. The interpretation made by the Swedish NAO of the chosen main strategy for implementing gender equality policy is that most agencies should have a gender equality perspective stated in their instructions. In reality more than half of all agencies governed by instructions do not have this.

The audit shows that the changes made as regards governance of agencies in recent years, in the form of a new Government Agencies Ordinance in which the gender equality perspective was removed and where governance is to be through instructions and dialogue with agencies, quite probably has affected the possibilities of gender equality policy having an impact. There is a risk of traditional sectoral thinking being amplified with the new organisation-adapted governance and more governance through the informal dialogue between agencies and ministries. The Swedish NAO sees a risk that this will lead to a cross-sectoral area such as gender equality being lost in agency governance. As regards implementing gender equality policy there is no administrative authority. In addition, gender equality often lies outside the ordinary expertise of the agencies, which means that gender equality often can be perceived as quite diffuse.

In the opinion of the Swedish NAO there is a gap between the Government's ambitions in the area of gender equality and the actual governance. To strengthen the long-term perspective in implementation the Swedish NAO recommends that the Government clarifies which agencies have a remit concerning gender equality. There is support in the Instrument of Government for gender equality in the public administration. To realise this ambition the agencies, where deemed relevant, should have a clearly formulated gender equality remit. When the Government Agencies Ordinance replaced the Government Agencies and Institutes Ordinance this requirement was removed and has not systematically been included in the agencies' instructions. On the basis of the

strategy of gender mainstreaming and the idea of organisation based governance the agencies' instructions would be a reasonable place for the long-term governance leading to a gender equal public administration.

For policy promoting a gender equal public administration to be effective, agencies as well as the Government and Government Offices must have knowledge of what gender mainstreaming is. The Swedish NAO assesses that the gender mainstreaming programme now in progress in agencies fulfils an important function, for example in producing concrete examples of what gender equality work in central government administration can entail. However, the Swedish NAO has noted that only a limited percentage of the agencies is included in the programme and considers therefore that the Government needs to consider how other agencies should be reached by these policy signals.

There is no structure for dealing with the results

One difficulty in achieving sustainable results is that the Government's specific gender policy initiative in many respects has been separately organised in relation to the agencies' ordinary operations. The administrative structure in the gender equality area, with shared responsibility between different ministries, where there is no administrative authority and regulation of gender equality varies, does not either constitute sound support for dealing with the results of a temporary initiative.

The assessment of the Swedish NAO is that an institutional structure is needed that strengthens the gender mainstreaming strategy. Gender mainstreaming is the Government's main strategy for implementing gender equality policy. Despite that, the Swedish NAO has found that only a small part of the gender equality initiative has aimed to develop gender mainstreaming work in the agencies. The Swedish NAO considers that the work of gender mainstreaming needs to be strengthened in order to integrate the work of change achieved as part of the initiative into ordinary structures and operations. This is particularly important considering that the administration often lacks competence in gender mainstreaming, that policy signals from the Government are not consistent and that there is no administrative authority that takes responsibility for collecting and dealing with the results of specific gender policy measures.

The Swedish NAO considers that the Government needs to ensure that the results of the specific gender policy measures are utilised. For this to be possible the Swedish NAO recommends that the Government ensures that there is greater scope for analysis and strategic thinking in the implementation of gender equality policy. Today there is no coherent picture of the measures that work and that do not work, which means that the Government has a deficient knowledge base in formulating future initiatives.