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Top politicians' use of the decision basis for major public investments

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Summary

Norwegian public investment projects must be assessed before they are implemented, and the larger a project is, the better they must be investigated. The purpose of the Norwegian scheme for quality assurance of major public investments (in this report, we also use the terms QA regime, QA system and QA scheme, which means the same thing) is to ensure that large state investments provide the greatest possible benefit to society and ensure good control of costs, efficient use of common resources and, as far as possible, prevent unsound investments. Many studies have previously examined various aspects of the QA scheme, but few recent studies have examined how the reports made mandatory by the model are used by one of its primary user groups, the top politicians in the government and the Parliament (Stortinget). This is the overarching research question for this study.

To investigate this research question, we have asked the following questions:

- 1) What does the process look like in which top politicians receive information about various large investment projects through the conceptual appraisal and QA reports?
- 2) In what way are the conceptual appraisal and QA reports used in the decision-making processes?
- 3) When in a decision-making process do politicians perceive that the investment decision is actually being made?
- 4) What do the top politicians themselves think are the strengths and weaknesses of the QA scheme?
- 5) How can the conceptual appraisal and QA reports and the QA scheme be improved so that they to an even larger degree contribute to good decisions?

The study's most important data have been collected through 20 in-depth interviews with former and/or current top politicians from across the political spectrum who have experience with the QA scheme through their roles in the government apparatus or as parliamentary representatives. Furthermore, we have used document studies to review existing research literature and other relevant literature on the subject.

The analyses show that the decision bases are read to varying degrees by the different informants. How carefully they are read depends partly on several factors, such as how controversial the projects discussed are in terms of, for

example, the amount of critical media attention they receive. Most informants read the abstracts and/or conclusions, while some read the reports from the first to the last page. Some rely primarily on summaries from their own bureaucrats if they are in government. In addition, politicians use many other sources to get information.

There is a distinction between parliamentary politicians on the one hand and politicians in the government apparatus on the other. The latter – particularly state secretaries who are responsible for investment matters – usually delve significantly deeper into the subject matter. In this work, the state secretaries and ministers rely, to a large extent, on a competent bureaucracy for professional advice. These professional resources are far greater than those available to most members of parliament. All our informants have limited time resources, but when it comes to reviewing projects within the QA scheme, this applies most to parliamentary representatives.

According to our informants, the QA system contributes to some very socio-economically unprofitable projects being rejected. Moreover, several projects are modified, investigated better, scaled down and postponed. At the same time, political factors are decisive for whether a project gains support in Parliament after a QA2 and subsequently obtains funding from the government because ‘the political calculation decides.’ Thus, it is usually crucial for project completion that top politicians – especially in the government – perceive that a project should be implemented, not whether a project is estimated to have a net positive socio-economic benefit. This applies, for example, to a number of projects in the transport sector.

The assessments in the QA system are often used strategically/opportunistically. For example, a QA1 with an assessment of net positive benefit to society is highlighted by those who want a project to be implemented. In contrast, politicians and others who want a project to be stopped highlight the net negative social benefit of a project. If politicians disagree with the assessments in a cost-benefit analysis, they will often try to find weaknesses in it, for example, by questioning the underlying assumptions.

There were divergent opinions as to when decisions are actually made, and the informants interpreted and answered the question differently. The decision-making process has many ‘stopping points’, and a project can be stopped at just about any stage until it has obtained funding via the state budget. However, several point out that decisions, for example, about what kind of projects are chosen, are in reality, often made early in the process, after a conceptual appraisal and before a QA1.

The informants emphasized almost in unison that the QA scheme is perceived as useful. It provides a more orderly political process and higher quality of the

projects that are ultimately implemented while acting as a counterbalance to situations where ‘the fox guards the henhouse.’ The QA scheme helps to keep costs down, and has a disciplining effect on the actors involved by the thorough discussion of project proposals by, among others, external, independent consultants. The interviewed top politicians generally have great faith in the QA scheme and high trust in the bureaucrats in the government apparatus, state agencies and the external quality assurers.

According to the informants, the decision-making processes have considerable potential for improvement. Despite the fact that the QA scheme is also intended to be a counterweight to lobbying by narrow special interests, many investment decisions are nevertheless criticized for being too characterized by such. The cost-benefit analyses are considered to be inadequate, particularly because they either lack or have too superficial a discussion of climate effects, the value of nature, long-term and short-term environmental impacts, land use changes, soil protection, noise and cultural heritage. Several informants emphasized that the basis for decision-making should be better communicated. Furthermore, the informants generally wanted more and better discussion of the political trade-offs that they, as decision-makers would have to make.

A common view among the informants is that the current QA regime largely promotes considerations that the Ministry of Finance is concerned with that projects should be well-managed and socio-economically profitable. This can be interpreted as an indication that the QA regime functions at least to some extent as intended – since this Ministry places particular emphasis on socio-economic profitability and budgetary discipline particularly. Our analyses provide some support for the ‘economic man’ perspective, which implies that the most economically rational solutions are chosen when it comes to large government investments that are part of the QA scheme. At the same time, the analyses provide even stronger support for the ‘administrative man’ perspective, i.e., that decision-makers have limited rationality and make choices based on a number of different types of logic, including what is politically feasible. Politicians in the government rely largely on advice and analysis from their own bureaucrats while at the same time manoeuvring and appeasing their own voters and their own local politicians, supporting projects that are in line with party programs, finding compromises with the parties they govern with and supporting parties, and so on.

Based on the informants’ experience with the QA scheme, it is difficult to make strong recommendations as to how the scheme should be improved. Nevertheless, there seems to be room for improvement when it comes to making the reports more relevant to decision-makers, especially the conceptual appraisal/ QA1. First, the political trade-offs and consequences of choosing a

concept, including the zero alternative, should be made clearer. Second, the analyses should be summarized in a better way so that it is more comprehensible also to decision-makers who do not read the entire reports. Third, there is reason to consider whether various factors that are not currently priced should be priced in the future, like the value of nature.

At the same time, there are indications that the challenges are not just about the content of the reports, but how the decision-making process takes place, influenced by various groups within the different sectors who are fighting for the same budgets. The responsibility is distributed among many actors, resulting in fragmentation of responsibility. One possible solution to this could be that the Storting has a more formal role also with regard to the conceptual appraisal/ QA1, and/or that the Ministry of Finance is more involved in sectoral processes. However, this is inconsistent with the way the QA scheme is organized today, and such alternative solutions would need a thorough upfront evaluation if they were to be implemented.

The goal should be that the various actors in the decision-making processes have, as far as possible, a common understanding of the QA scheme and its role in decision-making. At the same time, there are limits to how much one can influence the way the decision-making process works and which factors are decisive through changes in the QA regime: It is difficult to envisage a process that is not to some extent characterized by sectors and persons representing special interests fighting for scarce funds through strategic behaviour.

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Forskningsprogrammet Concept skal utvikle kunnskap som sikrer bedre ressursutnytting og effekt av store, statlige investeringer. Programmet driver følgeforskning knyttet til de største statlige investeringsprosjektene over en rekke år. En skal trekke erfaringer fra disse som kan bedre utformingen og kvalitetssikringen av nye investeringsprosjekter før de settes i gang.

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The Concept research program aims to develop know-how to help make more efficient use of resources and improve the effect of major public investments. The Program is designed to follow up on the largest public projects over a period of several years, and help improve design and quality assurance of future public projects before they are formally approved.

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