Norway’s Whole-of-Government Approach

Challenges for Engagement with Afghanistan and Other Fragile States

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Summary

Norway lacks a comprehensive strategy for engaging in fragile states in general, as well as a whole-of-government strategy for any particular country, including Afghanistan. This policy brief recommends that Norway should consider adopting a law, or high-level policy document, that make it a requirement for Norway to have a national whole-of-government policy towards every country where it is engaged in initiatives related to peacekeeping, peacebuilding or conflict resolution.

Such Norwegian whole-of-government strategies should be limited to the higher strategic level. This will provide space for operational and tactical flexibility so that the Norwegian government can pursue coherence with local and international strategic frameworks, while also remaining flexible to changes in the situation on the ground.

In order to address the negative effects a Norwegian whole-of-government approach might have on the special relationship between the Norwegian government and Norwegian civil society, the report recommends that a forum be established where Norwegian civil society and government can regularly engage each other on issues related to the country’s international engagements, and its whole-of-government approach.

There is a significant fissure between policy commitments to an integrated or comprehensive approach, and the challenges of navigating the real-world dilemmas that decision-makers face when trying to coordinate multiple independent agencies. Despite the significant policy-level initiatives undertaken internationally, and in Norway, to facilitate an integrated or comprehensive approach, this coherence dilemma remains characteristic – not only of Norway’s engagements – but indeed of most peace, stability and reconstruction operations today.

Introduction

This policy brief is based on the NUPI-report Norway’s Whole-of-Government Approach and its Engagement with Afghanistan which represents a first attempt at comprehensively analyzing the Norwegian whole-of-government approach, as well as assessing its effectiveness to date. The policy brief will summarize the report and its findings.

The rationale for a national whole-of-government approach is greater effectiveness. It is driven by the assumption that a government’s foreign engagements will have a more meaningful and sustainable impact when the various government departments involved pursue a common strategy, have a shared understanding of the problem, a common theory of change, and an agreed plan for implementing such a strategy.

There is broad consensus, both internationally and in Norway, that peace and stability operations are managed more effectively when the interdependency and interconnectedness of the political, security, governance and development dimensions of these operations are recognized. Various models have been developed, including the Integrated Approach and Integrated Missions concepts by the United Nations, the Comprehensive Approach by the European Union and NATO, the Effects-Based Approach to Operations (EBAO) among NATO member states, including the United States, and a range of Whole-of-Government approaches, of which the best known is probably the original Canadian 3D (Diplomacy, Development and Defence) concept.

Norway has been a prominent supporter of the UN’s Integrated Approach and has actively contributed to the development of NATO’s Comprehensive Ap-
In the next sections of this policy brief we would therefore like to use the opportunity to address three major challenges for Norway’s future engagement with fragile states; (i) developing a comprehensive strategy and a whole-of-government strategy for fragile states (ii) the ad hoc nature of the Norwegian approach, and (iii) Tension between strategic and operational coherence. Each of the identified challenges is followed by recommendations on how they could be addressed by the government.

Lack of Strategic Policy Planning

Despite the leading role Norway has played in promoting integrated approaches to international peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, Norway does not have a comprehensive strategy for its engagement in fragile states in general, nor a whole-of-government strategy for any particular country, including Afghanistan. However, in 2005 Norway initiated the Afghanistan Forum as an attempt to establish a Norwegian whole-of-government approach, and in 2009 Norway did attempt to develop a strategic vision for its engagement in Faryab province. The Faryab strategy lacks a description of the ground realities that the strategy is intended to deal with, and is more a vision than a plan – but it can offer a good starting point. It is indicative of how a more strategic approach to Afghanistan can help to direct a more coherent whole-of-government approach to Afghanistan, as well as other similar country initiatives. Government agencies will find it difficult to pursue coherence if they do not have clear benchmarks for measuring whether they are acting in coherence with a larger strategy.

The reluctance to develop such specific strategies is perhaps symptomatic of Norwegian foreign policy in general. There is no doubt about Norway’s commitment to make a meaningful and sustainable contribution, but in the absence of a coherent whole-of-government strategy the default foreign policy and whole-of-government approach often appears to hinge on being recognized as a leading and exemplary liberal peacebuilding, humanitarian and development actor. The lack of a clear strategic planning process has resulted in government agencies and bureaucrats to often pursuing the safe fall-back, or auto-pilot, position: namely to make Norway look good.

Promoting Norway’s image on the one hand and pursuing Norway’s ability to make a meaningful and sustainable solution on the other, is not necessarily two contradictory policy approaches. However, pursuing the one does not necessarily result in the other and both require a coherent and interlinked strategy.

Most of the examples provided throughout the report contribute to this finding, but perhaps the most obvious one relates to the contribution of the Ministry of Justice in Afghanistan. The limited number of police officers that Norway can deploy in Afghanistan – approximately 23 in 2009 – have been spread thinly across a broad variety of organizations and projects. Nine officers are serving with the EU mission (EUPOL-A), four are working within the US-led Focus District Development Programme, one is seconded to the UN mission (UNAMA) and seven officers were working bilaterally on various projects, amongst others, mentoring the Counter Narcotics Police in Afghanistan and the Female Police Project at the Police Academy. This broad distribution of the police contribution ensures that Norway is seen to be a partner in a wide range of international police initiatives, and may thus contribute to achieving the objective of furthering Norway’s image as an exemplary and prolific partner in international operations.

Recommendation:

An alternative approach could be to focus these Norwegian resources on one, or a few, limited specific needs-based programmes, so that the investment could more readily produce tangible and sustainable results.

Process vs. Structure

One strength of the Norwegian whole-of-government approach lies in its ad hoc nature that favours process rather than structure. This avoids the main unintended consequences of most of the institutional models, such as the Canadian START, the US C/SCRS and the UK’s Stabilization Unit. In most, if not all, these cases, the newly established coordination units became part of the coordination problem and bureaucratic turf battles, competing for funds, power, influence and prestige with the existing departments that they are supposed to coordinate. The Norwegian approach, which is to keep coordination separate from execution, seems to be optimal for the highly complex and dynamic environments in which most peace and stability-type interventions take place.

However, too much of an ad hoc nature can be a weakness. Norway’s whole-of-government approach seems to be too dependent on the will of the government of the day, the goodwill of the current state secretaries and the personal chemistry of the personnel in the embassy in Kabul and the PRT in Meymaneh. In this context the Swedish, Dutch and Canadian models, where there is a legal, or high-level policy basis for the
whole-of-government approach, are to be commend-
ed, because it serves to formalize the processes that
need to be followed to ensure that a whole-of-

government approach has been integrated into the policy
decisions that lead to, and sustain, foreign interventions.

**Recommendation:**
Apart from a national policy on a generic whole-of-
government policy making process in Norway, there is
also room for a specific whole-of-government strategy
for each country, region or conflict system, e.g. piracy
of the Somali coastal region, where Norway chooses to
intervene. The goals and objectives of such a strategy
should be broadly defined at the higher strategic level,
leaving room for operational and tactical flexibility. In-
deed, part of the strategy should be to remain flexible,
and to seek to be coherent with national and interna-
tional strategic frameworks, as well as to be responsive
to changes in the situation. In that way, the strategy
would not become locked into a narrowly defined and
highly detailed national whole-of-government plan,
but would be able to consider Norway’s goals and ob-
jectives in the context of the dynamic situation as well
as national and international strategic frameworks.

Canada, the UK and others use their whole-of-gov-
ernment approaches to coordinate all their interna-
tional interventions. By contrast, Norway’s approach
has been limited to the intervention in Afghanistan.
The Norwegian whole-of-government approach could
be formalized, either in a law, or through a high-level
policy process, and could be applied to all cases where
the Norwegian government deployments civilians, po-
lice and military to international conflict management
operations.

**The Tension between Strategic and Operational
Coherence**
The need for strategic guidance at the political level in
Oslo has been recognized and implemented, through
the functioning of the Afghanistan Forum at the state-
secretary level, but there seems insufficient recogni-
tion of the need for operational-level coordination in
Kabul. Head office political functionaries and officials
typically cover a range of issues at the more strategic
level, whereas the officials deployed into the theatre of
operations have a directed focus on the specific case
and end to be more engaged in the operational and
tactical issues at hand. As this is also the case with
other countries and international organizations, the
coordination among international actors in the thea-
tre or at the operational level is a crucial level where
those dedicated to the specific context can meaning-
fully engage with each other. It is here that the local
authorities are present at the highest level, and that
they can be most meaningfully engaged. It is thus very
useful to have a range of in-country level coordina-
tion processes where national, international and local
stakeholders can meet regularly to share information
and coordinate action.

**Recommendation:**
It is recommended that Norway, following the Canadi-
an example, include as part of its whole-of-government
approach a specific set of policy actions required at the
operational or country level. These could include an
annual national or operational-level action plan, with
an assessment, an operational action plan, a descrip-
tion of coordination mechanisms, and a monitoring
and evaluation plan. Neither the Norwegian strategy
or operational plan, nor the monitoring and evaluation
process, should be so intensive as to hinder or prevent
the country-level representatives from participating
fully in their own functional coordination processes.
The whole-of-government coordination process
should be intensive enough to inform the Norwegian
policy-making process in a meaningful way, but not so
intensive that it negatively affects Norway’s ability to
engage meaningfully with other international partners
or in-country and local-level coordination processes.

**Relationship with Norwegian Civil Society**
Norway’s special relationship with civil society has
several advantages for its whole-of-government ap-
proach. First, it can provide the country with flexibility
to adapt relatively easily to a changing situation; sec-
ond, it enables maximizing the range of engagement
so that Norway can be involved in a wide range of in-
ternational processes; third, it can serve as a way for
the government to maintain the humanitarian space – as in Afghanistan.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and all the agencies
involved in the whole-of-government approach, should
engage with the Norwegian NGO and research com-
community, and openly discuss the Norwegian whole-of-
government approach, and how that may impact on the
special relationship between the Norwegian govern-
ment and civil society.

**Recommendation:**
A forum could be established where Norwegian civil
society, recognized as a key partner in achieving Nor-
way’s foreign policy, especially its developmental and
humanitarian objectives, can regularly engage with
each other on issues related to Norway’s international
operations and its whole-of-government approach to
these.

Such a forum could be replicated at the embassy level,
so that the Norwegian Ambassador and other govern-
ment agencies represented at the in-country level may
regularly engage with Norwegian NGOs active in that country, and discuss issues of common concern. Such organized discussions can create the space for a positively critical analysis of Norway’s foreign policy and whole-of-government approach in general, or in a particular country. They can provide both the Norwegian government and Norwegian civil society with useful information about each other’s policies, actions and perspectives – offering to both an opportunity to harmonize and align their policies accordingly.

Conclusion
We have found that Norway lacks a comprehensive strategy for engaging in fragile states in general, as well as a whole-of-government strategy for any particular country, including Afghanistan.

On the basis of our findings we recommend that Norway consider adopting a law, or high-level policy document, that make it a requirement for Norway to have a national whole-of-government policy towards every country where it is engaged in initiatives related to peacekeeping, peacebuilding or conflict resolution.

Furthermore we recommend that such Norwegian whole-of-government strategies be limited to the higher strategic level. This will provide space for operational and tactical flexibility so that the Norwegian government can pursue coherence with local and international strategic frameworks, while also remaining flexible to changes in the situation on the ground.

We are concerned about the negative effects a Norwegian whole-of-government approach might have on the special relationship between the Norwegian government and Norwegian civil society. To address this concern we recommend that a forum be established where Norwegian civil society and government can regularly engage each other on issues related to the country’s international engagements, and its whole-of-government approach.