

Ambiguities of Accountability and Attention – Analyzing the Failure of a Preventive Security Project

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Abstract

This article examines the failed implementation of a security project initiated by the Norwegian government in 2004, prior to the terrorist attack in Oslo 2011. Sustaining societal safety and ensuring adequate crisis management is a typical ‘wicked problem’, extending across government levels, policy sectors and organizational borders and creating problems for governance capacity. The authors apply an instrumental and a ‘garbage can’ approach to explain what happened in the case of the Security Project. The case analysis shows that there was insufficient attention and commitment to the project. Central actors did not have the necessary interest and capacity to implement the project. There were considerable accountability ambiguities due to complex organizational structures and conflicting roles. In this situation, ‘local rationality’ outplayed collective instrumental rationality. The study adds to our general understanding of the challenges of handling ‘wicked problems’ in public policy as well as to the literature on crisis management and societal security in public administration. In particular, the study shows how, in a governmental structure characterized by strong sectoral ‘pillars’, local rationality constrains efforts to implement coordination action due to ambiguous, shared and complex accountability measures. The article thus contributes to more in-depth insights into the implications of ‘negative coordination’.

Introduction

Public decision-making processes increasingly have to deal with ‘wicked problems’, i.e. policy issues that extend levels, sectors and organizations and affect a range of stakeholders (Bogdanor, 2005; Head and Alford, 2015). Such problems create severe policy-making, coordination and implementation challenges for government authorities, and are typically handled within complex, hybrid structures. These complex structures reflect uncertainty regarding organizational thinking, conflicts of interest and different world views, norms and values. It is crucial that governance capacity is increased in order to deal with these problems. The protection of public order and the health and safety of citizens is one of the main functions of a national state, and can be viewed as a ‘wicked problem’, which typically demands coordination of governmental resources (Christensen, Danielsen, Læg Reid and Rykkja, 2015). This protection includes ensuring preventive measures to protect against potential threats. However, not all prevention is followed through. In this article, we examine the failed implementation of a preventive security project initiated by the Norwegian government in 2004 and ask what lessons can be learned from this case.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, new security measures

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were imposed against terrorism in many countries, fueling debates about the balance between democratic and societal values on the one hand and a demand for increased protection on the other (Etzioni, 2004; Fimreite, Lango, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2013). Prior to 9/11 the question of security was not particularly high on the public agenda in Norway, owing to a general belief that the country and its government were not potential targets. In 2004, the Norwegian Government Security Committee¹ nevertheless moved to implement a number of specific measures known as “The Security Project”. The main aim was to protect the central government complex in Oslo from potential attacks. An important component of the project was to close certain streets near the government complex to general traffic. Even though the project supposedly had a high priority, some of its principal measures were never implemented.

On July 22 2011, seven years after the government decision on the Security Project a massive car bomb was detonated close to the entrance of the main building of the government complex housing the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Justice (MJ). The bomb killed eight people and injured around thirty. Most of the complex was destroyed. The devastating attack initiated an extensive debate about national crisis management and preparedness in Norway and the failure to implement the preventive security measures around the government complex became a major issue. The report issued by the official inquiry into the events of July 22 attributed the failure to implement the Security Project to ‘accountability pulverization’ and a deadlock between different authorities with central responsibilities (NOU 2012:14).

In a crisis, critical decisions have to be made quickly under highly uncertain circumstances (Rosenthal et al., 1989). Preparing for the unknown, and preventing and mitigating potential disasters is difficult in so far as they are low probability and high impact events (Boin 2005). Our article follows up the puzzle concerning the lack of implementation of central measures within this central area of public policy-making. On a general level the study relates to the concept of ‘negative coordination’ (Scharpf, 1994; Bouckaert et al., 2010) and the consequences of non-interference across organizational boundaries. Our argument is that in systems with strong sectoral government structures ‘local rationality’ will constrain efforts to implement coordination action. Such coordination is crucial in dealing with ‘wicked problems’, particularly in settings where structures of responsibility and accountability relations are ambiguous and where collective resources and attention is scarce. The article also adds to our understanding of the implications of coordination ‘underlap’; when policy issues fall between different organizations so that no organization feels responsible (Wegrich and Stimac, 2014). We pose the following research questions:

- What characterized the implementation of the Security Project? Who were the main political and administrative actors involved; what were their formal roles concerning public safety and security management, and how did they act upon those roles?

- How can the failure to implement central aspects of the Security Project be explained? Was it a case of instrumental failure, lack of attention and ambiguity in relation to accountability, or more a case related to ‘local rationality’, adding up to ‘negative coordination’ and ‘coordination underlap’?
- What are the implications of our findings for governance capacity in the case of ‘wicked issues’ that transcend ministerial areas and administrative levels?

We are interested in the effects of social organization on the behavior and attitudes of individuals within government, and the implications of structure on governance capacity. Our analysis is therefore based on explanatory perspectives from organization theory; an instrumental perspective (Christensen et al., 2009; Egeberg, 2012) and a ‘garbage can’ perspective (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972; Simon, 1947), in particular the arguments concerning ‘local rationality’ and lack of attention in that theory. In addition, we include elements from the theory of the politics of attention (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005) and accountability (Bovens, 2007).

The article starts by outlining the instrumental and the garbage can approaches followed by a section on data and research method. Thereafter, a contextual section explains specific characteristics of the Norwegian setting. The following section presents and analyzes the data. The article ends with a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical starting points.

Explaining implementation failure

To understand the basic puzzle – high importance but lack of implementation – we combine three rather generic analytical elements. They are chosen because it is our firm belief that there is no simple one-factor explanation to how governments deal with complex and wicked problems. To understand how governments choose to deal with the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize wicked problems, we need to bring together different explanatory factors.

In our case, this means taking instrumental features, ambiguous responsibilities, scarce attention and multiple accountability relations into account: First, through an instrumental perspective based on the concepts of bounded rationality (Simon, 1947) focusing on structural preconditions for implementation. Second, by using the ‘garbage can’ model of Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), pointing to the tension between potential local rationality and collective/organizational irrationality (Cyert and March, 1963) as well as the challenges of agenda setting and allocation of attention (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Third, with the theory of accountability mechanisms (Bovens, 2007) focusing of different types of primarily vertical but also horizontal accountability relations. By combining these theoretical approaches our aim is to enhance the understanding of the challenges of implementing policies of wicked and transboundary issues, that is, situations

where the problem structure does not match the organization structure. Taken together, these theoretical ideas provide new insight into the implications of ‘negative coordination’, ‘coordination underlap’ and local rationality.

An instrumental perspective focuses on constraining and enabling aspects of formal frames of the decision-making processes (March and Olsen, 1983). Political and administrative leaders are given an exclusive prerogative to make crucial decisions based on the ideal assumption that they know what to do and will achieve the goals they have set. They presumably score high on what Dahl and Lindblom (1953) label political/social control, presupposing enough capacity and attention; and rational calculation, expecting unambiguous means-end thinking. They are assumed to control not only decision-making but also the organization of the process, in this case the implementation process of the Security Project, through firm steering, clear accountability roles, unambiguous goals or motives, and a clear definition of existing problems, solutions and probable effects.

The perspective comes in two versions (March and Olsen, 1983). A *hierarchical version* presumes the existence of a homogeneous elite of leaders with few attention problems and clearly vertically defined roles and common interests, an elite who speaks with one voice, making consistent action and implementation highly likely (Cyert and March, 1963; Allison, 1971). The leaders would be expected to have full insight into the process and full knowledge about the security challenges. In a situation where there is little perceived risk, or the level of threat is seen as low, it might be rational not to implement security measures. In this perspective, the lack of implementation could be a deliberate choice by the leaders not to prioritize and attend to the suggested security measures. Coordination will be strong within the portfolio of each ministerial area but poor across them, producing coordinating ‘underlap’. A *negotiation version* of the perspective allows for heterogeneity and diverse interests, and would explain the lack of implementation by referring to conflicts of interests. Negotiation processes are often rendered more legitimate since more interests are catered for, but they are at the same time potentially less focused and rational (Mosher, 1967). The result of negotiations would be tension-filled and would contain ambiguities concerning coordination and roles (Cyert and March, 1963).

A ‘garbage can’ perspective regards decision-making processes in loosely coupled organizations as rather arbitrary, resulting in unpredictable outcomes (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972). Contextual features and coexisting issues on the agenda compete for attention from key participants. The complexity of joint actions – many actors, decision makers and veto points – tends to make implementation more ambiguous and difficult (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). High conflict and high ambiguity in the policy implementation process might lead to symbolic implementation (Matland, 1995). A basic premise is that participants have attention and capacity problems. How their attention is organized and directed therefore makes a difference (Lægreid and Roness, 1999). The main aspect that we want to emphasize here is the supposition that decision-making processes sometimes involve a clash between the ‘local’ rationality of single

public organizations and collective rationality (Cyert and March, 1963). Such self-interested and narrow attention may reflect capacity problems. In trying to cover up the gap between local rationality and collective consequences, the process may be characterized by decoupled talk, decisions and actions (Brunsson, 1989). This means in our case that the involved organizations and actors may have acted in a rational way from their own point of view, even though their behavior might be seen as more problematic in terms of the collective outcome.

In both perspectives the alleged lack of attention – to security issues in our case – is potentially a key factor to understand the implementation failure, assuming that attention is a limited resource and that key actors are affected by the dynamics of ‘attention shifting’ (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Allocation of attention is often constrained by thresholds of importance based on previous urgency. These thresholds tend to be context-sensitive producing an inefficient system that does not always respond in a proportional manner to the intensity of current external signals. Moreover, policy change and political dynamics tend to weight signals from the environment (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 275-76). Cognitive limits of decision makers and formal and informal organizational arrangements affect the dynamics of information processing. Certain issues have to be prioritized, but in a world of problem overload, attention juggling often occurs. Actors encounter different information flows, and these have important consequences for the response.

In the crisis management literature the politics of attention can be linked up to the ‘normalization of risk’ problem, which is often referred to when organizations fail to prevent crises (LaPorte, 2007; Perrow, 2008). Organizations tend to see what they normally see, and are resistant to change. An attention-based logic would suggest that a policy monopoly and its status quo bias will work to stimulate negative feedback processes when policy change is promoted (Hansen, 2008). Our aim is to explore to what extent these factors can explain the implementation process of the Security Project.

Adding to this, we also focus on how responsibility and accountability concerns play into the equation. Accountability is closely linked to responsibility, but there is a difference. Accountability is generally retrospective - i.e. a person or an organization is held to account or has to answer for what happened. Accountability deals with answerability towards others with legitimate claims in some persons’ or organizations’ activity. Responsibility is about entrusting someone with a task. If they fail to carry it out then they are accountable for the consequences. Two problems related to accountability are often mentioned: The problem of ‘many eyes’ – concerning accountability to whom (Bovens, 2007); and the problem of ‘many hands’ – concerning who is accountable (Thompson, 1980). Normally accountability is associated with different types of vertically structured relations. However, accountability can also be horizontal where the ‘accountee’ is not hierarchically superior to the ‘accountor’ (Schillemans, 2011:390). We will ask questions about how clear the formal responsibility and accountability relationships were in our case, how this played out in this situation, and to what extent this affected the implementation of the project.

Based on the two explanatory perspectives (the instrumental and the ‘garbage can’ theory), our focus on central actors’ attention and accountability relations, and the existence of local rationality, we formulate the following three postulations:

1. An instrumental-hierarchical postulation: The failure to implement central measures of the Security Project was related to central political leaders’ *lack of attention* to security questions and problems of *vertical accountability*, between political and administrative leaders, and between the PMO and subordinate sector ministries who were responsible for security questions.
2. An instrumental-negotiation postulation: The failure to implement central measures of the Security Project was related to both political and administrative leaders’ *lack of attention* and problems of *horizontal accountability* and coordination between sector ministries with security functions at the same level.
3. A ‘garbage can’ postulation: The failure to implement central measures of the Security Project was related to ‘*local rationality*’ and local priorities creating collective irrationality, but also to an *overall ambiguity of accountability and attention*, encompassing both vertical and horizontal aspects.

Data and research method

Our overall design treats the theoretical perspectives and the derived postulates as supplementary rather than alternative or competing approaches (Roness, 1997). The research is based on a qualitative content analysis of interviews with central leaders within the Norwegian central government conducted by the official inquiry into the events of 22 July 2011. They were questioned during the 22 July Commission’s research for the inquiry report in 2012 (NOU 2012:14). The interviews were taped and the respondents later approved written versions. In total 123 interviews were conducted, amounting to more than 1000 written pages.

Our selection of interviews was based on formal criteria, targeting the top leaders who were formally responsible for and involved in the Security Project. Based on this, we analyzed in depth the available interviews with the Prime Minister and with five ministers and six top civil servants who were key participants in the process of initiating and implementing the Security Project.² The interviewees worked at the PMO, in the Ministry of Government Administration (MGA) and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MJ). These institutions were all responsible for security and safety in and around the government complex. Our analysis was further informed by interviews with other central actors

(also conducted by the official inquiry) in so far as they gave relevant contextual information, and by central public reports evaluating formal and actual accountability relations and actions – the report from the 22 July Commission being the most important one (NOU 2012:14).

The rather detailed responses from the selected informants provide new and important information on internal decision-making processes in the central government that is highly relevant to our analysis and for different phases and aspects of the process. The interviews are publicly accessible in their full length through the National Archives of Norway. Such open access to the sources of an inquiry commission is rather unique. In the interviews the respondents speak directly to the questions we focus on, covering attention and accountability issues. Therefore, we do not see it as a methodological problem that we as researchers did not formulate the questions ourselves.

The main indicators used to guide our analysis were the following: In terms of their attention to security issues, we focused on the main political and administrative leaders involved and tried to grasp what was typical for their attention structure, both seen from their own and others' opinion. Did they at the time focus on security issues or not, and did their attention in this regard change over time? Concerning structures of accountability we looked for statements that said something about vertical organizational accountability between the central and local government (the City of Oslo) and between the Prime Minister's Office and line ministries, and statements that addressed horizontal accountability between ministries within the central government apparatus. How did the top leaders see the accountability questions play out in practice – as clear-cut or with a lot of ambiguity involved?

The Norwegian Context

In the Norwegian political-administrative system two governance doctrines are essential in order to understand the structure of crisis management and public safety. The first is the principle of *ministerial responsibility*, which means that each minister is responsible for all decisions in subordinate agencies and bodies within her portfolio. This principle implies that the minister focuses mainly on what happens within her own policy area. It has resulted in strong line ministries, administrative 'silos' and weak overarching ministries that are supposed to handle transboundary wicked issues that transcend ministerial areas – for example climate change or internal security. The only strong overarching ministry is the Ministry of Finance. However, it focuses mainly on budget and finances and not on substantive policy issues. Adding to this, the PMO's formal coordinating power is weak and the Prime Minister is seen as 'first among equals'. This results, in general, in weak inter-ministerial coordination. This is especially problematic when tasks cut across ministerial areas. In this system, 'negative' coordination is more common than 'positive', implying minimum coordination and a policy of non-interference into other ministries' areas (Scharpf, 1994; Bouckaert, Peters and Verhoest, 2010). Over time, some measures have been introduced to

counter this. In 2009 the PMO introduced the function of a ‘coordination minister’ to assist the PM in inter-ministerial conflicts, for instance. Nevertheless, the sector orientation still dominates.

The second doctrine is the principle of *local self-government*. The municipalities have independent responsibilities for a range of important public tasks at the local level – including responsibilities for public security. This implies that municipalities generally have their own policy agenda, often rather loosely coupled to that of central government. This potentially leads to weak vertical coordination between central and local government. Taken together the governance doctrines produce ‘grey zones’ for public administration as well as accountability ambiguities, both horizontally and vertically.

The formal division of responsibilities for security and prevention is complex. Several ministries and central agencies are involved. In 2011, the Minister of Government Administration (MGA) was responsible for the security of the buildings and the common grounds surrounding them through a subordinate government company. The Ministries’ Service Center (MSC) under the MGA delivered security services to the ministries and the PMO, and were responsible for the day-to-day security in and around the buildings. Adding to this, each of the then 17 Ministries were responsible for internal security within their own localities, including preventive measures. In this endeavor, the MGA had a consultative and coordinative function.

The PMO’s function in crisis situations included a responsibility for providing suitable localities for the Cabinet. Adding to this, the Ministry of Justice (MJ) had an overall superior responsibility for coordination in relation to the societal security. Coordinating authority was further delegated to the Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DCPEP) under the Ministry. The Police Security Service (PSS) under the MJ was responsible for the security of the Cabinet members and for evaluating threats against the central governmental complex in this respect. In the case of Grubbegata, the City of Oslo was designated to carry through the closing of the street through the municipal planning process. The municipal council however, denied the request on the arguments that closing the street would make the area “dead” after working hours, would not prevent crime, and would create congestion problems for people living in Oslo, i.e. they were not particular security-attentive (NOU 2012:14, 434).

This complex division of tasks demonstrates that public safety and crisis management is a typical cross-boundary policy area where there is a mismatch between the problem structure and the organizational structure. This transboundary policy problem demands coordination. However, the organizational structure is characterized by fragmentation and ambiguities, with responsibilities spread out between many different authorities. The Ministry of Justice has struggled to fulfil its lead and coordinating role (Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2015). In addition to these contextual factors, Norway was until 2011 a country with limited experience of terrorism and political violence (Fimreite et al., 2013). These factors lead us to expect that it at the time was rather difficult to draw the gov-

ernment's attention to security issues before other, more pressing, political priorities.

The Security Project

Referring to the initiation of the Security Project, the Secretary to the Government with the PMO stated in her interview with the Commission that when she started her job in 2002, two months after 9/11, she found that the security arrangements for the PM and the Cabinet were outdated. New plans were therefore launched. The broad intention was to ensure that the Cabinet could continue to function in the event of a crisis or attack against the central government. The groundwork for the Security Project started in 2003. Its aim was to provide a comprehensive analysis and a plan for protecting central government in the event of various threat scenarios. The task was assigned to the director of the Police Agency (PA) in collaboration with the Chief of Defense. A report was submitted to the PMO in 2004. It concluded that the security situation in the central government complex was unacceptable, and suggested several measures to correct this. The Cabinet's Security Committee concluded that the Security Project was to be implemented in accordance with the recommendations in the report, and be given high priority. Actually, the Security Project included several components and some of the more minor measures addressing more 'tame' issues were implemented.³ This article concerns the more 'wicked' and politically controversial aspects of the project that were not followed through.

The report proposed measures to prevent bomb explosions in or near the government complex. One simulation actually analyzed the possible damage in the case of a large bomb explosion and outlined a scenario that almost exactly matched the terrorist incident of 2011. The most important preventive suggestion was to permanently close *Grubbegata* – the street between the PMO/MJ offices and other ministries. The implementation process was very slow, however. Seven years later, *Grubbegata* was not closed and the terrorist was able to drive the bomb car up the very same street and detonate the bomb at the entrance of the Prime Minister's office. Obviously, it is difficult to claim that the terrorist's actions overall could have been prevented by closing this particular street. However, it is quite clear that placing the bomb at that exact location probably would have been prevented had the street been closed for traffic at the time.

Central actors' assessments

The Prime Minister's Office

PM Stoltenberg was in office from 2005 to 2013. In his interview he confirmed that he was informed about the Security Project when he came into office. At the time he considered the matter to be uncomplicated:

...there was no political discussion in the Cabinet about the project since the political leadership thought it had been decided and was in

the process of implementation, and that the preventive measures were reasonable and based on strong professional advice (Stoltenberg, 2012: 10).

Thus, it seems that the PM was not very concerned. He saw no problem with the project and largely left the implementation to the administrative actors.

In 2007, the Chief of Staff with the PMO (later minister and member of the cabinet) turned down a request from the Minister of Government Administration to discuss the prolonged implementation process of the project in the Cabinet. Echoing the PM, he argued in his interview that there were no political conflicts and that the Security Project was a matter of administrative implementation. His interpretation was that the MGA was responsible for implementing the Security Project in collaboration with the police. Reflecting some concern that the project had taken a long time, he was eventually asked by the PM to get involved and make contact with the municipality of Oslo in order to avoid politicization of the process. This turned the case around and made the municipality change its mind about the street closure over the next year. Even so, it took another three years before the permission to close the street was decided on. It was only implemented after the terrorist attack in 2011.

In her interview, the Secretary to the Government stated that the Security Project had a high priority, but that the PMO rarely became involved in these kinds of projects. Since, however, in this case the PMO had taken the administrative initiative and also was the receiver of the report, it was considered important to ensure that the sector ministries followed it up. In 2008 the PMO therefore took initiative to ask the PA for a status update. This probably reflected the PMO's early initiative, its later decoupling from the process, in combination with emerging security concerns. The Secretary to the Government stated that:

...it was important for the PMO to withdraw as a driving force in the project, and get the accountability unambiguously placed in the sector ministries, with the MJ in a superior scrutiny role (Frisak, 2012: 6).

Still, the project was not implemented until later. This confirms the Secretary's argument that security and prevention were not a high priority in either of the ministries involved. In her interview, she highlighted that the other ministries knew about the project. She argued explicitly that both the MGA and the MJ had had problems following up the project. She also emphasized that the role that the PM had taken in this process was somewhat unusual.

The Ministry of Government Administration

In her interview, the Minister of Government Administration from 2005 to 2009 stated that she was only involved in security questions to a limited extent (Røys, 2012). The Secretary General and the project leader of the Security Project in-

formed her about the project, indicating that the MGA was responsible for the follow-up. The minister never read the PA report from 2004, however. She stated that she regarded the follow-up of the project as a purely administrative task and that she had few worries about the implementation. Adding to this, her impression was that the PMO was responsible for the follow-up. She admitted that this could create ambiguities, but also stated that she did not know very much about the relationship between the PMO and the MJ relevant to the project. This seems to confirm that the MGA took a rather passive role in the project, and also speaks of considerable accountability ambiguities.

After July 22 the Minister of Government Administration was criticized quite heavily for not following up the project. Her statement to the Commission was that her involvement in and information about the project had been peripheral. She thought that the project was well taken care of and placed responsibility mainly with the administrative leadership:

...in the Ministry there was an expectation that the Secretary General was responsible for following up projects that ran smoothly and were therefore not raised to the political level. The political role is activated only when there is a need for a change of course, for making new decisions, exerting more pressure, or getting the Cabinet or Parliament more involved. (Aasrud 2012:7).

In the interviews, the MGA Secretary General from 2001–2010 said she felt that the division of work related to security in the government complex had been ambiguous, both with respect to the relationship between the PMO, the MJ and the MGA (Røisland, 2012). In her opinion, the PMO was the ‘owner’ of the project, while the MGA was to report to the PMO. According to her statement she never received any clear priorities for the project from the PMO and therefore saw her own role merely as a facilitating one. Responsibility for the project was primarily administratively defined with a full-time project leader with the MGA, and the Minister was only occasionally informed. In the interview, she commented that in general, ministers are not very preoccupied with security issues since this generally was not a politically rewarding field. At the time she also considered that the project’s progress was good, although admitting that the failure to implement the proposal to close certain streets was unfortunate. The Secretary also reflected on the accountability question and stated that the PMO:

...would seldom have a formal role, but steer anyway. This is a type of ‘informal steering’ that could be somewhat problematic (Røisland, 2012).

The leader for the Security Project at the MGA mostly worked alone on the project (Horst 2012). According to him, the fact that the MGA was responsible for the security of buildings and common areas while other ministries were re-

responsible for their own zones within the buildings was unproblematic. However, he also stressed that the original PA report had been ambiguous with respect to priorities. All the measures were to be implemented by the end of 2009, but the plan was never realized as a joint project with specific deadlines. Implementing the plan took longer than expected, and this was blamed on complexity and technical problems. When asked whether the Minister had been engaged in the process, he replied that:

...she didn't have much focus on the Security Project. According to Horst, no one was 'breathing down his neck'. No one told him directly to 'get those road blocks up (Horst, 2012: 9).

The Ministry of Justice

The Minister of Justice from 2005–2011 left office only a few months after the terrorist attack in 2011. In his interview, he stated that he had never seen the 2004 report, and that he had not been informed about it until 2009 or 2010. His clear understanding was that the MGA was responsible for the follow-up of the security measures, with the MJ's support. According to his statement, ministers normally do not participate in joint administrative meetings.

When the sitting Minister stepped down the then Minister of Defense was replaced and moved on to take on the role as Minister of Justice. She had previous experience as Minister of Justice in the mid-1990s. In her interview, she emphasized that the PMO was normally cautious about getting involved in operative coordination, but if or when it did, this would not release the MJ from its constitutional responsibility for security issues. Reflecting on the political and administrative roles in the Security Project she stated that:

The Minister must assume that the management of the Ministry is good, as long as the Secretary General does not signal that there are any unresolved or difficult questions... If there had been any unresolved responsibility relations, the Secretary Generals should have clarified roles, tasks and accountability lines. On the other hand, if the Ministers without the help of the Secretary Generals were to detect any unresolved questions related to the daily work of the Ministries, this would imply expectations that few Ministers could fulfill (Faremo, 2012: 8–9).

Thus, similar to the Minister with the MGA, she distanced herself from the situation and indirectly blamed the Ministry's administrative leadership.

In 2012 the two top administrative leaders in the MJ left their positions. In his interview, the former Secretary General in the MJ stated that he had mainly left security issues to his deputy. This might reflect attention problems in a large and complex ministry with many responsibilities. According to the Secretary

General, primary responsibility for ‘object security’ lay with the MGA and its subordinate units. He did not find it unusual that the PMO had initiated the Security Project, but acknowledged that the MJ could also have done so. His assessment was that the dealings were mainly between the PMO and the PA. He could not remember the PMO initially directing the MJ to follow up the Security Project in the other ministries, and stated that he found it somewhat ‘unorganized’ that the PMO at the same time had yearly meetings with the MGA on this matter. Thus, it seems that the top administrative leader in the MJ did not know much about the project and was not particularly worried about the lack of implementation.

The Assistant Secretary General in the MJ was responsible for following up the Security Project. He stated in his interview that he had been involved in the process leading up to the PMO’s initiative and that he was informed about the contact between the PMO and the PA. He stressed that the PMO’s role in the project was not normal procedure, but reflected that since the PMO had considered it important, the MJ did not have any objections. He also stated that he had been aware of the MJ’s overall coordinative role, and that the PMO had reminded them about this. According to his statement he had not been actively involved in the project, although he had occasionally been briefed by the project leader. He had, however, been worried about the lack of progress, especially concerning the closure of Grubbegata, but never confronted the political leadership about this.

The PA director from 2000–2011 gave a different version of events. She stated that she had dealt directly with the PMO at the start of the project and that the MJ was annoyed that it had been by-passed. This was denied by the MJ’s administrative leaders. The PA director said it had been difficult to prioritize the security measures and secure their implementation by setting deadlines. Nevertheless, in her assessment the PA’s role had been to give advice, while the MJ and the other ministries were responsible for following up by physically implementing the security measures. She was worried about the failure to implement closure of certain streets, in particular Grubbegata, and felt that the measures were difficult to implement. She also stated that the PMO had made the MGA responsible for following up the project in 2007–2008, and had urged the MJ to take action. She seemed critical of the roles of the PMO, the MGA and the MJ:

...the MGA did not have a clear understanding of its role and duty when it came to following up (the security measures). The rules about what the individual ministry should do and what the MGA should do in this respect were not unambiguous... She thinks that the MGA is definitely responsible for security in the ministerial offices, including both the physical security and the common areas/services... She emphasizes that it was surprising that the PMO ‘took the ball’ since the MJ from the start of the Security Project was independently responsible for security and preparedness (Killengreen, 2012: 7).

Summing up, the MJ did not ensure implementation of the Security Project even though it formally had a lead role and an overarching coordinating responsibility for security issues. This seems to have been influenced by the initiative from the administrative leadership at the PMO, the activities of the PA, and the current interpretation of the MGA's responsibility. Apparently, most of the political and administrative actors involved thought that someone else were handling the issue and therefore did not get involved themselves.

Our analysis, summarized in table 1, demonstrates that the process of implementing the Security Project was ridden by a great deal of ambiguity concerning roles, responsibilities and accountability. There was no formal head of security, which resulted in an increasing pulverization of responsibility and accountability. Instead of written formal instructions, oral messages were given from core actors. This created ambiguities and uncertainties. Complex accountability relations were dispersed both vertically and horizontally. There was a problem of 'many eyes', that is an uncertainty concerning to whom different actors were accountable. There were also 'many hands' – i.e. many actors and a significant ambiguity regarding who were accountable for what. Vertically, there was uncertainty regarding accountability relations between political and administrative executives. The politicians paid rather little attention to the issue and tended to point to the administrative executives when the question of accountability arose, while the administrative leaders pointed at the political leaders. There was ambiguity in the relations between the PMO and the ministries, and the PMO's hierarchical position seems to have been contested. With respect to the Security Project, there was ambiguity regarding whether the participants were accountable to the PMO or to the Ministries of Justice and Government Administration.

The situation also revealed ambiguous responsibility and accountability relations between central and local government. There were diverging views on whether it was appropriate for the central government to instruct the municipality of Oslo to close certain streets. To a large extent, the principle of local authority was heeded. Horizontally, there were significant accountability gaps or 'grey zones' between the MJ and the MGA, and also between their subordinate bodies. Overall, 'negative' coordination and coordination 'underlap' was prominent. The process was clearly characterized by non-interference across organizational boundaries and weak inter-organizational coordination, typical for 'wicked' policy issues that fall between different jurisdictions and organizations. The result was that the issue became the responsibility of none – and the implementation of the Security Project was not followed through.

Table 1 summarizes the central leaders' involvement and views on the accountability measures in the Security Project based on their interview statements.

Table 1. Central leaders' views on accountability matters in the Security Project.

Leader	Involvement	Who was accountable?
Prime Minister	Passive	Administrative leaders. Professional advice is important. The MGA and the MJ, the PMO with a supporting role
Coordination minister/Chief of Staff at PMO	Rather passive, but met with city representatives	Administrative leaders with the PMO. The MGA
The Secretary to the Government at PMO	Initiated the project, active involvement	The MGA, but also the MJ in a scrutiny role. The MJ should have initiated the project
Minister of MGA 2005–2009	Passive, but memo to PM about the project in 2007	Administrative leaders in the MGA. The PMO 'owned' the project, but had a problematic role
Minister of MGA from 2009	Passive, but somewhat involved from 2010	Administrative leaders in the MGA. The PMO's role and the MJ's scrutiny role was not unusual
Secretary General in MGA 2001–2010.	Somewhat involved and informed	Ambiguous role division between the PMO, MGA, and MJ. The PMO was accountable, but also the MGA and the PA for certain aspects
Project leader in MGA	Active – worked mostly alone	The project leader in MGA did not see accountability as problematic. Found the political and administrative leadership overall passive
Minister of JD 2005-2011	Passive and had little information	The MGA with MJ in a supporting role
Minister of JD from 2011, former Minister of Defense	Passive as Minister of Defense, involved briefly in the start	Administrative leaders and the MJ. The PMO's role was judged as rather unusual
Secretary General of MJ until 2012	Passive	Mainly the MGA but also the MJ. Somewhat confused by the PMO's role
Assistant Secretary General MJ until 2012	Somewhat involved in the initiative and informed, but not active	The PMO and the MGA. PMO's role seen as rather unusual, but the MJ did not object. The MJ in a coordinating role
Director of PA 2000 –2011	Somewhat involved, in an advisory role	The PMO, MGA and MJ, but ambiguous roles. The MJ was frustrated over being by-passed
Oslo City	Passive and opposing the central government decisions	Accountable to the city council, to local professional and administrative bodies and to media more than to central government

Explaining the implementation failure

The implementation of the Security Project was plagued by a multitude of problems typical for ‘wicked problems’: Complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity due to transboundary challenges, combined with a lack of attention and awareness, a narrow foci, ambiguous roles and a lack of coordination.

Our first postulation is related to the hierarchical version of the instrumental perspective. We expected that the failure would be related to central political leaders’ lack of attention to security questions and to problems of vertical accountability. Judging from our analysis, a lack of attention capacity among relevant political leaders, but also a lack of security and risk awareness, seems to be a viable explanation (cf. also Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja, 2013). In a country without major terrorist acts before 2011, it can be rather easy in hindsight to criticize political leaders for this. In the specific setting, it might be rational to focus on other issues. Leaving the implementation to the administrative leadership is a well-established working principle, giving potentially more leeway for the political leadership to prioritize strategic thinking and unexpected events. On the other hand, the terrorist acts in other parts of the world might also lead to an expectation of higher awareness.

We can further conclude that the political leaders involved did not fully acknowledge problems of vertical accountability, since they largely delegated responsibility to the administrative leaders. It did, however create several indirect problems. One issue was related to the somewhat unusual role of the PMO. The Secretary of Government initiated the project and followed it through, but the political leadership of the PMO was rather uninvolved. This apparently weakened PMO’s influence on the other ministries involved and on the engagement and actions of the municipality. Another factor is that the lack of involvement of the political leaders in the MJ and the MFA lead to the impression among the administrative leaders that the project was not that important.

A third instrumental reason for the implementation problems is linked to a lack of control and rational calculation. It seems that the PMO, in its interaction with the PA, the MGA and the MJ either did not have the necessary tools to prioritize and follow up on the project, did not have proper insight into what to do, or did not think that something should be done. In the end, it exerted general pressure that had little effect. Adding to this, the top leadership in the PMO and the involved ministries never considered using a central government regulation plan and thus ensure that the proposed security measures were implemented because they anticipated problems with Oslo City authorities, something that eventually was solved in a softer way, but too late.

Stacking up the evidence, we may conclude that the lack of attention and awareness from the political leadership and most of the administrative executives, not to mention the ambiguities of accountability, participate in explaining the lack of implementation. In a larger counter-factual picture it is not obvious that the acts of the leaders lacked rationality at the time, although in hindsight their decisions do seem evasive and did have consequences for the outcome.

Our second postulation was related to the negotiation version of the instrumental perspective. We expected that the failure would be related to both political and administrative leaders' lack of attention and to problems of horizontal accountability, between sector ministries with security functions. Based on our analysis, not only the political leaders but also the administrative leaders' lack of attention and security awareness was rather obvious, with the exception of the administrative leader in PMO. Without initiative and attention from the top leaders, it was overall difficult to implement the project.

Another element of negotiation, and more of a horizontal issue given potentially overlapping ministerial roles, was the initiative from the PMO. Although there was no open conflict, the situation speaks of tensions between the relevant actors. The question of who should do what, especially related to the responsibility and accountability division between the PMO, the MGA and the MJ, became pertinent. Instead of active negotiation, however, the process was more characterized by 'negative coordination': Each actor involved relied on others to take care of the implementation (Scharpf, 1994). In the end, no one did.

Our third postulation, related to the 'garbage can' perspective, stated that the failure would reflect 'local rationality' and priorities, creating collective irrationality related to the overall ambiguity of accountability, encompassing *both* vertical and horizontal aspects. Our analysis shows that the process indeed seemed to be ridden with 'local rationality'. Neither the PM nor the top political and administrative leaders in the two ministries gave priority to security questions. Instead, they kept attending to their own specific goals and 'local' matters, without reaching out to solve the problem. This produced a collective lack of rationality, feeding into the implementation problems.

The municipality of Oslo also had its own agenda. Those involved in the project prioritized accessibility and openness, the need to avoid congestion and the interests of local businesses. Altogether, most of the central and local actors had priorities and attention structures that did not support the implementation of the Security Project. This led to a rather loosely coupled process and, as anticipated by the 'garbage can' model, a crucial lack of implementation.

Adding to the 'garbage can' features, our analysis reveals that the division of roles and formal accountabilities concerning security measures was quite intricate and therefore difficult to follow up in practice. This concerned the roles and tasks of the PMO, the MGA and the MJ, but also other individual sector ministries. As argued elsewhere, the government responsibility for public safety and security in Norway is rather fragmented (Fimreite et al., 2014). Judging from this, it seems that implementing the Security Project was problematic from the start. The fact that the initiative came from the PMO only added to the ambiguity. Only in hindsight, after realizing that the project was not implemented, did representatives from the PMO emphasize that the MGA and the MJ were accountable.

The process also involved another 'garbage can' feature: The use of symbols. Political leaders rather often talked about national security questions being important, but our case shows a decoupling between talk, decisions and action,

or a certain bureaucratic ‘hypocrisy’ or ‘double-talk’ (Brunsson, 1989). When the PA delivered its report in 2004, the Secretary of Government with the PMO tried to invoke certain dramatic symbols associated with security and safety. For instance, the reference to a possible devastating bomb scenario was frequent. However, this had little effect at the time. It seems that the idea of Norway as a peaceful place free from serious security threats dominated throughout the implementation process.

In sum, the process has many typical ‘garbage can’ characteristics: Part-time participants allocating little attention, local rationality and loose coupling between talk, decisions and implementation, but also allowing for specialized decision and access structures in line with a generalized garbage can perspective (Lægreid and Roness, 1989).

In agreement with our three postulations, allocation of attention in cases like this is crucial. The responses from and actions of key policymakers is important to understand what happened in this process. How roles were enacted, information was used and interpreted, how attention was allocated to the security issue and how government bodies responded to information is crucial to understand the failure of the Security Project. Our findings can also be transposed to more general decision-making processes. In a situation with information overload, the core political and administrative executives are subject to limited attention spans and constrained information processing; something that is more challenging in complex structures. Organizations in themselves tend to produce biased attention to those problems that are prioritized and the solutions that are considered as relevant and appropriate.

Empirical and theoretical implications

Our case shows features that reveal typical challenges in handling ‘wicked problems’. Overall, and in particular after 9/11, most nations have built up their security systems and are very much focused on these questions. In Norway, this overall awareness did not instrumentally influence the Security Project process very much, however. The main reasons can be found in the historical path of Norway with no previous major terrorist acts, and also seems rooted in a ‘trust-based naivety’ assuming that ‘it could not happen here’ (Christensen, 2003). The existence of negative coordination and accountability ambiguity is widespread also in countries that have reasonably higher security awareness, however, for example in the USA after 9/11 (Kettl, 2004). Because of its ‘wickedness’, public administration in this field is often characterized by complex responsibility and accountability relations and lack of coordination. In the Norwegian context, this is related to the existence of strong sector-ministries with overlapping authority, a relatively weak PMO and also a rather weak coordinating role for the MJ even though it was supposed to be the lead organization in this matter.

Our theoretical basis emphasizes the importance of structural elements, which in our case created attention problems and role ambiguity more than capacity and firm action frames (Simon, 1957). In this respect, our findings add to

the emerging literature on the instrumental difficulties for executive leaders to handle multi-level and cross-sectoral decisions and implementation, i.e. 'wicked problems'. As observed also by Egeberg and Trondal (2015), reaching across levels and sectors increases the likelihood of structural complexity and hybridity. Coordination at one level tends to be incompatible with coordination across levels. It is much easier for leaders to handle issues and policies that are located inside one level and one sector. The increasing demands on coordination were not met in this case. Quite the contrary, the case reveals, based on the dynamics of lack of instrumental awareness, local rationality and accountability ambiguity, and considerable 'negative coordination' (Scharpf, 1994).

Our case highlights the limitations of specialization by purpose or tasks. Transboundary 'wicked' issues such as public security and crisis management suffer from attention deficits when many different organizations are involved and each ministry and agency has a narrow focus on their own primary task portfolio. This is especially the case when line ministries are strong and overarching ministries and units are weak (Christensen, Rykkja and Læg Reid, 2015). This is also why many countries work towards more coordination within this policy field, specifically through the establishment of designated security ministries or 'lead agencies' (Hammond, 2007; Christensen et al., 2015).

Our case further illustrates some main points highlighted in the 'garbage can' literature. In situations with information overload there is often an attention-inefficiency, meaning that the executives and government bodies do not adjust their attention in a smooth and simple manner to shifting signals from the environment. A crucial point, also taken up by Allison (1971), is that 'local' rationality may lead to central or collective irrationality. It may have seemed rational for central actors at the time not to be too much committed to security management and possible terrorist acts even though they emphasized the importance of the project. Such 'double-talk' might be an asset for leaders in stable times, but definitely would be a liability in crisis situations, when the risk of finger-pointing is more prominent (Brunsson, 1989; Hood, 2011).

The solution to wicked problems might be found in the introduction of and commitment to specific strategies for collaboration and coordination, by new adaptive leadership roles and accompanying enabling structures and processes, such as better communication, more trust and mutual commitment (Head and Alford, 2015). To deal wisely with wicked problems, several different governance capabilities are needed (Læg Reid and Rykkja, 2015). Enhancing the capability to deal with multiple frames, to adjust actions to uncertain changes, to respond to changing agendas and expectations, and not the least to unblock stagnation, seem reasonable measures (Termeer et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Our study has focused on the failure to implement a Security Project initiated by the Norwegian the government in 2004. The main reason for its failure relates to the question of 'wicked problem' and the challenges of coordinating efforts

across levels and sectors in complex systems. The analysis revealed a lack of attention from most of the central actors. A main conclusion is that a combination of the instrumental and the ‘garbage can’ perspectives, in particular the role of ‘local rationality’ gives a plausible explanation of the failed implementation. It is also attributed to responsibility and accountability ambiguities related to the fragmented organization at central level. Formal structures and instrumental decisions mattered. The instrumental decisions were in a sense rational at the local level, but turned out irrational at the collective level.

Ambiguous accountability relations played a major part. The dynamics of the implementation process were related to both vertical and horizontal accountability ambiguities. The problems of ‘many hands’ and ‘many eyes’ were evident, both *vertically* between political and administrative executives, between the Prime Minister’s Office and the ministries, and central and local government, and *horizontally* between the MJ and the MGA.

To see the process and outcome of the failed implementation of the Security Project through an instrumental perspective alone, as a willful product of political executives with comprehensive insight into and power over the coordination of the process gives, in hindsight at least, an incomplete, restricted and partly erroneous picture. Going to the other extreme and applying a view of executives with limited opportunity to influence implementation through deliberate choice seems to give more insight, although we have not analyzed what other competing issues they had on their plates.

The case further illustrates that organizational arrangements are meeting-places for heterogeneous actors that go beyond hierarchical and formal relations. The observed decision-making processes are often messy and influenced by a complex set of factors and informal actions and relations. In this case, implementation took place in a situation characterized by fluid, multi-dimensional and ambiguous accountability relations. In such situations time, energy, and attention are scarce resources, and part-time participation by core actors is normal. Still, individual actors can take initiative. Thus, complex contexts constrain but do not altogether remove the latitude of political and administrative executives to maneuver.

Our case analysis contributes to the study of wicked problems more in general, and is not only related to the question of governing for societal security. We have shown that the dynamics between lack of instrumental attention, ‘local rationality’ and accountability as well as responsibility ambiguities in a hybrid governmental structure participate in explaining the lack of implementation of a seemingly urgent matter. This adds to our understanding of the problem of handling transboundary ‘wicked’ policy issues in a political administrative apparatus with strong sectoral specialization and weak cross-boundary coordination. In situations when the problem structure does not overlap with the organization structure effective implementation is constrained by weak inter-organizational coordination mechanisms.

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Notes

¹ The Government Security Committee (*Regjeringens sikkerhetsutvalg*) is a Cabinet based committee normally comprising the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Finance.

² A list of the specific interviews used by the authors is provided at the end of the article.

³ 'Wicked problems' are often contrasted to 'tame', more technical problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973).