

Rules and Reforms

On the acts of saving and changing in public organisations

Swedish text. English summary. Swedish title: Reformer och regler. Om att spara och förändra i offentliga organisationer.

Sven Siverbo, School of Public Administration, Göteborg University, Box 712, S-405 30 Göteborg, Göteborg 2001. 238 pages. ISBN 91-628-4705-8

Abstract

All organisations contain formal and informal rules influencing what is possible to propose, decide on and implement. Principles of control and organisation are examples of formal rules, while norms and behavioural conventions are examples of informal rules. At times the formal rules are incompatible with the informal rules and new administrative reforms introduced in an organisation may clash with the organisation's informal rules, leading to the initiation of an interaction between the formal and the informal. The general framework of reference that is laid down in this report shows that it is unclear what kind of results such an interaction will lead to: is it the formal or informal rules that will be complied with?

The main purpose of this thesis is to develop a theory on the interplay between formal and informal rules in public organisations. Within the framework of this purpose the ambition is to further develop the rule concept, forming a secondary objective, which is to develop a theory on why rules change in public organisations. In order to develop such a theory, formal and informal rules in three Swedish municipalities are identified and analysed and their effects are mapped out. Alongside this theory-developing purpose, practical questions are dealt with concerning the extent of a reform's actual impact and the reasons why it has proven so difficult for local governments to pursue savings.

It is concluded that heavily institutionalised informal rules, so-called meta-rules, are of great significance. They constitute the explanation to why an internally staged change of formal rules takes place. The fact that meta-rules occur in public organisations is an important explanation to the great difficulty of pursuing savings. In the three municipalities studied, the three meta-rules of good economy, good activity and fairness are identified, which prove difficult to unite as they compete with each other. The existence of competing meta-rules explains why formal rules are introduced but not followed, that is to say, why consistency does not prevail between decision and implementation. The importance of other informal rules, so-called subrules, is also qualified in the thesis. The subrules seem to have a limited effect on what goes on in public organisations as long as the meta-rules compete with each other.

Keywords

Administrative reforms, budget, competing values, corporate culture, informal organisation, institutions, irrationality, local government, management control, rules.