



Summary:

National coordinators as a central government policy instrument

Audit background

It has become increasingly common for the Government to appoint national coordinators to deal with current issues and societal problems. The national coordinators are not part of the ordinary administrative agencies. Their remit is for a limited period and is based on voluntary participation by the recipients of central government governance. Previous studies have shown that national coordinators are not a homogeneous phenomenon. There is considerable variation in how they are organised, the resources at their disposal and the type of problem they are to deal with.

Knowledge of when the policy instrument works is limited. It has therefore been important to investigate the results achieved by national coordinators and whether this is an appropriate policy instrument.

Purpose

The purpose of the audit is to assess the appropriateness of the Government's governance using national coordinators. By appropriateness is meant conditions for achieving expected results without negative consequences for ordinary agencies or those the governance is directed towards. The appropriateness also concerns which conditions the form of governance sets for public oversight and accountability. The following questions guided the audit:

- Do the national coordinators achieve the results expected?
- What conditions are important to enable national coordinators to achieve expected results?
- Does the use of national coordinators entail negative consequences?

Implementation

The audit consists of three empirical components: a survey of the 33 coordination projects assigned during the period 2005–2015, interviews with representatives of 12 of these coordination projects as well as case studies in which four of the coordination projects are investigated in more detail. The case studies refer to the national coordinator on domestic violence, the national care choice coordinator, the refugee coordinators and the homelessness coordinator. Both the interview study and the case studies were selected to cover the varying duties and conditions of

the coordinators. During the case studies interviews were conducted with the national coordinators themselves, their clients and target groups as well as other actors concerned.

Audit findings

The Swedish NAO's overall assessment is that national coordinators may be an appropriate policy instrument but the results depend on how the coordinators are used and the conditions created for them. As a rule national coordinators have a broad and flexible mandate, which provides good conditions for adapting to the situation and creates space for developing and testing new ideas, working methods and approaches. At the same time the audit shows that this broad and flexible mandate means that the Government has limited control of the outcome and that unclear divisions of responsibility are created with limited transparency.

Governance with mixed results

Most national coordinators have a remit that is directed both downwards and upwards: they are to both influence one or more target groups, and contribute new knowledge on which the Government can base development of its ordinary governance. Some national coordinators succeed in their task, while others do not achieve the expected results. Common to most of the coordinators is that they succeed in highlighting the issue in question and can influence the willingness of the target group to change its behaviour in accordance with the wishes of the Government. However, it is more difficult for national coordinators to change the target group's behaviour. This is because the coordinator does not succeed in increasing the target group's capacity to act or that there are structural obstacles to changed behaviour.

The audit shows that national coordinators often assimilate and try to bring back new knowledge to the Government, even in the cases where this is not the main purpose of the coordination remit. The information the coordinators report to the Government is not always used, however.

Flexibility is the main strength of the national coordinators...

The audit shows that the possibilities of the coordinators to achieve expected results depends on the freedom they have in implementing their assignments and it is precisely flexibility that constitutes the main strength of the national coordinators in relation to other policy instruments. National coordinators are one of several policy instruments the Government can use to act on an issue. Alternative courses of action are to set up an inquiry, initiate negotiations with other actors or to instruct an agency to influence the target group via regulations or recommendations. Normally the Government does not choose either the one or the other alternative, but uses policy instruments in parallel or following on after each other.

A common reason for appointing national coordinators is that the Government needs to handle questions involving many actors. The Swedish NAO's audit illustrates that the Government uses national coordinators to show decisive action in a high priority question, while the coordinator seeks answers to how the question can best be handled. Further reasons for the Government to appoint a national coordinator is that there is a need to act in acute situations or that there is clear demand for central government governance.

Common to these situations is that it is not clear what a suitable course of action is or that the Government does not have the time or the opportunity to choose the most appropriate long-term policy instrument. The terms of reference give the coordinator a mandate to collect information, negotiate with the target group and promote a change in behaviour in the target group. The coordinating assignments thus include elements that are recognisable from other courses of action such as appointing an inquiry, negotiator or instructing administrative agencies. With the broad mandate and great scope for interpretation the coordinator is allowed to investigate various possibilities to find the avenues that are open.

... but a flexible remit also has drawbacks

A flexible remit is an important condition to enable national coordinators to achieve expected results. At the same time this freedom has some negative consequences.

In the first place there is lack of clarity concerning the role of the coordinator and who is responsible for governance. When a national coordinator makes a statement it is not clear if it is on behalf of the Government. In practice this lack of clarity exists regardless of whether national coordinators are appointed as a body within the Government Offices or in the form of committees. Despite the fact that committees are formally independent agencies and covered by separate rules concerning oversight and transparency, the audit shows that these coordination assignments are conducted in close and informal collaboration with the minister responsible.

In such cases the division of responsibility between minister and coordinator in practice is not clearer than for coordinators within the Government Offices.

Moreover, there are problems concerning the possibilities of oversight of the coordinators' work since terms of reference and reporting vary greatly between coordinators. In some cases there are no terms of reference and some coordinators do not submit a final report.

The need for a flexible mandate makes it difficult for the Government to steer the coordinators via detailed instructions. The flexible mandate and ability of coordinators to themselves determine the focus of the assignment mean that the Government has limited control of the outcome. Instead the relation between the Government and the national coordinator is based on trust.

Important factors for successful governance

Apart from the flexible mandate, the Swedish NAO has identified four factors that are of great importance for successful governance: the competence and legitimacy of the coordinators, the establishment of mutual dialogue, priority of target groups and the nature of the issues.

The access of the national coordinators to relevant arenas and their ability to gain support among relevant target groups is entirely crucial to the prospects of achieving the expected results. This is simpler if the coordinator has a previously established relationship to the target group and has a good understanding of political processes. To gain legitimacy with the target groups the coordinator should also clearly appear as the Government's representative by constituting a channel to the Government as well as having a mandate to speak on behalf of the Government.

For the coordinators to achieve results there must be some concessions, sometimes in the form of incentives, but more often through the coordinator acting as a link to the Government and relaying the perspective of the target group. Despite the governance logic behind national coordinators being mainly based on voluntary participation, it is not enough to try to convince the target groups through argument and good examples. The coordinators must also be able to offer something in return.

The coordinators find it easier to achieve results when it is made clear which actor the Government sees as having main responsibility for the question. It is also important that the coordinators can relate to other government initiatives in the area and give priority to communicating at the right level, that is with those who have the power to decide how the target groups should act and use their resources.

The national coordinators find it easier to achieve results if the questions they are responsible for can be "depoliticised" and not appear as party divisive. This makes it possible to create increased consensus on the causes and solutions of the problem and to get different actors to work in a more uniform and well-coordinated way, which most of the coordinators' assignments aim to do.

A policy instrument that contributes to innovative administration

National coordinators are by nature an innovative and exploratory policy instrument that can be used when there are no obvious solutions or courses of action. A national coordination remit is often a way for the Government to gain new knowledge of the circumstances in a policy question or about the opinion among the country's municipalities and other relevant actors. The coordinators are normally given a broad and flexible mandate that allows them to gather and test new ideas or implement pilot projects. The information about the problems the target groups encounter and the potential that exists for development can be used for innovative improvements in public administration, by implementing the proposed structural changes or making the coordinators' operations permanent when they have proved successful.

However, there is not always interest or capacity to manage the information that coordinators collect and put it to use in continued work. For national coordinators to be an effective tool for innovation, their work and experiences must be utilised by the Government and the Government Offices. Optimising the use of national coordinators could involve developing structures for more systematic learning as well as clarifying the role of the coordinators in developing public administration.