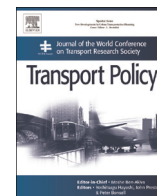




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Transport safety agency's success indicators – How well does a performance management system perform?

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ABSTRACT

Whereas transport safety research has long and established traditions, the pivotal public task of integrally governing, managing and overseeing transport safety in an effective and socio-economically cost efficient manner is yet a largely uncharted area within science. Therefore, it should not be taken for granted that all public resources are allocated where they add value the most. This is due in part to historical reasons and the inertia within how governments respond to changes around them. This article investigates the performance management system of a national transportation safety agency with qualitative methods. First, it introduces the evolution history and the surrounding institutional architecture of the agency. Next, the goal-setting, steering and management control mechanisms are described, followed by a cross-check of mandated tasks and objectives and the associated performance indicators. The main finding is that significant gaps between stated policy objectives, operational annual performance targets and available indicators can be identified. Especially with regard to societal objectives, the steering framework turns out to provide less than comprehensive coverage. Performance indicators for some major objectives are missing and vice versa, some measurement metrics do not seem to link clearly to set objectives. Not all the set objectives need (or even could) necessarily be measured, but certain shortcomings in the performance control system may prove critical. The findings imply that there is a risk of sub-optimal use of public resources if the targets and indicators of agencies are not thoroughly considered so that they logically cover agencies' mandates. The implications of the discovered gaps are outlined, together with recommendations for a more balanced approach. The analysis concludes with some recommended steps in order to cover the blind spots. With the aid of these steps, performance management systems can be improved to better meet policy and societal objectives.

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1. Introduction and aims

The United Nations (UN) has declared this decade (2011–2020) as the decade of action for road safety (United Nations, 2010). The five pillars for the global plan are road safety management, safer roads and mobility, safer vehicles, safer road users and post-crash response. Several governments have devised national plans regarding how they are adopting to the global plan (e.g. Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Egypt, Great Britain, Greece, Israel, Latvia, New Zealand and the Philippines), while others are currently developing them (World Health Organisation, 2015a, 2015b). Whilst roads are the main problem in traffic safety (e.g. World Health Organisation, 2011, 2013; Salmon and Lenné, 2015), the overall transport policies and strategies will ultimately

dictate how the transport system is embodied as a whole. Hence, the meeting of the safety targets for roads will be partly affected by how well the other parts of the system serve mobility needs – urban and interurban rail in particular. A holistic and effective governance and management of the transport sector therefore becomes one of the key success factors for transport safety policies.

Along with the UN, the above situation is also recognised by other intergovernmental actors. The European Union (EU) is prioritising the following action lines to reduce road accident fatalities by 50% by 2020 compared to 2010 (European Commission, 2011): enhancing road safety technologies, designing more agile emergency responses, improving quality of training and emphasising vulnerable road user (VRU) safety measures. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) under the umbrella of the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) is active in a number of research actions, programmes and initiatives, the latest being the “Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st

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Century Act" (MAP-21) (Federal Highway Administration, 2012) and the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users" (SAFETEA-LU) (Federal Highway Administration, 2005). Both of these were perhaps more aligned to prioritising funds to be used toward investments and operations that have implications for traffic safety, rather than explicitly addressing safety measures. The former programme is more recent and multimodal in its approach, recognising the roles of rail and light traffic in its agenda.

A stack of research addresses the challenges of road and transport safety, and the field is very mature in many respects. For example, there are several international forums and boards aimed mainly at supporting the networking of the numerous universities, institutes and other actors in this field (See e.g. ECTRI, 2015; FEHRL, 2015; FERSI, 2015; TRB, 2015). The typical division of disciplines is, for the most part, followed: the automotive industry's focus on vehicle technologies, the government or public side's emphasis on infrastructural issues and social scientists' focus on behavioural studies. While this logic is easy to follow and this division of work "boxes" the topics and issues nicely for each stakeholder, it lacks a systemic view and deals partially with isolated problems – even if these problems are of paramount importance. Salmon and Lenné (2015) acknowledge that a potential shift from this non-systematic approach is currently emerging at least in the road safety research area. As an indication of this shift, there is growing consensus that a systems approach is required to induce further reductions in road trauma (see e.g. Larsson et al., 2010; Read et al., 2013; Salmon and Lenné, 2015; Salmon et al., 2012; Scott-Parker et al., 2015).

The ultimate goal of transport safety administrations and related research is to reduce the number of accidents that result in substantial socio-economic losses that can be measured as death tolls, injuries and disabilities. These losses can be counted as fractions of the gross value of production; in other words, meaning that countries' gross domestic production (GDP) is reduced by the losses. The World Health Organisation reports that in low-and middle-income countries, between 1–2% of the GDP is lost due to road traffic injuries alone (World Health Organisation, 2013). Taken globally, Europe is the safest region, with 10.3 road traffic deaths per 100 000 people, whereas in the Americas, the corresponding figure is 16.1 and in Africa 24.1. Half of all road traffic deaths are among pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. There is a significant body of research in this area (see e.g. McDonald et al., 2013; Papadimitriou et al., 2011; Federal Highway Administration, 2004), but the research and governance still do not show and emphasise this fact to the extent it deserves. For example, the World Health Organisation (2013) states that national and sub-national transport policies currently still neglect pedestrians and cyclists.

There are other major blind spots in the research as well. While the overall picture of what are the problems are (and, in many cases, what the solutions would be) is relatively clear, the critical task of governing, managing and overseeing transport safety in an effective and socio-economically cost efficient manner is yet an uncharted area. This is probably due in part to the fact that such research is demanding, and there is a lack of tradition. Secondly, it is not self-evident that administrations are happy to have their effectiveness and manner of governance and management be critically scrutinised by researchers. Such efforts can be regarded as uncomfortable by the managers of transport systems, who furthermore are more accustomed to monitoring and overseeing than to be the focal subject themselves. However, evidence-based policy, which is much called for but perhaps less exercised than one would think, requires critical assessments.

From the intergovernmental organisations' publication lists, only the UN-related Road Safety Fund's "Decade of Action" (Road

Safety Fund, 2014) acknowledges governance and management as one of the key areas for answering the challenges of improving transport safety. All other approaches by and large maintain the managerial *status quo*, meaning that seldom institutional or high-level managerial practises and *modus operandi* are viewed critically. Mostly, when management and governance is addressed, the questions relate to indicators, data gathering, statistics building and other technical issues (see e.g. Chapelon and Lassarre, 2010; ISO, 2012).

This paper performs a descriptive analysis of Finland's Traffic Safety Agency, later referred to as *Trafi* according to the official acronym, or as "the agency". The analysis focuses on the governance and management architecture of *Trafi* and specifically addresses the following points:

- What is the structure of the management system – including the surrounding governance and management structures – in terms of power, managerial performance indicators and managerial processes?
- How do the aforementioned indicators and targets correspond to the policy objectives stated by the national government and the EU?
- What are the potential areas of policies where the agency's actions and services can potentially best benefit the society and its citizens and organisations (such as private sector companies)?

These research questions emerged while conducting a larger study on the impacts of the agency's services. Management by objectives (MBO) is a well-defined method of setting objectives to achieve the mission of an organisation (Drucker, 1974). The mission of Finland's transport safety agency is based on national legislation, EU directives and the overall objectives of the Finnish state administration. The state applies MBO throughout the administration in order to operationalise and specify the mission of each ministry, agency and state institution. In this paper, we test how successfully this managerial approach is applied to the transport safety administration.

We describe the brief history of *Trafi* and its current governance and management system as part of the state administration and analyse how the set targets and policies are met with the current performance management systems. We present a cross-check of the main tasks, objectives and indicators and show that there are significant gaps between stated policy objectives, operational annual performance targets and available indicators, which became visible as we cross-analysed these. Finally, we discuss the implications of the discovered blind spots and sum up the recommended next steps to be taken to fill in those gaps. This hopefully facilitates the discussion between the agency and the overseeing ministry (the Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland, or MoT) in the collaborative design of sustainable and balanced operational and strategic targets. Furthermore, we would like to initiate the discussion on how transport safety could be best and most effectively managed within a country and as an integral part of any intergovernmental effort.

2. Methods and data

The methodological approach is a descriptive qualitative analysis. As research material, we rely on official published documents and discussions with the agency's management, where we talked to 13 people. Their roles at the time were: general director, deputy director-general for maritime transport, deputy director-general for aviation, deputy director-general for rail transport, deputy director-general for communications, deputy director-general for

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