

A Municipal Service Center – For What and For Whom?

Understanding the Political Nature of a Public Administration Reform Process

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Abstract

Organizational reforms in public administration have been high on the agenda for decades. A popular example is the municipal service center (MSC) which brings citizen-government interaction together in one location, physically and virtually. Previous research has mainly focused on the organizational solution and operation of MSCs. This article contributes by using a processual approach to study how priorities are handled during a reform process with fundamental effects and consequences for the organizational solution. The article is based on an in-depth case study of an MSC in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. The empirical data comprises documents and 29 interviews with politicians, managing directors, and other key actors. We discern a number of process factors and analyze the process in relation to four key priorities: organizational change or organizational solution, values in relation to efficiency or democracy, politicians or administrators as key actors, and citizens as customers or co-creators. The article also relates the priorities to more comprehensive public administration perspectives in the literature such as NPM and more citizen-centered perspectives. The results show that the process was characterized by a view of citizens as service-recipients and customers; a focus on efficiency and the MSC as an organizational solution, and a process driven forward by leading public administrators with a significant influence over vital value priorities.

Introduction

Organizational reforms are commonplace in public administration and management. They respond to various societal needs and events and are often used as a management tool to increase legitimacy and credibility (Bouckhaert, 2010). Even with the best intentions, reform processes are rarely straightforward and predictable. For example, public administration reform processes are often affected by conflicting views, sudden events, shifting trends and contextual factors such as time frames, scale, and existing institutional norms and rules (March and Olsen, 1995; Pierre & Peters, 2012; Christensen and Laegreid, 2013). Motives and intentions can differ greatly from the actual outcome. Furthermore, reforms are connected to diffusion processes and marketing strategies, factors that can lead to unexpected inputs in a reform process. All these aspects show that it is far easier to shortsightedly embrace reform trends than to achieve the organizational change intended or any change at all. There

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are several ways to study trends, for example, focusing on the trend itself, its motives, its diffusion, and its consequences. Another research approach is to study the actual process of setting up and implementing a reform. There is a growing literature promoting a processualist approach to studying public sector reform as the events affect the reform path and the decisions made during a process determine a specific outcome (c.f. Barzelay & Gallego, 2006). This article is an attempt to add in-depth knowledge of a contemporary reform process, that of municipal service centers (MSCs), using a processual approach.

Reform processes are often torn between economic and democratic values and reform methods have been challenged by processes of opening up public service delivery to business-oriented approaches inspired by New Public Management (Hood, 1991), but also to more inclusive and participatory approaches such as New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006) or New Public Service (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006). A customer-oriented approach and freedom of choice may increase citizens' trust in performance, but it can have negative effects on administrative procedure (Gustavsen, Røiseland & Pierre, 2014). Good public management '...does not allow performance and results to take precedence over procedure; rather, it seeks to find the proper balance between a customer model and a citizen model of public service production and delivery' (Pierre and Ingraham, 2010: 4). Revealing the relationship between performance and procedure in reform processes is thus of central importance in understanding the nature of a process.

This article focuses on the international trend of reforming the organization of citizen–government interaction through so-called citizen service centers (CSCs) (Bhatti et al., 2010, 2011), contact centers (Bernhard and Wihlborg, 2014), one-stop shops (Askim et al., 2011), or municipal service centers (MSCs). The two main problems that these centers address are; unequal and fragmented access to public service. The two main motives for establishing MSCs are to provide equal opportunities for all citizens to obtain high-quality service, and to make citizen–government interaction more efficient and cost-effective. The central idea is to bring all arenas for interaction together, in one geographical location accessed via one phone number and one website, etc. These centers provide '... citizens with *one* entrance point where they can access a variety of public services.' (Bhatti et al., 2011: 579). Another central feature is to relieve specialists or back-office personnel from the task of answering simple questions, allowing them to concentrate on core issues.

Most literature on MSCs emphasizes the actual running of the centers (c.f. Askim et al. 2011; Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2014), while indicating that processual factors are key to successful implementation (Bhatti, et. al. 2011; Bernhard, 2013). The complex process of establishing MSCs, which often entails vital and difficult value-priorities due to the vast number of actors and administrative sectors involved, needs more attention from social science research. The question of who makes or sanctions priorities is vital in a democratic organization. For example, if politicians rather than administrators are the key actors in setting priorities, this may have beneficial implications for democratic accountability. If

priority setting involves citizens as co-creators, this indicates the influence of participatory values, while viewing citizens as customers signals a narrower focus on service efficiency. More research on MSCs can contribute to a better understanding of the motives and the consequences of the priorities made during reform processes.

The purpose of this article is to scrutinize the process of establishing an MSC in the medium-sized Swedish municipality of Örebro. This article is guided by two theoretical themes: (i) the implications of process factors, such as process focus, value priorities and agency, on the organizational solution; and (ii) how the process characteristics can be viewed in the light of broader public administration and management perspectives. Our empirical analysis is guided by the following research question: What value priorities were of central importance during the reform process and how were they handled and settled? Our analysis focuses on four aspects: 1. Focus on organizational change or organizational solution? 2. Process characterized by business-oriented or citizen-centered values? 3. Who are the main process actors – politicians or administrators? 4. What was the role of the citizen in the process? By identifying key events, actors, goals, and organizational focus during the process of establishing the center, and as well as value priorities in the process, the article contributes to a deeper knowledge concerning the political nature of MSC as a contemporary administrative reform. Political is defined here in terms of making value priorities, implying that political agency is understood in a broad, non-formalistic sense.

Research design

This study was designed as an in-depth case study in order to gain nuanced insights into a complex process (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The city of Örebro is a suitable case because its character as a reform-friendly, medium-sized city (with approximately 140,000 inhabitants) permits the results to be generalized to cities that approximate to an average city. Choosing a Swedish municipality is also of interest as municipal independence is enshrined in Swedish law. A trend of local organizational reforms, such as the rapidly spreading concept of service centers, can thus evolve differently than similar trends on the national level. Another interesting aspect is that the service center in Örebro is often used as a successful example in a national context thus generating frequent study visits at the center and a demand for lectures given by its employees.

The case provides us with an opportunity to study an entire process, with the idea of establishing a service center in Örebro fairly contested and a limited critique at the end of the implementation process. At a time where numerous research findings are indicating reform failure (c.f. Tranvik & Fimreite, 2006), it is of central importance to scrutinize and analyze the value prioritizing process.

The study presented in this article was performed within a broader project on municipal service centers in Sweden and this part of the project was based on so-called shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007; McDonald and Simpson, 2014). The shadowing method is closely connected to direct observation and ethnography

and the basic idea is to follow individuals, projects or processes closely in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of internal mechanisms within an organization. Shadowing has enabled us to attend key meetings on a continuous basis and obtain up-to-date information about the process of establishing the MSC as well as insights into day-to-day challenges encountered in the municipal organization. Shadowing is a particularly fruitful method when studying organization and management (Czarniawska, 2014) and also when applying a processual approach as it provides a unique understanding of decision-making processes and events leading up to a specific priority and decision.

Tracing processes in interviews and documents

The shadowing approach constituted a basis for performing qualitative interviews and document studies (e.g. pre-studies and decisions of the city council executive committee) in order to trace motives, conflicts, goals, influence, and risk assessments. We have performed 29 semi-structured interviews with city council politicians, chairs of sectorial committees, key administrators at the service center, and the executive managers of each administrative unit. The broad selection of respondents was necessary in order to grasp the complexity of the reorganization as the process was different in every administrative unit and sector. The interview guide covered the origin of the MSC idea, key actors, preparation, organization, influence, functions, and communication. Interview method is a particularly important tool in order to understand complex ongoing processes and to expose underlying conflicts (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The interview material was thoroughly transcribed, systematically sorted, and analyzed in relation to the theoretical perspectives presented in the next section. These perspectives are used as a broader framework in which to place our material, in combination with process tracing (described below) as an inductive approach in order to let the process “speak for itself”. The quotes presented in the article have been selected to illustrate the main points of each section.

Process tracing method is an analytical tool based on both a descriptive and causal approach. It is a common method when performing case studies. Process tracing ‘...focuses on the unfolding of events or situations *over time*.’ (Collier 2011: 824). Causal process tracing (CPT) is used to understand events and decisions from a relational point of view. CPT moves beyond traditional path dependency and used in a policy change perspective it provides an important tool for identifying events and how actors and events are related. CPT focuses on the unique features of each step and helps isolate each element in the process in order to subsequently put them in a relational perspective (Kay & Baker, 2015). CPT is a particularly relevant tool when applying multiple perspectives on a case (Kay & Baker, 2015), especially if it involves complex relations and irregularities. Process tracing has helped us to understand causality and regularities as well as unexpected deviances and changes.

In this article, descriptive inference is used by inductively constructing a meticulous narrative and creating a time-line, then performing a more deductive analysis. Describing the process is therefore vital and we devote meticulous

attention to “getting the process story right” in the first section of the empirical presentation. The theoretical aspects presented in the next section then provides a basic framework for the analysis of our empirical data in the second section of the empirical presentation.

Theoretical perspectives

What happens during a reform process in the public sector determines to a large extent the organizational solution, in our case the MSC. We should not expect the management of a reform process to control all aspects of a process, which is an important insight in relation to both causality and legitimacy. For instance, a reform forced too quickly through an implementation process could lead to criticism for lack of inclusion or organizational reflection. A longer process based on endless deliberations could on the other hand be inefficient and lead to a vague organizational solution. A processual approach helps us by drawing “...attention to the actual configuration of the implementation process as the key determinant of reform outcomes.” (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2013: 142). The priorities made during a process are intimately connected with the organizational solution which is what constitutes the basis for institutionalization. Temporal and relational aspects are important components in our case and the processual perspective “...is especially attentive to flows of interaction, to the subtle interplay between belief and action as experience unfolds and to temporal context” (Barzelay & Gallego, 2006: 538). Departing from this focus on process, the article draws on discussions regarding (i) broader frameworks on public administration reform and particularly (ii) priorities in reform processes.

Reform ideas and strategies of public management

There are a number of motives and agendas when introducing a reform idea and there is often a trade-off or balancing between different values such as economic and democratic (Lundquist, 1998). These values are equally important in reorganizing public administration although different theoretical traditions and management trends may view these values differently. First of all, we need to understand why reforms are implemented. Mainstream theories identify three main reasons: to be responsive to societal needs, to increase legitimacy and trust, and to adapt to new circumstances (Bouckaert, 2010). Thus, reforms can result from both internal and external pressures.

Second, we need to understand how the reforms are constructed concerning content, idea, and implementation. Prior to the 1990s, reforms were mainly conducted through the top-down hierarchical structure of traditional public administration. The NPM perspective articulated a desire to broaden the political influence on administration and create more efficient organizations (Hood, 1991). NPM entailed a new type of reform management where the major features were borrowed from the private business sector, according to which society should be governed in an efficient and performance-oriented way, citizens are seen as customers, and where a strict division is upheld between elected officials and the

administrators executing decisions (Lapsley, 2008). In a variety of forms, the business-oriented approach has dominated public administration reform for decades, both as a response to fiscal austerity and as an attempt to modernize public administration (Pierre and Ingraham, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

On the other hand, managing public interests is a special responsibility that relies on citizen confidence, as it entails handling taxpayers' money. Seen in this light, many researchers, politicians, and administrators have called for a more inclusive public administration (Peters and Pierre 2012). Several new concepts have entered the academic discussion, such as new public governance (NPG) (Osborne, 2006, 2010), network governance (Kooiman, 2003), new digital era governance (Dunleavy et al., 2005), deliberative and collaborative governance (Healey, 1997), new public service (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000, 2006), and public value governance (Stoker, 2006; Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2014). Common to these concepts is the claim that public administration is unique and cannot be compared to private business; much less imitate its values, ideas, and organizational solutions. Another argument is that, since public administration concerns the direction in which society is heading, it is crucial that reforms in public administration are performed inclusively. 'Government shouldn't be run like a business; it should be run like a democracy.' (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006: 3). Reform processes carried out in a collaborative and deliberative manner stand a better chance to reflect the "common good" and "common values". The value-priorities identified in our empirical data will be related to these broader perspectives.

Trade-offs and value-priorities during reform processes

Research on how public management reforms are implemented and institutionalized indicates that reformers often ascribe positive values to organizational reforms, such as increased efficiency and productivity, better service provision to citizens, and a better-functioning democracy. Making promises is often a necessary tactic in order to reach a decision to launch a major organizational reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

Furthermore, there is a tendency to overestimate the expected positive effects of organizational reforms while underestimating the potential problems and obstacles encountered in designing and implementing them. Accordingly, organizational reform is often accompanied by a somewhat naïve desire to optimize the number of important values. Public organizations must balance various values against each other and this means that several, sometimes contradictory, values must be addressed simultaneously by policy actors. We often see trade-offs between values leading to intractable dilemmas for decision-makers, and unintended consequences and paradoxes often follow from organizational reforms (Margetts and Hood, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The value-priorities presented here are adapted from a number of research contributions on reforms such as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 187), Wiesel & Modell's governance logics (2014: 178), Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, 2014's dimensions and Osborne's elements (2006). We have adjusted these models to fit a process

analysis and identified three broad process factors; 1. Process focus, 2. Process values, and 3. Process actors. Within these perspectives, a number of priorities can be identified.

First of all, we need to identify the process focus. Is it on the reform process in terms of continuous organizational development, reflections and learning, i.e. *organizational change* or on the final product, i.e. *organizational solution*? Business-oriented reforms have tended to emphasize the final product or the output, for example, a new type of organizational unit, and research demonstrates that such reforms are usually based on a rationalistic, instrumental view of organizational change (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993; Peters and Olsen, 1996). In contrast, the intention of a reform process could be reorganization as such, including the consequences for the organization and changes in organizational culture, hopefully adding to the common good. In this study, we examine whether the focus is on achieving the organizational solution as quickly as possible or on organizational change and organizational development which requires a relative openness for new ideas.

A second key theme when understanding a reform process is to identify and analyze process values or implementation values. Value-priorities made during a reform process help us to follow and understand motives and ideational perspectives. One main challenge in reform processes is the balancing *values of efficiency* and *values of democracy* such as deliberation and anchoring. This challenge is a kind of 'Catch 22,' as an efficient process might result in the effective use of taxpayers' money to meet public needs while possibly working against democratic values such as transparency and proper deliberation. A modern democratic organization requires open deliberative processes in order to enhance legitimacy, which may be more time-consuming. At the same time, there is a need for responsible and sound management. We will relate our empirical data to this key issue in order to understand how these values interplay and how they may change during the process.

A third issue in any reform process is the relationship between different *process actors* such as politicians and administrators. The research literature on organizational reform demonstrates that leading politicians have an important role to play when it comes to decision-making and formulating overall policy goals, but that administrators in general and managers in particular have strengthened their influence in recent decades. One of the leading imperatives of the NPM-discourse is to 'let the manager manage'; accordingly, it is an open question to what extent politicians and administrators are handling and influencing the value-priorities that determine 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell, 1956).

The citizen constitutes another central actor and in this article including both the view of the citizen during a reform process and citizen influence. In a broader sense it also entails influence of a variety of actors. Should the citizen be viewed as a *co-creator* or *customer*? This question concerns whether citizens are more passive service recipients or '...co-producers, more actively involved in service provision and decision-making and requiring coordinated services from

multiple agencies.’ (Wiesel and Modell, 2014: 179). In the Swedish context, customer approaches have challenged the normative view of political organization and active citizen participation, particularly in a local context. It is important to remember that the opportunity to be a co-creating citizen also depends on various factors such as the size of the municipal organization and local political culture. The process perspectives presented in this section are important when launching and organizing MSCs and will be discussed in relation to our empirical data.

Public service integration in Sweden

The research on citizen service centers indicates that we are witnessing a global diffusion of a new idea of organizational reform (Turner, 2012) and local governments all over the world have introduced service centers, for example in Italy (Poddighe and Ianniello, 2011), India (Shahaida, Jayasimha, and Nargundkar, 2005), Mongolia (Turner, 2012), Denmark (Bhatti et al., 2011), and Sweden (Bernhard and Wihlborg, 2014; Bernhard, 2013). In Denmark, for example, these centers are legally regulated and their main purpose is to provide a single access point for all citizen–government communication, regardless of administrative level (Bhatti et al., 2011). Many initiatives have had a clear online approach (Wimmer & Tambouris, 2002; Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2014). In Sweden, they are introduced on municipal level and tends to focus on face-to-face or telephone interaction.

In Sweden, the discussion of public service delivery and MSCs in particular was sparked by the national public inquiry ‘See the citizens – for a better public service organization’ (SOU 2009:92). The main purpose of the inquiry was to identify factors that could enhance access to public services; its main suggestion was to establish MSCs in every municipality, with generous opening hours and dealing with multi-level issues, i.e. a deeper cooperation between different public authorities. The inquiry particularly emphasized cooperation regarding social welfare. The information and assistance provided to citizens should be based on the newest technology, suitable for remote access, and for citizens with special needs (SOU 2009:92).

In the aftermath of the national inquiry, many Swedish municipalities, such as Örebro, began to develop MSCs. Today there are at least 81 municipal service centers out of 290 municipalities and in around 30 municipalities, more limited citizen centers have been established. Several municipalities are opening MSCs in the near future, which makes this case study particularly interesting for future comparison. Research on Swedish and Danish service centers show that the key to a successful implementation lie in process factors such as deliberation, key actor and view of the citizen (Bhatti et. al., 2011, Bernhard, 2013, Bernhard and Wihlborg, 2014).

The municipal system in Sweden is in many ways unique as Swedish municipalities possess strong self-determination set forth in the Fundamental laws (Instrument of Government, 1974). In the 1980s, Swedish municipalities started

to experiment with citizen-government interaction and have since adopted forms mainly based on territory or sector (Montin and Granberg, 2013). The citizen-government interaction in Örebro was earlier performed through territorial units bringing administrators and politicians closer to everyday issues. In 2003, the territorial organization was replaced by a centralized sector-based system. The shift was related to administrative quality, efficiency and legal certainty. According to a majority of the respondents in this study, the shift led to a more fragmented municipality and difficulties for the citizens to navigate. The fragmented administration was one of the key incentives for establishing a MSC.

Establishing a municipal service center

The MSC in Örebro, located beside the City Hall, opened in February 2014. The municipal website describes the MSC using the slogan ‘one entrance regardless of the question’ and further states:

we collect knowledge and useful advice for how we together can solve problems in the daily life of private persons, entrepreneurs and organizations. (Örebro Municipality website, 2014, our translation)

The website also states that previous service functions have been terminated, such as the immigration service and planning and building service; instead, all questions are handled by the new MSC. This makes service delivery ‘easier and more efficient,’ as the center is able to manage more cases in the first contact. Furthermore, the center has extended opening hours and contact can be made via the Internet and social media. The center employs specific municipal advisors, several of whom are multilingual. In this official presentation the role of the citizen seems to be limited to that of a customer and service recipient, while a more democratically conceived role is not mentioned. Furthermore, the main task of the center is described in terms of issue-specific questions, while political and democratic issues are not visible.

The process

In this first empirical section we present the process of establishing the MSC in Örebro, which can be divided into three phases: problem framing and initiation, legitimization and preparation, and the actual opening of the center.

Problem framing and project initiation

The organizational history of the municipality reveals that citizen service has been of major concern over the years. The 1990s vision ‘citizens first’ led to initiatives such as ‘the service warranty’, specific ICT strategies, and citizen centers. These visions, together with the inspiration from the national inquiry (SOU 2009:92), laid ground for a discussion regarding an MSC, which was initiated just before local elections held in 2010. Most respondents say that the

key actor in this phase was the new municipal chief executive who, inspired by the ongoing discussions and with experience from another municipality, launched the idea of creating a MSC for all administrative units. Only a few politicians gave a slightly different picture where also politicians were seen as active, but they did not deny the central role of the chief-executive. This citation is a representative statement among most of the respondents:

The first time it [i.e. the MSC idea] appeared was in a common development project launched in 2007. ... Then, the municipal chief executive, who came here in 2009, was contributing to the further development of the idea. The chief executive was a proponent of a service center as the main entrance. ... The chief executive emphasized again and again, well always, that this was important for the common development of the municipality and something that all administrative units were going to work with. (Communication officer 3, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

One complication was that a first pre-study (2010) was performed during a political vacuum, as the municipality had to arrange repeat elections in a few constituencies due to mishandled votes in the local election 2010. After the repeat elections, the MSC idea and two pre-studies were presented to the new majority (comprising the Social Democrats, Center Party, and Christian Democrats), the city council and its executive committee, and the executive managers of the various municipal units. It was presented as a measure to enhance service accessibility, to have one access point in order to reduce fragmentation, and to enhance citizen satisfaction with municipal services. The keywords were clarity, smoothness, and cordiality. E-services were a central feature and accessibility would be improved by establishing limited contact centers called satellites in various neighborhoods.

The pre-studies did not present a comprehensive problem description but identified a few basic problems in citizen–local government interaction that needed to be addressed.

Today, the municipality has a number of physical entrances/contact paths for citizens and the business sector depending on the issue and person At the same time, some administrative units lack a clear contact path. The municipal sectors and their employees are often considered difficult to reach and to get an answer from – a problem that the municipality shares with many other municipalities. (Örebro Municipality Prestudy 2, 2011: 7, our translation).

The City Council executive committee decided in December 2011 to support the establishment of a MSC, though the decision was not unanimous (Örebro City Council Executive Committee, Ks 199/2010). The opponents, Moderate Party,

Green Party, and Liberal Party (members of the old political majority), cited different reasons for their opposition. Some of them, particularly the Green Party, did not agree with the basic description of ‘the problem.’ They argued that citizens receive better service when every administrative unit has its own ‘service center’, as the information provided is likely to be more accurate.

We are quite concerned that all communication with the citizens will be through a central unit. We believe for example that the administrators of building permits are better at communicating building permit issues. (City Council Member 1, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

Second, though the project was described as a measure to possibly save money, its opponents, particularly the Moderate Party, believed that costs would increase. Third, the opponents believed that the location in the middle of the city center would send negative signals in a segregated city, signifying centralization. Fourth, the lack of a clear plan for e-services was considered problematic as it indicates a technologically distanced municipality. E-service was identified as a priority by all respondents. The fifth argument was that no larger studies or inquiries had been conducted among citizens to ascertain whether an MSC was desired. Finally, the opponents cited a lack of broad discussion among all political councils and committees and within all administrative units.

No, there has not been that much discussion – there has been information from the majority. This is what it was like and we had to live with it. Yes, some questions are open for dialogue, but this [the MSC] was not that kind of question. (City Council member 1, Municipality of Örebro, our translation)

However, the disagreement did not prevent the process from continuing. This part of the process reveals a number of trade-offs, (i) the political vacuum increased the role of administrators and the politicians on the city council level chose not to re-enter the process after the decision despite the criticism, (ii) the idea was not fully developed before the process moved on, and (iii) the citizens and the sectorial committees were never invited to comment on the idea.

Legitimization and preparation

During 2011, the administrative units embarked on so-called ROSA analyses, which entailed scrutinizing day-to-day issues and listing those that the MSC could handle. One problem was that these analyses were made without a clear conception of the organizational solution or time-frame. Another complicating factor was the lack of formal leadership and that no one worked full-time on the project. It was more supervised than driven forward, even disappearing from the agenda from time to time.

In September 2012, the project started progressing at full speed as the municipality engaged a project leader (who became the director of the MSC). The respondents state that the project was progressing quickly at this point and most of the ROSA analyses were completed in 2013. The critics claim that the process progressed too fast and was unprofessionally managed, while others stated that it was quick, but systematic and well informed. The task was complicated and most respondents state that the project leader ‘did the best he could under the circumstances.’ The municipal organization is fairly big with 11,000 employees, 11 administrative units, and 25 political sectorial committees. It is complicated for one person to keep relevant actors informed and involved. Due to lack of time and number of issues to transfer, some units were put on hold during this phase, while others were prioritized. The end goal of this phase was a signature by all executive managers on a delivery agreement containing the issues identified in the ROSA analyses.

The distribution of costs was determined rather late in the process, in 2013. Instead of following the pre-study’s initial suggestion, that each unit should start paying for the center a year after the opening, the units were required to contribute immediately. This prompted sharp conflict and some sectorial committee politicians, particularly those greatly affected and regardless of party affiliation, felt that they had been side-lined by leading administrators and the city council executive committee:

We are responsible for the budget, which is the taxpayers’ money, and I think it is like a playground when it is done in this way. ... The executive committee of the city council may make decisions, but they have to realize that it is easy to make a decision theoretically and believe that it is very good, but they also have to listen to the sectorial committees, because it is in that reality that we see the consequences. (Chair, Sectorial Committee 1, our translation).

This led to a major discussion regarding legitimacy and trust. Some of the sectorial committees did not trust the MSC staff to be able to answer citizens’ questions in a legally certain manner. Therefore, they wanted to assume control of signing the service delivery agreements. This phase of the process contains a number of trade-offs; (i) the organization learned that there would be little progress without a designated project leader and hired one, (ii) the initial idea that every administrative unit would participate was cast aside due to time restraints, and (iii) the new project leader prioritized communication, organizational structure and changing organizational culture and attitudes in an attempt to deal with the conflicts, although with limited resources.

The opening of the service center

By the time of the opening, several functions were not completed – a strategy likened to building a boat at sea. One important issue was the ‘knowledge bank’,

which is based on the service delivery agreements and provides the center staff with information on appropriate answers. The aim is to update the bank regularly by the center and the administrative units through a common process, but the knowledge bank was not completed by the time of the opening. There was widespread criticism among the respondents that the paths of communication in general had not been formalized.

The plans for the location and layout of the MSC changed during the process. The center was finally located next door to City Hall, but the premises are smaller than planned and cannot contain the exhibitions and protect integrity as expected. The location is also problematic due to limited parking space.

Another issue that was not properly addressed in time for the opening was the establishing satellite offices. A city council member from the majority says that 'from a democratic point of view, we have to be able to meet citizens in other locations than the central location and that was our main motive for supporting this' (City Council member 2, Municipality of Örebro, our translation). The satellites would serve as links to citizens in neighborhoods affected by unemployment, poverty, and other social problems. It was a major component of the idea of providing equal service but, according to some respondents, there was not enough time or interest to establish these satellites. This led to criticism concerning the service level for citizens with physical disabilities or for those lacking knowledge of other access points.

Another concern for all respondents was the lack of a properly planned e-service arena in time for the opening. Due to a re-organization at the ICT unit, the development of e-services more or less stopped, according to the respondents. This is described as particularly problematic as citizens are more than ready to use this tool.

It has functioned really, really badly because we have no e-services yet. And from my point of view, it is actually a precondition for this [the MSC] – that we have simple and functional e-services that the citizens can use.... (Executive Manager 3, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

Should the center have opened despite all this unfinished business? Most respondents say 'yes,' stating that these services can be put in place subsequently. This was believed to be the most cost-efficient approach to creating the center. Some also claim that it may be advantageous, because the services can then be based on experience.

I am not sure that waiting would have had the right effect. Sometimes it is good to decide and to actually push for a result and have a deadline. ... If we had waited another two years before opening, I am afraid that we still would not have finalized these other things. (Executive Manager 1, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

Even though you jump into a boat with the wrong engine and the wrong sail, sometimes you actually have to test whether it works or not. (Executive Manager 5, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

One problem with launching the MSC without all the functions in place is that the incomplete structure may become institutionalized, which could lead to unsatisfactory functions, unclear answers, poor reputation, and political disputes. In contrast, there are also advantages of ‘building the boat while at sea,’ as trying out ideas in action might jumpstart processes and solve complicated problems. This part of the process reveals several priorities; (i) the project leader decided to put some of the administrative units on hold until after the opening due to time restraints, and (ii) the project leader decided not to pursue the satellites or an e-service organization. These priorities were sanctioned by the municipal chief executive. In the interviews, executive managers and other administrators were critical to postponing the development of e-services, but they did not necessarily relate the lack of e-services to the development of the service center. Postponing the satellites passed with limited attention, also among politicians who had previously supported this idea. Thus, the process towards the MSC continued to be “owned” by administrators, while politicians on all levels more or less disappeared from the process.

Analyzing a MSC reform process

This section contains a systematic analysis based on process focus, process values and process actors as well as a brief discussion on their relation to broader public administration perspectives.

Organizational change or the organizational solution?

Our results indicate that the process was uneven in terms of both speed and the level of commitment. Some of the administrative units and key actors in the project saw the potential of thoroughly examining current tasks in order to improve the organization. In other units, however, very little was done in terms of seriously rethinking the organization. This uneven commitment led some units to prioritize the organizational solution. This was also indicated by the fact that the risk analyses, presented in the pre-studies, were not continuously updated and dealt with in the administrative units.

The uneven process is related to different perceptions of the reform, which is illustrated by quite different comments from two executive managers:

In our unit it [the MSC] is a marginal issue. ... I have a hard time believing it is a big issue, except for those who are directly affected. In my view, it is not a big issue. (Executive Manager 4, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

I believe that it is a very big issue. This is just the beginning of all the changes that we need to implement. ... So based on that, it is the beginning of something very big. (Executive Manager 6, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

The service center staff made an effort in the latter part of the process to create an understanding of the service concept in every administrative unit in order to manage conflicts, but limited time was spent on organizational development. Viewing the process of organizational change as central could have made the process smoother. Instead, the focus was on the center as the final product and the process was adapted to that end. A relatively narrow idea of the center was launched and an instrumental view of organizational reform pervaded the process.

Efficiency or democracy values?

Related to the previous discussion is how to balance the two basic values of efficiency and democracy (here mainly deliberation, access and influence). Making a process more efficient might entail reducing certain deliberative aspects, but without deliberation, the process could end up in unresolved conflicts, which may cause delay and inefficiency. It is clear that our case was not characterized by deliberation and inclusion, mainly because the project was not considered controversial or complex. It was assumed to be a swift and efficient process. This conclusion is consistent with previous research on service centers in Sweden (Bernhard, 2013). Deliberative aspects were not deemed important at the outset but as problems arose during the process, broader discussions became necessary. On the other hand, several issues were raised but not solved, for example, satellites and e-services. This should come as no surprise, as research on organizational reforms tells us that it is often difficult to progress quickly in such matters (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

When contrasting the problem description and goals of the MSC with the actual priorities set, it is obvious that several of the components aimed at creating equal access to service were not in place by the time of the opening. These components were core issues for many political parties. The respondents praise the way the staff has created a welcoming environment at the center for all groups, particularly those with functional disabilities, but question why e-services have so far been left out of the process at the cost of both efficiency and democratic values.

Another value-priority was the decision to put the satellite offices on hold and locate the MSC in the city center – a move that could be interpreted as centralization. The focus on first establishing the physical center has from the outset prompted ideological discussion about equal accessibility versus efficiency. Accordingly, one city council member says

We do not like it that they are centralizing in the municipality. We want to decentralize. They have shut neighborhood offices and cut expenses in the outer areas. We believe it is necessary to be close to the municipality, even though you do not live in the center of the city. (City Council member 1, Municipality of Örebro, our translation)

All politicians in this study favored the establishment of satellite offices in various neighborhoods, but particularly where there is social deprivation. However, few respondents believe that they will be established due to the extra cost. The MSC was created to facilitate access to municipal services, but the central location risks sending negative signals to those in socio-economically challenged neighborhoods and to citizens with disabilities. On the other hand, an MSC in a central location could probably remove some of the stigma of having to visit certain offices, such as social welfare, because there is no way of knowing now what issues cause a person to visit the center. The unusual shift in focus from a virtual to a physical arena is in line with research on establishing Danish service centers (Bhatti et. al., 2010). The creation of a physical and a phone-based access could be seen as beneficial for citizens with special needs. Creating an e-service arena first would primarily have created access for citizens with resources and knowledge.

Who owns the process?

Another aspect concerns what actors are perceived as the ‘owners’ of the project. In this case, none of the political parties claimed ownership of the idea and representatives of the current coalition emphasized that the idea was launched before the 2010 elections. All respondents stress that the administrative leadership managed the project. Our interviews also reveal different opinions about the role of the politicians. Some sectorial committee chairs claim that they should not necessarily receive detailed information about every administrative process, because managing projects is seen as a responsibility of administrators. Several of the chairs argue that this was not considered a major issue at the time and could therefore be handled just as well by administrators:

My task is not to interfere with the work of the administrative units in detail. I expect and believe that all administrators will do their very best and that they are the experts. I have no reason to doubt that the final results will be satisfactory. (Chair, Sectorial Committee 2, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

These politicians believe that the project was a typical administrative project, meaning that it was better to emphasize swiftness rather than deliberation. Many of the respondents eventually realized that they had misjudged important implications of the project.

The limited role of the politicians in both designing and preparing the MSC is typical of more business-inspired reforms. The logic of appropriateness for political behavior according to such a perspective is one of allowing latitude for leading administrators to be active, creative, and efficient ('let the managers manage') (March and Olsen, 1995). Earlier research on service centers stresses the connection between a professionalized workforce and the development of service centers (Bhatti et. al., 2011). Another value at stake here is accountability. If the MSC should not function properly, who is then held accountable and how? This value-priority clearly indicate the influence of business-oriented values.

The citizen as co-creator or customer?

The citizen is another process actor and different administrative units use different terms when speaking about citizens – for example client, customer, or service recipient – but most respondents see the citizen as some sort of customer. This does not necessarily mean that they think less of the capabilities of citizens. One consequence of regarding the citizen as a customer is that the citizen's knowledge and interest is not really visible in the process. Some respondents questioned why citizens had not been surveyed in connection with the pre-studies. Would citizen involvement have changed the process? Several respondents claim that citizens are not interested in *how* municipal services work but *that* they work. These respondents consider citizens to be customers and not active, co-creating citizens and political agents:

We should inform and give counsel and help and facilitate citizens in their contact with the municipality. That is stated in law and is what I stand for. Not how we organize – that is not interesting to citizens. ... When I contact an organization or any other authority, any store, I sincerely do not care how they are organized. I think I do not want to know. I want a service or item quickly and cheaply and provided cordially. I am not interested in how things are organized behind the scenes... (Executive Manager 10, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

The citizen is here clearly viewed as a customer. However, in areas such as garbage collection, the citizen *is* a customer paying for service, but this role is somewhat problematic in a democratic political organization.

The question is whether this view will make the citizen a passive service recipient. If access to services is convenient and one never has to search or learn, then one might become a passive consumer of public goods. It is well known that many citizens feel distanced from public officials and the MSC could exacerbate that feeling. Those who worked closely on setting up the MSC emphasized that the center strengthens rather than weakens citizenship and increases citizen knowledge of how things actually work. As claimed by one city council

politician, 'Before, there was no one to explain the processes to the citizens. ... But now there is someone there to guide and to make sure that they get an answer' (City Council member 2, Municipality of Örebro, our translation).

Our results indicate that the priorities made in a reform process can be linked to several public administration perspectives but that the themes studied in this article show that business-like approaches are dominant in this reform process. We note the risk of conflicts in the absence of deliberation, particularly at the beginning of a process, and the risks related to a reduced influence of the politicians. On the other hand, the process shows signs of organizational learning, where misjudgments early in the process can be remedied later on. The most surprising results are the active choice not to include citizens in the first phase and the exit of the politicians. A democratic organization is expected to build on certain public values, but it is a challenge to uphold these values in a broad reform and in a large organization where the multitude of actors are highlighting different solutions.

Conclusions

This article scrutinizes a process of establishing an MSC in the municipality of Örebro, Sweden. The possibility to perform research based on shadowing has enabled us to receive updated information and material swiftly and through interviews. It has provided a deeper knowledge about motives, priorities, and solutions. From a processual point of view, this has provided detailed data on relations, causality, and temporal aspects. The MSC idea is spreading at a fast pace all over Sweden and around the world. Given that most studies have concentrated on the organization and running of these centers, our study has contributed by systematically mapping the process from initiation to the opening of the center. In this article, we identify the main events during the process and three process factors guide our analysis in order to grasp the political nature of a reform process. During a large part of the process the focus was on the organizational solution and not so much on organizational change, such as establishing relations or changing organizational culture. As the process moved forward, the project leader, with experience from the private call center business, embarked on a dialogue with the administrative units, which meant that many practical issues and challenges were handled and a shift in administrative culture began. As much of the focus was directed towards opening the center, initial ideas like satellite offices and e-services were indefinitely postponed. The project, both as a process and final product, prioritized efficiency values at the expense of values related to dialogue, influence and decentralization. The chief management executive and the project leader were the real "project owners". Most politicians saw this process as a typically administrative one and decided early on to back off. They did not intervene when the establishment of satellite offices was postponed, which was an idea that had been supported by the politicians. As a result, the establishment of the center was viewed as an apolitical issue. Our study also shows that many politicians and administrators view the citizen as a customer of public

goods rather than a co-creator of a service center servicing a democratic community.

This reform process constitutes a break with historically more inclusive citizen-oriented reform processes in Örebro and is mainly inspired by private sector management. This could indicate that public administration reform processes move further away from citizen input. On the other hand, MSCs entail a new form of front line communication with citizens, as the municipal guides have a communicative role rather than an administrative. This pertains a new kind of responsiveness, particularly interesting in the Swedish multicultural society. The fact that e-services was not prioritized as a part of the package can be interpreted as a focus on citizen groups in need of face-to-face interaction, particularly in multiple languages. This process has revealed that citizen input into a process may not be the most important processual factor, but rather the process of anchoring an idea within the organization, both within the administrative and political organization.

The focus on performance and efficiency, the administrator as the key actor, and the citizen as a customer are all aspects related to a more business-inspired public administration. This article reveals both negative and positive aspects regarding this focus. First, if the citizen is happy with the performance of the service center and has the opportunity to give feedback, then this reform process might be less controversial. On the other hand, if there are a lot of dissatisfaction, the 'surrender' of the politicians lead to an accountability problem. The lack of involvement in the process by key actors could lead to the institutionalization of problematic structures that may be difficult to change once they are implemented.

Lastly, how this MSC will function and evolve in the future is an open question; will the chosen organizational solution institutionalize or will old or new ideas be launched again? The current establishment of service centers all over Sweden come at a time when Swedish municipalities are facing several challenges like poorer results in schools, fragmented elderly services, refugee crises, etc. A front line organization could play an important role in bridging knowledge gaps and creating a more professional relation with citizens. As this reform trend is spreading in the Swedish society it is necessary to further study the integration of virtual and physical service structures. There is also a need for further studies on a national level and particularly in relation to current societal challenges. Can this reform of service integration, in its full virtual and physical potential, build new bridges between citizens and public administration?

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