

## OUTCOME-BASED PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Experiences from Swedish Central Government

SVEN MODELL

*University of Manchester*

*Stockholm University School of Business*

ANDERS GRÖNLUND

*Stockholm University School of Business*

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper discusses the use of outcome-based performance management in Swedish central government agencies, with particular reference to how it has evolved in response to the government's growing emphasis on citizen orientation and interagency collaboration. Although a general tendency toward increasing reliance on subjective, user-perceived outcomes is discernible, the use of outcome indicators for internal control purposes is still limited. We also observe inconsistencies and tensions between different outcome indicators in several policy areas and a tendency for some agencies to trade off achievement of these and adapt selectively to the government's reform agenda. The implications of these findings for research and policy development are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS:** *outcome indicators, outcome-based management, performance management, Sweden*

Governments around the Western world are currently grappling with the task of reorienting performance management practices from a relatively narrow focus on efficiency to a heavier emphasis on outcomes and effectiveness. Such a shift in the ethos of performance management underpins the movement toward New Public Governance, stressing the need for enhanced citizen orientation and lat-

eral collaboration across agencies as a reaction to previous New Public Management reforms (Osborne, 2006). However, prior experiences of developing outcome-based performance management suggest that this change is associated with a range of practical and political obstacles (Heinrich, 2002; Kelly, 2005; Pollitt, 1988; Smith, 1993, 1995). We also lack a deeper understanding of how government agencies translate such performance management regimes into external reporting and internal control practices in the process of implementing policy initiatives. This paper sheds some light on these issues by discussing a number of key observations from a multicase research program in Swedish central government.

We start by outlining an analytical framework for examining the notion of effectiveness in public sector organizations. We then describe some general developments in performance management practices in Swedish central government since the late 1980s and present the research design. The case study observations subsequently reported provide deeper insights into how these broader developments are reflected in individual government agencies.

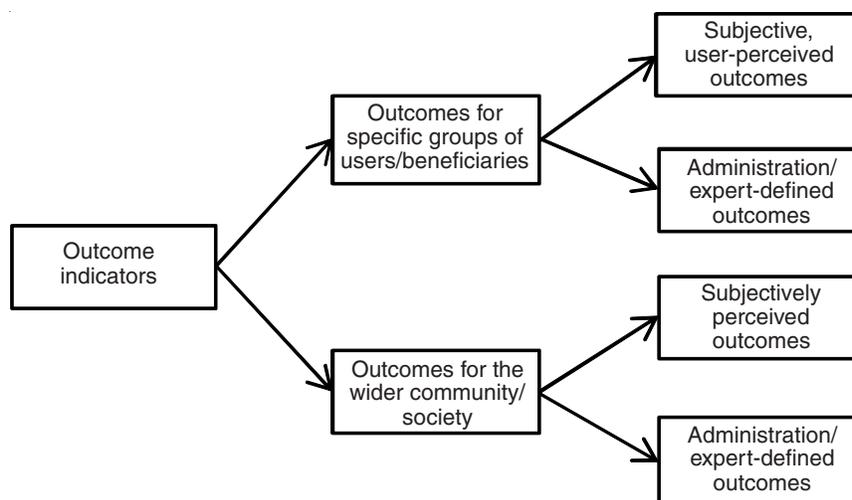
### **A Framework for Analysis**

The effectiveness of public services is distinct from measures of efficiency in that it refers to whether overriding societal and political objectives are achieved. Hence, achievement of effectiveness needs to be understood as indicative of the very *raison d'être* of public sector organizations. Whereas efficiency measures relate outputs to inputs or reflect the level of resource utilization, effectiveness is typically captured by more composite indicators relating outcomes to pre-established objectives. Such outcomes generally refer to the effects on specific groups of beneficiaries or some larger collectivity, such as the wider community or society, resulting from the provision of one or more outputs.

The efforts to redirect performance management practices toward a heavier emphasis on outcomes have, in many cases, been accompanied by pressures to adopt a more explicit stakeholder approach to organizational planning and target setting (McGuire, 2002; Radin, 1998). However, there is also evidence of a tendency to narrow the conception of stakeholders to those benefiting most directly from service provision and recast these as customers of public sector organizations (Fountain, 2001; Watkins & Arrington, 2007), which is manifest in the increasing use of subjective measures of the benefits of public services, such as

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**Figure 1. Framework for Classifying Outcome Indicators**

customer satisfaction indicators (Kelly, 2005; Kelly & Swindell, 2002; McGuire, 2002). Hence, it is relevant to complement the classification of outcome indicators with a distinction between beneficiary-centered measures based on subjective experiences and those grounded in a more administrative or expert-based perspective. A similar distinction can be made for outcomes for the wider community/society, although little is known about the extent to which government agencies rely on subjective measures of such outcomes. The resulting framework for classification is illustrated in Figure 1.

Outcomes tend to be more costly and difficult to measure than outputs and efficiency (Pollitt, 1988). Smith (1995) proposed the following reasons for the difficulties in using outcome indicators for the purpose of control:

- Outcomes are often dependent on the outputs of several agencies, the effects of which are difficult to isolate.
- Differences in external, uncontrollable factors have an important impact on variations in outcomes across agencies.
- There are often long time lags between the provision of outputs and outcomes.
- There are often unclear cause-and-effect relationships between inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Such technical difficulties imply that outcome indicators are often associated with considerable ambiguity, which opens up the possibility of conflicting interpretations of the value of public service provision, which may contribute to politicizing control practices, especially because critical scrutiny of agency effectiveness may lead to questioning of their roles in society (Modell, 2005a; Pollitt, 1988; Stewart & Walsh, 1994). The politicization of control practices may also be exacer-

bated if the outcomes for different stakeholder groups conflict or if subjective and expert-defined outcomes diverge (cf. Kelly, 2005; McGuire, 2002). As illustrated by recent developments in the Swedish central government, deeper examinations of such political aspects are required to enhance our understanding of the use of outcome indicators beyond their instrumental and technical functions.

### **Research Context and Design**

The Swedish central government is composed of a large number of autonomous agencies that are held accountable to 12 government ministries. However, the possibilities of direct ministerial intervention in operating matters are circumscribed by the legislative framework, and the formal governance mechanisms available to the government are mainly those of the annual appropriation and reporting process and the appointment of director-generals. By international standards, the Swedish central government is relatively unique for its long history of devolved responsibility for operating tasks to agencies and has been less affected by the global trend toward agencification over the last decades (see Pollitt & Talbot, 2004). In addition, the reform tradition has been characterized by consensus-oriented incrementalism, and policy initiatives often emerge in a bottom-up manner from the agencies (Pierre, 2004).

This reform tradition is reflected in the evolution of the governance system over the past two decades. Even though the ethos of managing for results gradually emerged as a result of a series of budgetary reforms since the late 1980s, it has evolved into a relatively flexible governance framework. Little emphasis has been placed on developing uniform reporting standards for service performance, although the concerns with enhanced transparency of financial reporting grew in the 1990s. The agencies have considerable discretion in devising internal control practices. Informal communication between the agencies and the ministries also plays a pivotal role, and the former have an important influence on the establishment of political objectives and targets for their operations (Modell, 2006a). However, critics have warned that this collaborative governance approach leads to diffuse accountability relationships and a lack of political control (Molander, Nilsson, & Schick, 1999).

The managing for results system was long heavily geared toward measures of outputs, operating processes, and efficiency (Sundström, 2003). However, a gradual increase in the emphasis on outcome indicators is discernible since the late 1990s (Modell, 2006a). An important impetus behind this development is the renewal of the government's reform agenda to encompass a greater emphasis on citizen orientation since 1997, which partly grew out of concerns with an overly narrow emphasis on efficiency aspects but was also inspired by the voluntary adoption of total quality management practices by a growing number of agen-

cies. Consistent with the existing governance system, however, the government has refrained from imposing standardized reporting procedures for outcome indicators on the agencies (Modell, 2006a). Yet, broadly based surveys of the performance management practices of government agencies suggest that outcome indicators are primarily used for external reporting and have only limited influence on internal control practices (National Financial Management Authority, 1999, 2000).

Whereas the research reviewed accounts for the historical development and broader tendencies in performance management in Swedish central government, our case studies provide insights into how more context-specific variations impinge on individual agencies' use of outcome indicators. Given the dearth of knowledge on this topic, the case studies were of an exploratory nature and covered a range of policy areas, such as national statistics administration, taxation, infrastructure, higher education, law enforcement, national defense, and environmental protection. The data encompass over 200 interviews with managers and staff at multiple levels within the agencies and civil servants within government ministries, mainly conducted between 2002 and 2007. Interviews are complemented by extensive documentary evidence, participant observations, and informal contacts and debriefing with key informants. For the purpose of the analysis, we discuss the responses of nine agencies to the government's reform agenda. These cases have been reported in greater detail elsewhere, and the following discussion merely summarizes common tendencies across the cases, with particular reference to the analytical framework outlined in the foregoing. No claims to generalizability are made. However, we believe that the cases provide valuable additional insights to those emerging from more broadly based inquiries.

### **The Use of Subjective, Beneficiary-Centered Outcome Indicators**

Consistent with recent research predictions, six of the nine agencies have been under pressure to develop subjective, beneficiary-orientated indicators, such as aggregate customer satisfaction indexes (CSIs), as a result of enhanced citizen or customer orientation. However, some variations are discernible in their use of such indicators. One category of agencies tends to use such measures as substitutes for more objective, societal outcome indicators when the achievement of overriding political objectives is difficult to measure. Evidence of the use of CSIs was found in the National Bureau of Statistics (Statistics Sweden) and the Swedish National Agency of Student Aid, which have both undergone reforms aimed at enhanced market or customer orientation but whose objectives remain vaguely defined and geared toward wider societal outcomes (Modell, 2006c). Although CSIs are, thus, inadequate indicators of the effectiveness of these agencies, they are used in defense against criticisms for lacking responsiveness to user needs

levied by the National Audit Office and other external stakeholders. However, the agencies make minimal use of these indicators for internal control purposes and are largely unable to prioritize between user needs as a result of political and regulatory constraints.

Similar observations were made in agencies in charge of infrastructure maintenance, such as the Swedish Railroad and Road Administrations (Wiesel, 2006, 2007). Inspired by the overriding reform agenda and their experimenting with total quality management, both agencies have initiated changes aimed at enhanced customer orientation. The introduction of CSIs has formed an integral part of these changes, but they are widely regarded as providing untimely and inadequate information, which is difficult to translate into operating-level actions. Although objectives corresponding to these indicators are set within the agencies, the dominant view of effectiveness remains geared toward expert-defined, societal outcomes such as the quality of infrastructure and road casualty statistics. However, rather than only seeing CSIs as a means of external legitimization, senior management attaches considerable symbolic value to these indicators for nurturing the long-term striving toward enhanced customer orientation in the agencies.

Whereas these findings suggest that agencies adopt but make relatively limited use of CSIs, we derive contrasting insights from two other agencies. In the Swedish Tax Agency, the government's striving toward enhanced citizen orientation has been interpreted in terms of a need to develop a more user-friendly and proactive approach to taxation, thereby reducing the need for retrospective controls (Modell, Jacobs, & Wiesel, in press). This effort has led the agency to identify a number of key operating aspects affecting taxpayers' attitudes and willingness to pay taxes as complements to its traditional emphasis on the effectiveness of tax collection (defined as the gap between taxes levied and actually paid). Subjective measures of taxpayers' attitudes are seen as causal drivers of such outcomes and have been linked to a range of operating-level actions aimed at facilitating taxpayers' participation in the process of taxation. In effect, this movement has renewed the agency's emphasis on operating processes, albeit from a more externally focused perspective than the administrative and expert-defined logic traditionally dominating the view of the effectiveness of tax collection.

Whereas the case of the Swedish Tax Agency suggests that subjective, user-oriented indicators may be used for internal control purposes if adjusted to existing performance management practices, contrasting evidence from the higher education sector illustrates how such indicators might conflict with expert-defined views of effectiveness (Modell, 2005b). Attempts to introduce rankings based on the level of student satisfaction have here been resisted by the key regulatory agency, the National Agency for Higher Education, as they are perceived as representing an overly narrow conception of outcomes and as challenging its

performance audit system grounded in established expert procedures for evaluating the outcomes of education. The emergence of such rankings across universities and colleges produced a contested situation resulting in their rejection as a means of governance. To gain political support for its audit system, the National Agency for Higher Education also sought to realign it to wider social objectives being introduced by the government. As explicated next, however, alignment of outcome measures to such social objectives gives rise to additional challenges for government agencies.

### **Tensions in the Achievement of Wider Outcomes**

The aforementioned attempt by the National Agency for Higher Education to redirect performance management toward social objectives reflects a wider shift in the political priorities guiding higher education policy in Sweden. Since the late 1990s, the role of higher education as a vehicle for addressing wider societal issues such as gender inequality and social and ethnic segregation has been increasingly emphasized. The government has required universities and colleges to meet new objectives for such aspects in addition to existing, efficiency-centered objectives linked to government funding. Universities and colleges appear to respond to this challenge of meeting multiple objectives with a balancing strategy. For example, recent time series analyses show a significant negative relation between social, administratively determined outcomes, such as the advancement of gender-neutral education, and efficiency-centered indicators with a more direct impact on the financial viability of universities and colleges (Modell, 2006b).

A similar pattern of relatively selective adaptation to the introduction of new, social outcome objectives has been found in the case of the Swedish Railroad and Road Administrations (Wittbom, 2006, 2007). These agencies are increasingly exposed to political pressures to promote gender-neutral transportation systems. However, this effort resulted in a relatively rigid, measurement-centered approach to performance management in which considerable weight is attached to easily measurable aspects, such as gender distribution across various operating areas, but little attention is paid to the more ambiguous aspects associated with achieving gender-neutral outcomes. There is an obvious risk of this resulting in largely symbolic conformance to the government's reform agenda, and there is little evidence of these changing political priorities' resulting in forceful actions that alter core operating-level practices.

A similar risk of displacing emergent reform ambitions as a result of measurement problems is discernible in the area of law enforcement. Over the past decades, policing has witnessed a changing modus operandi, notably epitomized by concepts such as zero tolerance and community policing. Consequently, the emphasis is shifting from output measures based on a narrow perspective of re-

ducing crime to wider, societal outcomes such as crime prevention, fear reduction, and an enhancement of the role of the police in raising the quality of urban life (Carmona & Grönlund, 2003; Moore & Poethig, 1998). The Swedish Law Enforcement developed a set of measures in a balanced scorecard model combining financial and nonfinancial performance measures. However, implementation of the model tended to reinforce performance monitoring based on easy-to-measure indicators conveying a traditional view of police work, while some crucial areas of community policing were not measured. Moreover, the relevance of aggregated outcome indicators for police work at the local level was questionable (Carmona & Grönlund, 2003).

Changing political priorities have also affected the Swedish Armed Forces following the emergence of a radically new national security situation after the end of the Cold War, which has resulted not only in increasing pressures for downsizing but also a transition from military self-sufficiency and neutrality to an enhanced emphasis on international collaboration through peace-keeping missions. This shift has prompted the Swedish Armed Forces to reconceptualize its wider role in society and the international community and how this may be captured in the form of novel outcome indicators (Catasús & Grönlund, 2005). Even though broadly based surveys show that the public's confidence in the Swedish Armed Forces remains high, a key challenge for the Swedish Armed Forces has been to demonstrate how outcomes of enhanced international collaboration are achieved to maintain its legitimacy in a political climate much less benevolent to spending on military defense. This example is further testimony to the potential tensions between subjective and expert-defined, societal outcomes in the process of policymaking. Moreover, although experimenting with novel outcome indicators is currently under way within the Swedish Armed Forces, it has proved far from unproblematic to redirect the organization from its entrenched, internally focused control practices and change its self-image (Grönlund & Norlander, 2006).

### **Outcomes of Interagency Collaboration**

As previously noted, a major problem in measuring outcomes in the public sector is the interdependencies between multiple agencies involved in service provision. This issue was further examined in a study of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency with particular reference to how this impinges on accountability relationships among the actors involved in different environmental protection programs (Grönlund, Karlberg, & Tideman, 2006). The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency fills an important role as a sponsor of environmental protection programs and provides plans and guidelines to this end but largely relies on other agencies within local and regional government and the private sector to execute these programs. Hence, the agency faces a complex

situation in which its outputs form vital inputs to the activities of other agencies while it has only limited and indirect control over the outcomes of environmental protection programs. This situation exacerbates the task of holding the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency accountable for outcomes. Although the agency may reasonably be expected to be held accountable for intermediate outcomes, such as user perceptions of its services, accountability for wider, expert-defined environmental outcomes is diffused across numerous agencies. This diffusion of accountability has resulted in some friction between the different agencies involved in environmental protection programs, as there are political pressures to devolve more comprehensive responsibility for such programs.

Similar coordination problems have been observed in other policy areas. These problems not only are due to the autonomy traditionally enjoyed by Swedish government agencies but also can be traced to the policy level through the division of partly interdependent tasks among ministries. Although a comprehensive reform to improve the coordination between ministries was initiated in 1997, an early assessment of this reform indicated that little had changed in terms of actual work practices (Jacobsson, 2001). The Swedish central government has been relatively slow in adapting to the current international movement toward joined-up government (Ling, 2002). Various ministries have initiated small-scale projects to explore the opportunities for improved coordination within and between policy areas (Ministry of Finance, 2007). At the same time, however, the prime minister's office is undertaking relatively far-reaching efforts aimed at standardizing work practices and procedures across the ministries. There is little evidence to suggest that these change initiatives have been tightly coordinated. Moreover, there is some reason to doubt whether they will have a mutually supporting effect on the outcomes of collaboration across policy areas. Prior research suggests that standardization can be detrimental to coordination of complex organizational interdependencies, which often requires more informal and fluid forms of collaboration (Mintzberg, 1979).

### Implications

Our observations raise a number of implications for practice and future research. In the following discussion, we are primarily concerned with the ramifications of our observation for the future of performance management in central government and how our studies may be extended to international, comparative research.

Consistent with recent research in other countries (e.g., Kelly, 2005; McGuire, 2002), we observe a general tendency among central government agencies to rely increasingly on subjective, beneficiary-centered outcome indicators. However, few agencies link such measures, or other outcome indicators, to internal control practices. Our case studies confirm the survey evidence (National Finan-

cial Management Authority, 1999, 2000) suggesting that such indicators are primarily used for external reporting and political exchanges. In addition, there is evidence of inconsistencies and tensions between subjective outcome indicators and expert-defined outcomes of wider, societal concern in several policy areas, especially higher education, military defense, and environmental protection (cf. Kelly, 2005). Such problems may be exacerbated by the tendency of agencies to focus on outcomes that are relatively easy to measure or trade off achievement of certain outcomes for more narrowly defined efficiency or effectiveness aspects, which may result in displacement of overall reform ambitions (Smith, 1993). Evidence of such risks was particularly found in law enforcement and, with respect to wider outcomes of social significance, in the areas of higher education and infrastructure.

These problems pose a dilemma as far as the overall development of the government's reform agenda is concerned. Following the devolved nature of policy development in Swedish central government (cf. Pierre, 2004), much of the ongoing experimenting with novel outcome indicators emanates from agency-specific initiatives rather than uniform, government-wide regulation. This experimentation is especially the case where subjective, beneficiary-oriented indicators constitute manifestations of wider change initiatives aimed at enhanced customer orientation. It is also worth emphasizing that the agencies' experimenting with such initiatives is still at a relatively early stage and may only become more firmly embedded in organizational practices in the longer term. On the other hand, the potential conflicts between different outcomes and the agencies' considerable influence on what information is reported suggest that there is an obvious risk of agencies' biasing such information (cf. Smith, 1993). Similar to previous criticisms levied at the managing for results system (Molander et al., 1999), this potential for biasing leads us to harbor some skepticism of whether greater emphasis on outcome indicators will enhance government control of the agencies and overall policy implementation.

A solution to this dilemma would be to increase the level of detail of the agencies' reporting requirements and other forms of regulation. However, such a requirement goes against the devolved nature of central government operations in Sweden and might unduly circumscribe the agencies' ability to seek novel ways of improving service provision. Moreover, as a result of devolution, Swedish government ministries are relatively disadvantaged vis-à-vis the agencies in terms of the availability of administrative resources and expertise. Civil servants within the ministries already experience considerable difficulties in using the extensive information reported by the agencies (Modell, 2006a).

Hence, it remains an open, empirical question how the ongoing experimenting with new modes of service provision and performance indicators can be balanced with the need for accountability and government control. This issue requires further research. It would be of interest to extend such research to international, comparative studies with particular reference to how the conflicts

and dilemmas observed in Swedish central government are managed in countries with a stronger tradition of implementing reforms in a more centralized, top-down manner. For example, experiences from implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act and the National Performance Review in the United States suggest that such an implementation mode is not necessarily conducive to strengthening government control. Rather, considerable problems have been observed in aligning federal government objectives heavily geared toward outcomes with control practices within federal agencies and state governments (Cavalluzzo & Ittner, 2004; Heinrich, 2002; Kravchuk & Schack, 1996; Long & Franklin, 2004). It would be of interest to examine whether such problems have also hampered wider organizational change efforts in response to the government's reform agenda and to contrast such experiences with those emerging from our empirical studies. Prior research in state governments in the United States provides mixed evidence in this respect, suggesting that initiatives such as the Government Performance and Results Act may both stimulate and inhibit experimenting and learning (Moynihan, 2005). Comparative research across countries dominated by radically different reform traditions may give more systematic insights into how such differences impinge on the wider outcomes of implementation.

### Concluding Remarks

This paper provides a broad outline of evolving performance management practices in the Swedish central government. Although we observe several similarities to the international trend toward New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006), we highlight key features of the dominant reform tradition and established governance practices in Swedish central government. A central observation in this respect concerns the need to balance the ongoing experimenting with novel outcome indicators with the government's information requirements to hold agencies accountable for policy implementation. This balancing act is exacerbated by the potential conflicts between different types of outcome indicators and the risk of agencies' biasing externally reported information. Although this problem is not unique to Swedish central government, the devolved nature of policy development implies that there is considerable scope for selective adaptation to the government's reform agenda. We outline ways in which further insights into these problems may be generated through international, comparative studies. We believe that much can be learned from such investigations.

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*Sven Modell is professor of management accounting at Manchester Business School, United Kingdom. He received his Ph.D. in business administration from Lund University, Sweden. His research interests pivot around the social, political, and institutional aspects of management accounting and control with particular emphasis on public sector organizations.*

*Anders Grönlund is associate professor of accounting at Stockholm University School of Business, Sweden. He received his Ph.D. in business administration from School of Business, Economics and Law, Göteborg University, Sweden. His research interests concern public management and governance with emphasis on public sector organizations.*