

Policy programmes as steering instruments

With the policy programme for health promotion as an example

The Government's possibilities to steer policy and the preparation and implementation of cross-sectoral policy measures have been developed in recent years. On the basis of a recommendation that was made by the Central Government Reform project, policy programmes were piloted, and during Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's First Government three policy programmes were launched. These are now in their second programme period. The programmes can be considered important because the boundaries between administrative sectors in Finland have appeared rigid and the need to reduce shortcomings in the narrowly focused preparation and implementation of measures is great. Attention was drawn to this matter most recently in the OECD's country report on administration in Finland.

The audit examined how well policy programmes make it possible to assemble cross-sectoral policies as a coherent whole and to improve the implementation of the Government Programme as part of the steering of administrative sectors. Key questions were how well policy programmes can coordinate horizontal measures and bring value added to ministries' preparation and steering procedures.

The direct financial significance of policy programmes is rather small, although in connection with their implementation one can in principle make choices regarding the allocation and dimensioning of appropriations. The significance is linked to expectations concerning more efficient and broader preparation rather than programmes' direct financial impacts.

Programmes do not form a clearly delimited and unambiguous whole. They are above all political steering tools that can be used in many different ways depending on political will. The normative basis for them has been quite thin, so that grounds for evaluating their success are in many ways open to interpretation. Policy programmes have been characterised as umbrellas or loose collections of measures, while at the same time the idea has been to make objectives

more precise. Many different actors participate in implementing programmes and interpret a programme's goals, role and means somewhat differently. The audit strove to survey interpretations and form an overall picture of the functioning of programmes and their preconditions.

The programmes are still under way. It appears, however, that the programmes have not received the originally conceived role in the Government's strategic planning and horizontal spending limits and budget preparation as an integrating instrument. Their significance in steering administrative sectors has remained quite small, and the programmes have not been able significantly to bring together parallel and overlapping preparatory and steering functions. The observed problems do not concern the practical implementation of programmes as much as the basic preconditions provided by the current way in which they are applied as well as programme management's inadequate means to influence matters.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the role of programmes' ministerial groups has remained unclear, and the handling of matters in the ministerial group does not ensure adherence to policy or agreements. Shortcomings in the Government's collective commitment are visible not only in programme resources but also in the fact that even ministerial groups' and the coordinating minister's current means to influence matters have not been used. Ministers have not taken part in budget preparation or budget negotiations for programmes' key administrative sectors.

Policy programmes' measures are based on the general outlines of the Government Programme, but these are rarely elaborated and consist of projects that ministries, agencies and other cooperation partners consider important. Consequently programmes lack a strategic core that focuses implementation and prioritises the most important tasks. A programme easily becomes a collage of individual measures whose synergies may remain small.

Programmes are quite broad and measures cover a wide range. Many reform projects in whose preparation or implementation a programme may play no active role have been assembled under programmes' umbrella. Breadth can be justified by programmes' basic nature as a link connecting administrative sectors and bringing together policy measures. In practice measures are implemented individually and interaction between different projects and actors is

insubstantial. Programmes' measures fall mainly in the administrative sectors of the ministries that are in charge of programmes. With regard to actual "cross-sectoral" measures or measures in other administrative sectors, this often amounts to recording measures that are already being implemented in programme documents.

When the programmes were started, existing development processes were not surveyed and a complete map of reforms and development projects was not assembled. As a result, national programmes, processes implementing Government resolutions or other broad projects that develop the same matters may exist alongside a policy programme. Some projects have been interpreted as implementation channels for a policy programme, but mostly parallel programmes' measures are implemented in a fragmented way, according to each separate programme.

Although programmes are clearly overlapping, most of the programme implementers do not recognise special needs for coordination. The audit was unable to show that parallel programmes have caused direct overlap in the use of resources or unnecessary development measures. In spite of this the large number of parallel programmes and the fragmentation of measures can be considered counterproductive. Conducting many loosely connected development projects at the same time weakens possibilities to set priorities, outline different actors' responsibilities and determine the value added of individual measures. Parallel development operations also hamper development work at the local level. The Government's basic messages and priorities are difficult to recognise and the network of numerous parallel and partly overlapping programmes can harm the credibility of programme and project administration as a whole.

Programmes' own resources are quite small; however, in terms of effectiveness a bigger problem is that programmes are quite dependent on cooperating ministries' preparedness to implement a programme and provide the necessary labour input. From the viewpoint of programme management, ministries' expert input is generally not available for a programme but has mainly been allocated to the individual measures for which the ministry is responsible. This tends to fragment a programme into the implementation of narrow, individual subprojects. Programmes do not have enough preparatory resources or authority to use them.

In the second programme period an attempt was no longer made to integrate the preparation of the Government's strategy document, spending limits and budget preparation and the implementation of policy programmes. Since many measures with direct effects on appropriations were eliminated from programmes, the connection with spending limits and budget planning was no longer considered essential during the second programme period. This has reduced the weight given to programmes.

Many of the measures included in the programme appear to have made progress during the programme period and the policy programme has helped to speed up the preparation of some measures. It is true that many measures would have probably been implemented in any case, and therefore it is difficult to evaluate the significance of the policy programme for their progress.

According to audit findings, the policy programme did not essentially change ministries' planned activities or the focusing and allocation of expert work. Horizontal cooperation depends largely on previous cooperation practices and their scope.

Programmes' value added lies above all in drawing attention to matters that the Government considers important. The publicity received by policy objectives and the resulting discussion during the Government term can influence future decision-makers and decisions. This change in culture or attitudes is difficult to observe or demonstrate directly.

Policy programmes contain very few measures that would create permanent preconditions for promoting policy objectives. With a few exceptions, measures are not expected to result in new cooperation procedures, organised networks or common planning and preparation arenas.

Great expectations have been placed on policy programmes in implementing the Government Programme and coordinating policy measures horizontally at the Government level. With the help of policy programmes it has been possible to create contact and communication channels that have increased the approval of cross-sectoral measures and encouraged ministries to work together. In their present form policy programmes are not able to meet expectations regarding more effective political steering, cross-sectoral preparation and the implementation of policy measures. The National Audit Office recommends that alongside and in place of policy programmes, horizon-

tal preparation should be developed using other integration means. The role of the Prime Minister's Office in developing horizontal integration and coordination means should be elaborated and strengthened. The Ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister's Office should also be given an obligation to cooperate in integrating cross-sectoral policies.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, despite significant shortcomings, policy programmes have created a foundation and approval for networking and unofficial cooperation among ministries. One good aspect of their open and network-like form of implementation is light programme administration and the possibility to reevaluate measures flexibly during the programme period. Policy programmes have not been carried out according to the original specifications, so the possibilities and effectiveness of the programme management model have not been fully tested. Programme activities need to be made much more efficient, however. This involves the application of the principles in the original programme concept and the creation of new instruments and procedures that strengthen the implementation of programmes.