

Independence, trust, and loyalty. The county governor's coordination of public and voluntary resources in crises in Norway

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Funding information

None

Abstract

Collaboration and communication are crucial factors in handling crises, whether the crisis is a serious landslide requiring emergency response for several days or a pandemic lasting for months. This article describes and analyses the governmental relationship with the local communities in critical situations with the COVID-19 pandemic as a case. In the Norwegian administrative organisation, the county governors have a defined role in their emergency responsibilities, including being chairpersons of the County Emergency Council (CEC). The Norwegian emergency system is organised with *samvirke* (translated to English as coordinated cooperation) as a core constituency. In this system, voluntary organisations have a formalised role in taking an active part in crisis handling. The inclusion of voluntary organisations in the CEC, as seen by the county governors, is used as a case study. The challenges of collaboration can be analysed using the terms independence, trust, and loyalty. Data are collected from governing documents and interviews with the county governors. The main factor in successful coordination is the governors' ability to support the municipalities and the local communities. They must balance between wants of independence and state control. The art of this balancing act is the topic of this article.

KEYWORDS

central-local tension, cooperation, county governor, crisis management

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article describes and analyses the coordination work between central and local levels in crisis management by studying the Norwegian county governors' inclusion of voluntary organisations in the County Emergency Council (CEC) in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Norwegian Coronavirus Commission claimed in their report released in April 2021 that voluntary resources had been important in handling the pandemic by supporting public authorities in building up

control capacity, in communication with the population, and in providing social care for vulnerable people (NOU, 2021:6, p. 207, 285). The Commission also acknowledged the coordination efforts by the county governors, but still emphasised the need for the government to clarify their expectations related to this coordination work (NOU, 2021:6, p. 209, 285).

A recent Norwegian survey, where the public and voluntary organisations were approached, shows that mobilising resources through voluntary organisations has been important in handling the

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first wave of the pandemic in Norway (Arnesen & Sivesind, 2021, p. 73). The survey makes it clear that voluntary organisations cooperated with the authorities on a central level to a larger degree than on a local level. The voluntary organisations more often initiated the cooperation than what was done by the authorities (Arnesen & Sivesind, 2021, pp. 35–36). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the local variations are considerable and that there still is unused potential. Extended knowledge about voluntary participation in contemporary emergency preparedness and crisis management seems to be of academic as well as practical interest (Mao et al., 2021).

In our study, we have analysed the relationship between voluntary and public organisations as comprehended by the county governors.

2 | CONTEXT

2.1 | Municipalities

According to law, the 356 Norwegian municipalities enjoy a high degree of self-governance within the framework set by national legislation. This tradition stems back to 1837. Accordingly, the municipalities are responsible for their own emergency plans, including plans for infection control (Ø. Larsen, 2010; Næss et al., 1987; NOU, 2000:24).

In coordination and communication work, generally, as well as in crisis management, the tradition of independence is strong. As a part of the traditional central-local tension in Norwegian society, the people do not always trust the central state and its representatives. They want to keep their independence.

The leadership imposed on the municipalities from the government, through the county governors, therefore must rely more upon “coordination” than “command and control,” which follows current trends in crisis management with leadership from above (Owen et al., 2015).

2.2 | Voluntary organisations

In voluntary organisations, we find another type of independence: most voluntary organisations were not established to be a part of either a central or a local public organisation. Their work is based upon their own ideology and aims. However, voluntary organisations and population-based movements are widely acknowledged as very important when establishing the structures and processes in the new Norwegian nation in the 19th century (Skirbekk & Skirbekk, 2012, p. 71). This strong position still exists. The voluntary organisations are acknowledged as stable and trustworthy collaborating parts with the authorities on local and national levels.

The Norwegian experience reported here is based on systematic and preplanned participation from voluntary organisations in emergency preparedness and crisis management. Studies from other countries tend to concentrate on volunteers as individuals, more spontaneously organising themselves for example as “disaster knowledge worker” or as “community champions,” still becoming great resources in the neighbourhoods and local communities (Mao et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

2.3 | County governors

The Norwegian county governors have always had important coordination roles in the administrative organisation. As state representatives, appointed by the Government and reporting to several Ministries, they work for the implementation of laws and central government decisions. They supervise the municipalities, with due respect to the local judgement, and their control functions include the role as a guardian of civic rights.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the county governors were delegated increased responsibility and power in emergency preparedness matters, especially in wartime situations (Flo, 2014, pp. 389–390). After the end of the Cold War, the county governors' emergency preparedness tasks were increasingly directed at the coordination of regional resources in protracted crises of all kinds affecting civil society. Previous research on the cooperation between sectors and actors in Norwegian emergency response systems has indicated the need for an effective coordination function (Aasland & Braut, 2019, 2020).

The chief of police usually has this role in search and rescue operations. However, in protracted and long-lasting crises, the county governor is expected to be the coordinator at the regional level. In real ongoing emergencies and training, the main meeting place for relevant actors in Norway is the CEC. There are CECs in every Norwegian county. The county governor is the chairperson and organiser of this forum.

In a recent article about governance and different types of values, Sacchetti and Catturani (2021) have developed an analytical framework working out their role in the CEC, the county governors in this framework would manage their coordination by cooperation as a mechanism in an inclusive structure. Typical values are encouraging participation and social learning and networking (Sacchetti & Catturani, 2021).

Today's 10 county governors' coordinating role in the emergency system builds on the principle of “samvirke.” “Samvirke” is often translated in English by the word coordination, but the concept has a double connotation in practice, covering both cooperation and coordination.

Their responsibility in dealing with crises is defined in a Royal decree issued June 19th, 2015 (Royal decree, 2015). In addition, they are responsible by law for implementing a broad set of means in crises, not least in connection to outbreaks of contagious diseases.

The task of the county governors is, therefore, to align efforts to achieve good collaboration. This task is both vertically and horizontally oriented in the emergency system.

2.4 | The intersection between voluntary and public organisations

According to the Royal decree (2015), voluntary organisations shall be invited as members of the CEC. It is necessary to underline that the county governors are not supposed to use the voluntary organisations directly. But, as voluntary organisations are part of the total emergency plans and training this relationship as members of the CEC is reasonable.

Despite this official status as a part of the Norwegian emergency response system, different studies show that voluntary organisations are

not optimally exploited in planning, handling, and evaluating emergencies (Aasland and Braut, 2018; Engen et al., 2016; Fimreite et al., 2014; Gjerde & Winsvold, 2016, 2017). The voluntary organisations have the skills, local knowledge, tools, and human resources to contribute during emergencies, but they are not necessarily asked and included.

The possible discrepancy between the governmental expectations on coordination, including the voluntary organisations and the current practice, will be investigated in this study. The presumption in this article is that the county governors, as leaders of the CECs, as well as regional coordinators and connectors between central and local levels, regard it as an aim to motivate the local communities to include the resources and competencies of the voluntary organisations in necessary handling and management of crises and emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The governmental coordination of resources to handle contingencies concerning local communities is delegated to the county governor.

Previous studies on voluntary organisations and local authorities (municipalities) show that these local actors expect the county governors to take a strong coordination role related to activities during real incidents and emergency preparedness exercises (Aasland & Braut, 2019, 2020). These expectations are also found in recent discussions in the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget, 2021).

In general, not much research has been done on the different roles of the county governors (Flo, 2014, p. 5). In particular, the coordinating role of the county governors in emergency preparedness is poorly analysed. In a Chinese study about interaction among the human and organisational factors regarding epidemic prevention and control, the authors recommend that the public sector deepen partnership to adopt collaborative measurements instead of separated risk responses (Fu et al., 2022).

3 | THEORETICAL APPROACH

The voluntary actors who are supposed to coordinate their work with public resources, expect enough independence to allow their organisational hallmarks to influence the working methods. The organisations' loyalty goes both to their own anchoring and to the process coordinated by the public authorities. Through communication based on mutual respect, trust as an earned authority is crucial for the coordinator to succeed (Aasland & Braut, 2019; Sennett, 2012). To better understand the coordination challenge, we have used the concepts of independence, trust, and loyalty for structuring the empirical material.

3.1 | Wicked problems requiring multilevel responses

In this project, we have chosen to rely upon combining different theoretical perspectives. Dealing with crises is dealing with complexity. Complex challenges deserve to be approached by different theories and methods, not only in practice but also in research.

The current Corona crisis has been described as a wicked problem due to its complexity and because it has been difficult to decide what decisions are right and wrong at a given point in time (Schieffloe, 2021). It seems wise to identify forces or agencies with power related to different issues under consideration to cope with this challenge. Three main forces are included in our study of crisis handling: central government, local democracy, and voluntary participation, as described above.

3.2 | Trust as the basis for coordinated cooperation

Trust may be defined in several ways. One definition is that trust is the basis of all social life, something we take for granted because it is the basis for our contact with others (Skirbekk & Grimen, 2012). Trust makes us willing to leave something valuable to another person or institution (Baier, 1986; Skirbekk, 1999). This can make us vulnerable or strong: vulnerable because there is a risk that something is lost, and strong because it is easier to make transactions.

Alternatively, trust can be understood as something one does after "rational choice" when something is in one's own interest (Coleman, 1990, p. 100). The difference between these theories lies very much in the fundamental trust, or scepticism, towards both authorities and people. An alternative theory about rationality is to bring in a social dimension and look at rationality as social: individual rationality has a dimension of humanity, also including ethical relationships (Lagerspetz, 2012).

Trust concerns relationships of reliance, for instance, organisations and people (Gjerstad et al., 2020; Sacchetti and Catturani, 2021). These relationships of reliance are described by both the term *confidence* and the term *trust*. The term *trust* is used here because it has a broader meaning than *confidence*, thereby more naturally including both persons and institutions.

3.3 | Understanding coordination

To understand some of the coordination challenges and study the terms *trust*, *loyalty*, and *independence* as a totality, it makes sense to explore Richard Sennett's idea about the social triangle (Aasland & Braut, 2019). All coordination work relates to formal and informal relations in organisations. It can vary from a strict line of command to more freedom for the actors (Sennett, 2012). In his description of the social triangle, Sennett (2012) shows how different experiences and values work together as informal relations in a work situation, illustrated by the three sides in the social triangle: earned authority, mutual respect, and cooperation during a crisis.

According to this model, it is not sensible to study cooperation separately from respect and authority. Therefore, the theoretical base for studying cooperation must include values and relations that enlighten the road to trust. The road to trust goes through a consciousness of the loyalty and independence challenges. The social triangle model can help us to understand the importance of

independence and the basis for loyalty, thus helping to operationalise the core content of leadership based upon coordination rather than command and control (Owen et al., 2015).

In Norway, or any Nordic country, basic trust in authorities and in each other is high (Skirbekk & Grimen, 2012). This context is important to understand the discussion of the role of the county governor in Norway. Trust in institutions partly explains the high level of trust in persons in Norway and the Nordic countries. Trust in institutions has even been claimed as a prerequisite for this high level of trust on an individual basis (Grimen, 2009). Mutual trust is also internationally profiled as a core component when dealing with complex information related to understanding and handling crises related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahern & Loh, 2020).

The discussion about responsibility and independence between state and municipality, central and local level, becomes more difficult when the state part is not effectively coordinated (Fimreite et al., 2014).

3.4 | Building on previous experiences

When dealing with emergencies and crises, the need to build on previous experiences, particularly those gained locally, is widely acknowledged (Boin et al., 2017, p. 104; Cheng et al., 2021). In a case study of disaster decision-making, the authors find that it is necessary to supply the recognition-primed decision model with decision-making expertise (Crandall & Getchell-Reiter, 1993; Curning et al., 2020).

To understand how previous experiences and decisions implicate decisions and actions in ongoing crises, we may also seek support from theories on path dependence (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Based on this approach, we may grasp some constituencies of coordination of current crises based on previous experiences (Fasth et al., 2021). Partly, path-dependency is characterised by self-reinforcing sequences, and partly they may be regarded as reactive sequences (Mahoney, 2000). In our final analysis, we will consider the practice of the county governors related to their coordination efforts in crises on the basis of these two possible types of path-dependent sequences.

4 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

We have chosen a qualitative approach to explore the county governors' coordination work. The approach can provide a description of processes and special features in the collaboration between the central state, state representatives, municipalities, and voluntary organisations (Repstad, 2007). We have used analysis of documents to determine expectations from a superior policy level. The purpose of the interviews has been to clarify the current situation perceived by the county governors as leaders of the CECs and look into possible variations throughout the nation. The results from the interviews are compared with the results from the document analysis. One of the authors (Tora Aasland) was a county governor in the period

1993–2013. This earned experience and knowledge from inside the system, even though not updated regarding details concerning COVID-19, was of help when synthesising the results.

4.1 | Analysis of documents

The purpose of the document analysis was to clarify the expectation on coordination by the county governor from above. The purpose of the interviews was to reveal how these expectations were perceived and put into practice by the county governors.

The two main criteria for choosing documents for close reading in this study were to (a) demonstrate current expectations from a national policy perspective or (b) give clues for grasping possible formative patterns based on previous policies on the coordinating role of the county governor.

The studies of documents relevant to understanding the current status on the distribution of responsibilities and tasks related to societal safety in Norway give both a historic and an updated background for describing roles and mandates. The most relevant official documents and reports from the governmental level are those dealing with crisis coordination. These are “white papers,” different reports, guidelines, and instructions from the last three decades. Regarding “white papers” to the Parliament, the documents describing current policies are used. Literature from research dealing with the roles and authority of all actors towards each other supports the analysis of these official publications.

The analysed documents are (arranged chronologically, details to be found under references):

Development program for the County Governors (Ministry of Administration, 1993)

Regional state government and local democracy (Kvaløyutvalget, 1996)

Report from an expert committee on a vulnerable society – challenges in the field of societal security and preparedness in society (NOU, 2000:24)

Report from an expert committee on state supervision towards the local communities (NOU, 2004:17)

Report from an expert committee on collaboration between national, regional and local democratic institutions (NOU, 2005:6)

Royal decree concerning the county governor's tasks related to societal safety, emergency preparedness and crisis management (Royal decree, 2015)

A description of the Norwegian total defence today (Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2018)

White paper to Parliament on societal security and safety in an unsecure world (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021)

Accommodation to the Parliament from the standing committee of justice on the above-mentioned white paper (Stortinget, 2021)

Guidelines from the Norwegian Government regarding the pandemic (Circular 20/1504, 2020).

The first report April 2021 from The Norwegian Coronavirus Commission (NOU, 2021:6)

All policy documents are originally published in Norwegian, none of which are translated into English. Above, the core themes of the documents are shortly described in English.

All approached documents are authentic and credible, as they are published as a part of the approved system for publication of texts from the authorities (Duedahl & Jacobsen, 2010, p. 53ff). They are accessible to everybody on the internet as well as paper-based documents. As documents presenting public policies, they claim to be representative of the normative expectations.

All the analysed documents are well known to the county governors. They are commonly used by the actors on different levels in the emergency preparedness chain to develop action plans. However, the report from the Coronavirus Commission documents deviations from the norms and statements described in the governing texts and current practice by governmental representatives on a regional level. The interviews in this study closer investigated this phenomenon.

From the analysis of the documents, it is possible to extract statements related to the government's view on the collaboration in the intersection between the national, regional, and local authorities (Yin, 2014, p. 125). These statements were subsequently used for elaborating the interview guide for the subsequent interviews.

4.2 | Interviews

Establishing good routines for dialogue and cooperation, especially in critical situations, is necessary to arrange meetings and communication routines. Therefore, the main question to the county governors was how the CECs performed the coordination and communication in the initial phase of the pandemic in 2020.

Semistructured interviews were performed with all ten county governors in Norway about the activities in the initial phase of the pandemic, which is the period from February to June 2020. Even if this is a small number of informants, it represents the whole universe. Nine out of ten answered by phone, one of them by e-mail. The phone interview typically lasted ½ hour. The voice was not recorded, but the interviewer made notes and wrote an abstract immediately after the interview. The informants were challenged to give facts about the participation of the voluntary organisations. It was

important to get information about the inclusion and use of voluntary organisations in the meetings of the CEC.

This study comprises what can be called the craft of public administration (Rhodes, 2015). Rhodes (2015) argues that there are two main methods in studying this craft: the best method is participant observation, but interviews with focus groups also give much knowledge. In this study, we rely upon individual interviews with the county governors. In combining and interpreting the findings from the interviews with the findings from the document analysis, we also have kept an eye on the requirements and possible biases regarding earned experience, as one of the authors knows the system very well from the inside (Yin, 2014, p. 117).

4.3 | Ethical and legal considerations

The documents analysed are publicly accessible and contain no information on individuals. The interviews with the county governors were based on informed consent. No personal or sensitive information was collected. The material from the interviews is not stored electronically. Therefore, it was not necessary to obtain formal approval or advice from any external agency. The project was acceptable based on the current ethical norms relating to social science (NESH, 2019).

All informants knew the interviewer (Tora Aasland), as their former colleague, and knew her experience on the topic in question. As a former county governor, the first author (Tora Aasland) could add some personal experience to the document study in the interview guide and the discussion. In the preparation of the interview guide, advice was sought from the second author (Geir S. Braut). The first author also contributed to the quality assurance of the findings because of her closeness to the studied organisations. Furthermore, the second author provided additional theoretical material for the final preparation of the text and took care of adjustments in the final discussion.

5 | ANALYSIS OF THE MATERIAL

5.1 | Findings from the document study

5.1.1 | The coordination role of the county governor

Even if emergency and societal security matters are related to a specific sector nationally or on the county level, the county governors must take a wide societal perspective when dealing with them, exceeding political and administrative levels and sectors. Coordination is, therefore, necessary, and so are broad contacts with nonformal actors, such as private enterprises and voluntary organisations (Flo, 2014, p. 579). There is always a risk that the sector instructions dominate and that coordination occurs in the shadow of and subordinate to the sector responsibility (Fimreite et al., 2014).

The coordination responsibility of the county governor is formalised in the total defence concept and the Royal decree (2015). The county governor, as the leader of the CEC, is here instructed to make a regional risk and vulnerability analysis (known as a *CountyRVA* [Norwegian: fylkesROS]) in close cooperation with regional actors (Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2018).

This coordination task is unanimously acknowledged in all the superior governing and policy documents. However, it is seldom made instrumental by giving the county governor specific power to fulfil particular situations.

5.1.2 | Role conflict between national, regionalised, and local authorities?

There have been many reports and committees debating the role of the county government regarding the municipalities. The Norwegian municipalities all have the same mandate regardless of size, and they are quite independent with many important tasks. Some of the areas of responsibility, for instance, in the planning processes, the state has devolved to county municipality or municipalities during the last 30–40 years (NOU, 2005:6). Because the county governor is also a controller and supervisor on government decisions (laws, human rights, etc.), tensions and mistrust easily develop.

This lack of trust appears in several documents and settings. There was a peak in this discussion in the mid-1990s, for instance, in the publication *Tame the Lion* (Kvaløyutvalget, 1996). The lion symbolises the county governor, and the wish to tame the lion comes from central actors in the local and regional elected governments. They claim that there has been a big growth in all parts of the regional state administration, even if a municipality “has a competence as good as the state.” They explain this with a lack of trust in the local and regional elected governments (Kvaløyutvalget, 1996).

Dealing with the coronavirus challenges led to instructions from the central government, triggering a conflict between the state and the municipalities about who should decide a possible prohibition of cabin owners in the Norwegian mountains and valleys visiting their cabins. This issue was serious during the Easter vacation in 2020 because Norwegians love to go to their cabins to ski at that time of the year. The critical capacity situation in the local hospitals concluded that discussion. Part of the problem here consisted of communication challenges inside the central state.

The discussions relating to lack of trust may be regarded as one possible path in Norway's long-lasting discourse between central and local authorities.

This example illustrates the importance both for the need for coordination and of trust among the actors. The state administration spread through several different offices, and there were few good examples of dialogue and mutual respect. Therefore, some new areas of responsibility were included in 2003 to make the governmental signals towards the municipalities more uniform. The chief county medical officer, who had regional health responsibility on behalf of

the central government, became a part of the county governors' administration in 2003. This office had been a separate institution since 1912, but in cooperation with the county governor, not least in cases related to emergency preparedness at a municipal level. At the same time, the county governors got the responsibility for coordinating educational and pre-school matters at a regional level, which had belonged to the regional director of education since 1860.

The cooperation between the regional government authorities and the municipalities builds upon a long-lasting and well-established tradition. Thus, this structure became a perfect responsibility portfolio in the real case of the pandemic in 2020, where schools and kindergartens were part of the total preventive actions (Guidelines from the Norwegian Government, March 29th, 2020).

This path, where regional governmental agencies are to be coordinated by the county government, also has a long tradition in Norway. In the last 2 decades, the coordination role has even been strengthened by the inclusion of the regional, governmental representatives for the health and educational sectors in the county governor's organisation.

The county governor has always been part of the total defence concept (Norheim-Martinsen, 2019). This responsibility was vitalised after the Second World War. The idea was to mobilise the totality of resources to show strength and force and secure a defence ability all over the country (E. Larsen & Kaiser, 2016). Both the military and the civil society needed to work and plan together. The county governor was important in a coordinating role, as leader of the CEC, and as part of the regional total defence council.

To cope with these new challenges, the Ministry of Administration established in the 1990s a development program for the County Governors (Ministry of Administration, 1993). This program had adequate advice about coordination, role understanding, and leadership. However, it was not very clear how to handle civil-military cooperation after the Cold War or include the resources in the voluntary organisations. This point could explain the variation in the county governor's practice as found in the interviews. The county governors have had the freedom to develop a more local practice.

In the latest white paper from the Norwegian Government (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021), the county governor's coordinating role is underlined, not least in the responsibility of civil support (Stortinget, 2021). The government underlines the need for fewer geographical variations and equal practice and reminds us about the learning possibilities in shared experiences. Our question will be to what extent central standards will take place and see the value in solutions and cooperation based on local conditions and local competence.

5.2 | Findings from interviews

5.2.1 | Participating in meetings

The CECs in all 10 counties had frequent meetings (all digital) in this period. Some had meetings twice a week. In the beginning, most had once a week. The meetings in the coordinating CEC were held at the

same frequency as the meetings the county governors had with the municipalities.

The voluntary organisations that usually participate in the CEC were also invited to the meetings dealing with the pandemic. Some county governors encouraged participation by inviting organisations that are not usually part of the council (Elderly people's council, "Women in Defence," business organisations).

5.2.2 | Use of the voluntary organisations

The voluntary organisations have very obviously been offering their help, and the county governors spoke of their competence: "They offered help." The voluntary organisations supported by providing information and updating the situation, and when they were in action, they could be inspiration initiators for the population. They could help with telephone contact with children and young people and elderly and lonesome citizens.

The county governors underlined that the voluntary organisations are primary resources for the municipalities and can support the local work by providing information and carrying out different tasks. This role varies from place to place, partly according to how well known and active the voluntary organisations are. Another explanation of the variation is that the development programs and steering signals from the ministries to the county governors have not been noticeably clear in these matters. That gave room for local variations. Nevertheless, the county governors acknowledge that they can be facilitators here to a greater degree.

5.2.3 | Change in attitude towards voluntary organisations

Most of the county governors answered that there was no change in their view on cooperating with the voluntary organisations. However, the county governors noticed that many municipalities rediscovered the voluntary organisations as a resource and support. The voluntary organisations are able to think more proactively than counting and reporting—therefore, they are an important supplement to public services, was a common standpoint.

5.2.4 | Variations in the contact between the county governors and voluntary organisations

Even if there were variations in how often the municipalities asked for help and support and how many volunteers were at their disposal, the main impression was that the voluntary organisations are a useful resource in a critical situation. Some emphasise that the council learns by inviting them in: "They ask necessary critical questions."

The main impression is that the county governors wish to continue to convince the local and regional emergency actors that they ought to involve the voluntary organisations in emergency

preparedness, drills, and crisis management training. They acknowledge their competence, and some point out the highly positive experience of including the voluntary organisations in the council: "They support actively and show what they can do. They manage to see the totality, and we get a wider horizon. You get good contact with the civil society through voluntary organisations." They support in such a way that "you feel secure that you can get help," and "together we are stronger!"

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | On the methodological approach

As the first author (Tora Aasland) in a previous period was in the position of a county governor, it was deemed necessary to invite a second author (Geir S. Braut) to carry out quality assurance of the findings and evaluate the coupling of the findings with relevant theory before finalising the discussion. Through this process, we think that reasonable efforts were made to ensure that the findings and their assessment are valid and reliable and thus as unflawed and unbiased as possible. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the findings support and not least complement results from other international and national studies.

6.2 | The role of the county governor and the CEC

The county governor and CECs' responsibility before the spectre of a crisis includes an overview of local and regional resources that will be important for emergency preparedness work. This study includes voluntary organisations. "It is crucial that there exist voluntary search and rescue organisations that are able to organise the local engagement around the country" (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021, p. 121).

The white paper promotes the ambitions of the same structure locally/regionally as in the central state with the division of labour and tasks, division, and cooperation for administrative advice and political decisions. There is a link to communicate and coordinate in the pandemic situation between the central state directorate (DSB) responsible for emergency matters and the responsibility to follow up with the county governors and the rest of the central state.

6.3 | Building common risk perceptions

Loyalty is necessary to follow up decisions and guidelines from authorities. It is not always easy for independent actors to be loyal. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that loyalty is not the same as obedience. Anyone has the right to whistle-blow about critical conditions or unethical behaviour and routines (Leer-Salvesen, 2016). To be able to handle and coordinate a difficult emergency, openness and possibilities for public discussions are necessary. Deviations from normal procedures related to political and administrative decisions may

constitute a threat to mechanisms for legal safeguarding in a democratic society (Graver, 2020). If one expects loyalty, it appears important to obey commonly accepted procedures as closely as possible, even in crises. Here, CEC can be an important meeting place.

In recent decades, it has become clearer that decisions related to dealing with emergencies and crises have to acknowledge uncertainty and complexity (Artigiani, 2005). There is a strong need for mutual validation of available information and discussions among stakeholders. Different actors may thus regard the CEC as a forum for a broader founding of decisions during emergencies. In this situation, the role of the county governor is to build "collective meaning structures" (Kruke & Olsen, 2012; Owen et al., 2015). Such structures should be supported by relevant information (Ahern & Loh, 2020). In this way, one can extract the necessary "collective advantage" that is needed to cope with wicked problems (Schiefloe, 2021).

6.4 | The craft of public administration

There is one conspicuous function through the history of state representatives in the counties: the county governor's administration is municipality-related, especially in the coordination role and in roles as controller, supervisor, information base, and motivator. The core tasks of the county governors are broad and contact towards municipalities (Flo, 2014, p. 624).

The county governors have a coordination challenge regarding both the central state and the municipalities:

The county governor is an institution built on tensions, contradictions and ambivalence [...] The county governor is the state representative in the region, and at the same time, articulates the interests of the region towards the central state. The county governor shall see to it that local governments follow central instructions, but at the same time to inspire local activity and support the local self-government. The ambition is holistic, but many of the tasks are based on sectoral instructions. The county governor is both a tool for standardising – for the idea about equal rights for the citizens no matter where they live in the country, and for differentiated management – and for the ideal that state policy shall be able to respect special local conditions (Flo, 2014, p. 693)

This competence can be defined as a craft rooted in traditional public administration and acknowledge that it still has much utility. Rhodes (2015) shows the threats to this old craft, from both New Public Management and New Public Governance, and argues for a mix of skills, still giving high recognition to the craft of public administration.

The pattern of contact develops through explicit decisions and traditions. Understanding how previous decisions, traits of actions, and tradition bind up current activities need to be understood, not

least by the county governor as a leader of the CEC. It is a demanding task to coordinate national and local actions and decisions, both in general and even more in emergencies. (Curning et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2022). It can be difficult to coordinate the state actors, and in addition, this state coordination must be compatible and coordinated with the quite independent municipalities. To have trust in each other is important. At the same time, loyalty is a concept and behaviour that is interpreted in many ways. Still, the authority requiring loyalty has to be earned. One way of doing this is by inclusive leadership of the CEC in real situations. But as real challenging crises, luckily, appear quite seldom, the establishment of earned authority through exercises should not be underestimated. Thus, it is interesting to see that the coordination function of the county governor also encompasses the duty to initiate and arrange exercises related to the need for coordination of crisis management.

6.5 | Tension between levels

The tension between central and local power has always been there. This path trait is very strong and may be regarded as a self-reinforcing mechanism, stimulating almost any contact between the municipalities and the county governor as a governmental representative. In most democracies, local freedom must be limited as the central state has to make some national decisions, such as lawmakers. Demands for development and living room in local societies, challenge the national standards and engage the locals in a fight for more self-determination (Malnes & Midgaard, 2017).

An important difference between central and local systems of action is the political dimension. The municipalities have political power and the government, but the coordinator on the local level, the county governor, does not have their own political mandate. The county governor is appointed, not elected, by the government. In that appointment, there naturally is delegated decision power from the government. In stressing the political dimension of decisions, especially the big municipalities and the big cities, they can consider their local political power as more "right" if it comes to a conflict.

Communication challenges between the levels occur because the communication lines are open and high pressure in an emergency. These challenges will always be in an open system when the time is short and resources are needed for more direct communication than the coordinator. Again, trust, mutual respect, and earned authority are core elements to understand what goes wrong and develop better solutions. As a regional, governmental point of joint-state force towards the local authorities, the county governor appears to be a path trait that has emerged as a reaction to alleviate the criticism, especially from the municipalities on the diverging signals that different non-coordinated central governmental agencies may send.

To understand the philosophy of cooperation, the common understanding of a task or a situation is important. "A cooperation is to hunt for a solution that seems right for everyone, a solution that is not only unknown, but also different from existing knowledge"

(Grelland et al., 2014, p. 29). It is a common experience that to be in a situation is something different from following it from a distance.

The tension between state representatives and local municipalities has been the topic in several investigations and reports. Many of them point out the authority that goes along with the role of supervision. This authority can challenge the atmosphere of dialogue, an atmosphere of trust that is necessary to succeed in, for instance, crisis cooperation (Curning et al., 2020). Developing mechanisms or routines of cooperation can be a means to build trust (NOU, 2004:17, p. 76). Routines of dialogue open the opportunity for mutual learning (NOU, 2004:17, p. 122).

6.6 | Meeting places and routines for information

There will always be a need for meeting places and routines for information. At the central level, we find that:

the crisis council in central Government has had frequent meetings (during the pandemic's first phase) with extended participation. Several strategic and operational decisions in handling the crisis have been done at the governmental level [...] The health administrative experts have given advice that has been crucial in almost every decision, but it has been the government's responsibility to make decisions after total consideration. Ordinary systems for handling and processes have been followed, but it has been necessary with shorter time limits (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021, p. 7)

The shorter time limits might have been a problem for a matching set at the regional level. The county governors probably did not have enough resources to follow up on the tighter time limits and get all the information they needed in time.

The DSB (The Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection) has arranged coordinating conferences [Norwegian: *samvirkekonferanser*], and utilising situation reports tried to get the total picture from municipalities and county governors (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021, p. 47).

The county governors have supported and supervised the municipalities at a local and regional level, among other matters in health laws and the municipalities' duty of emergency responsibility. They also performed supervisory work to interpret the rules of quarantine (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021, p. 48).

The guidelines from the Norwegian Government stated: "*National and local infection control measures shall work together*" (Guidelines from the Norwegian Government, March 29th, 2020). This document is the main order that sets a positive and optimistic tone as to cooperation.

6.7 | The role of the voluntary organisations

Voluntary organisations are important social factors in most local communities. Interestingly, the government is concerned about

scattered populations and thereby longer distances, such as voluntary support. "*It is crucial that there are voluntary search and rescue organisations that can organise the local engagement throughout the country*" (Meld. St. 5, 2020–2021, p. 121). The government considers them part of Norway's basic emergency preparedness system and names them "the support beam". In the interviews with the county governors, they strongly confirm this attitude, and there are many good arguments for including the voluntary organisations even more.

After one year of pandemic experiences, we have seen that voluntary organisations, to a varying degree, have participated in local (municipal) activities aiming at prevention of and dealing with the spread of COVID-19 (Aasland & Braut, 2020). They have supported local authorities with increasing testing capacity, communication with subgroups of the population, and giving practical aid and social support to persons in quarantine and isolation.

The interviews indicate a great variation among the county governors related to their cooperation with voluntary organisations in general and in the handling of COVID-19. These findings reveal a need for clarifying the role of the county governor and the CEC as coordinators in the intersection between the central government, different local authorities, and voluntary organisations. Such coordinating functions should be trained through regular exercises. As there is no direct line of command or governance between the central government and the municipalities, this role appears to be important to secure a uniform response on regional and local levels from the multitude of public and voluntary actors participating in handling a crisis.

6.8 | Seeing the totality

Again, the county governor's coordination depends on accepting and respecting the total regional situation, not the sector instructions alone. It is important to avoid fault lines and manage cooperation vertically (between different levels in the same structure) and horizontally (Boin et al., 2017). Moreover, it is important to have the ability to improvise, keep a virtual role system, wisdom as an attitude to values and characteristics, and respectful cooperation and trust (Weick, 1993). It is necessary to set up systems based on trust and mutual respect to perform the best possible cooperation processes in crises with actors from systems with a different logic and encourage inclusion and common exercises not already present. This means one approach to building the collaborative advantage that is desirable when dealing with wicked problems (Schieffloe, 2021). Long-lasting obligations are built up through regular participation in the CEC. Learning to know each other this way appears to be an important mechanism, perhaps even more important than implementing fixed plans. Fasth et al. (2021) point at the need to balance structure and flexibility in planning for emergency preparedness on a local level. Cooperation through the CEC can be regarded as a means to strengthen this balance.

The description of the processes comprises values such as *interdependence*, especially for the municipalities and the voluntary

organisations; *trust*, all actors' trust in each other; and *loyalty* towards the main actions from the central government. The material consists of information gained from two types of approaches: document study and interviews.

It is a saying that the Norwegian county governor institution is a bold construction. It is thrilling to look into the history, with all its tensions and challenges, noting how this institution can balance different actors to establish a common understanding of a pandemic. Thus, this construction may pull the governmental leadership in crisis beyond command and control (Owen et al., 2015), following the municipal political and administrative leaders responsible for their local population to handle the challenges in the different local communities.

7 | CONCLUSION: THE ART OF BALANCE

It is necessary to have good governance and good collaboration to succeed in risk management. Following Aven and Renn (2010), the principles for good governance are openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, coherence, proportionality, and subsidiarity. These principles are in harmony with the recommendations discussed above.

The formal Norwegian requirement related to coordinated co-operation ("samvirke") in emergency preparedness and response underpins the need for a well-defined role as a conductor able to influence both public and voluntary actors. In this effort, the two core paths to be mastered by the county governors are balancing the central-local tension when exerting public power and fine-tuning the often somewhat diverging signals from central agencies toward the local authorities and voluntary resources.

The main success factor in good coordination, especially in emergencies, is to have a coordinator who can support the municipalities and be a trustworthy controller and supervisor on behalf of the state. To build trust in the coordination of voluntary organisations and local municipalities that want to be independent, and a central state that wants to be controlling, is a challenge. It requires mutual loyalty among the participating actors and a sense of the art of balance by the county governors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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How to cite this article: Aasland, T., Braut, G. S. (2022). Independence, trust, and loyalty. The county governor's coordination of public and voluntary resources in crises in Norway. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12399>