



The Contemporary Norwegian Municipal CEO

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7.1 INTRODUCTION, DATA, AND METHOD

The aim of this chapter is to present a portrait of the contemporary municipal chief executive officer (MCEO)¹ in Norway. In the first section, we present our data and research approach. In the second section, we describe

¹The Norwegian title is *Rådmann, Administrasjonssjef or Kommunedirektør*.

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the main characteristics of the Norwegian municipal sector and changes in the organizational context. In the third section, we explore changes in MCEO biographies, tasks, priorities, and contact patterns. In the fourth section, we describe changes regarding how Norwegian MCEOs conduct their roles and how they perceive the influence of different actors. Finally, we take a closer look at what characterizes the interaction and dynamics between Norwegian mayors and MCEOs.

The chapter is based on two data sources. First, we use findings from a leadership study, the UDiTE project (*Union des Dirigeants Territoriaux de l'Europe*), where the respondents were MCEOs from 14 countries (Magnier & Klausen, 1998). The common international questionnaire consisted of 54 core questions. The Norwegian part of the UDiTE survey was conducted in January 1997 and achieved a very high response rate (75%), providing a representative sample of Norwegian municipalities at that time (Baldersheim & Øgård, 1998). Second, a survey (TopNordic) was conducted among top managers and MCEOs in Norwegian municipalities in 2017 (Karlsen et al., 2017).² The questionnaire included many of the UDiTE questions and was based on a Danish survey from May 2016 (Bertelsen & Balle Hansen, 2016). Due to linguistic and cultural similarities between Denmark and Norway, the questionnaire was directly translated into Norwegian in a collaboration between the Danish and Norwegian research teams. After pretesting and adjustments, the questionnaire was administered as a web-based survey to top managers ($n = 1527$) in all 428 Norwegian municipalities between 15 March and 30 April 2017. The data file consists of information from 647 respondents (response rate 42.4%) from 317 municipalities (74.4%). After selecting the MCEOs (level 1 managers) and excluding level 2 and level 3 managers, we were left with 174 MCEOs, yielding a response rate of 38.4%, which was representative of Norwegian municipalities.³ In addition to our primary survey data, we interpreted and compared our data with findings from

² See Appendix for the Nordic MCEO survey questions.

³ We performed a sensitivity analysis of responders versus non-responders and found no differences in municipality centrality ($p = .299$), municipal population size ($p = .505$), or region ($p = .919$).

previous and recent local government research on MCEOs in Norway (Baldersheim & Øgård, 1998; Baldersheim et al., 2021; Kjølholdt, 1992; Willumsen et al., 2014).

7.2 THE NORWEGIAN MUNICIPAL SECTOR: INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Since the 1960s, municipalities have been the prime authority for implementing national welfare expansion (Rose & Ståhlberg, 2005). In many respects, the Norwegian welfare state is a *local* welfare state, as local government accounts for up to one-third of total government expenditures⁴ and employs more than 50% of the total public labour force⁵ (OECD, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2018). Norway and the other Nordic countries are decentralized unitary states, and one of the main features of the Norwegian government is its high degree of decentralization of service provision (Baldersheim et al., 2019). In 2016, an amendment of the Norwegian Constitution gave citizens the explicit right to govern their own local affairs through democratically elected local bodies (§ 49), and in 2018, this right was expanded and formally included in the first two chapters of the Local Government (LG) Act (Prop. 46 L 2017–2018). However, since 1837, the unwritten principle of local self-government has been strong, becoming constitutional in character (Larsen & Offerdal, 2000; Smith, 2003). Thus, the formalization of this principle in the Norwegian Constitution in 2016 did not change much, but it was still seen as an important step in securing local self-government against state intrusion in the future.

Most MCEOs in Norway lead relatively small organizations compared to their neighbours in Denmark and Sweden and to a lesser extent Finland (see Chap. 1). The first amalgamation reform in the mid-1960s reduced the number of municipalities from 744 to 454. In the modest 2020 reform, the number dropped from 428 to 356 municipalities. The amalgamation reform had an impact on MCEOs' professional lives—since many of them lost their positions in the wake of the amalgamations. Many of them also continued to lead in the many municipalities that did not merge. The

⁴ However, it accounts for 50% of total public *consumption* (Statistics Norway, 2018).

⁵ Fifty-six percent measured by the share of public expenditures and 63% measured by the share of public employees. This accounts for one-fifth of the total Norwegian labour force (Statistics Norway, 2018).

median population size of municipalities in Norway is now 5163 (2021), and 51% of municipalities have less than 5000 inhabitants (2021). The size of Norwegian municipalities has been the subject of heated political debate in Norway for the last 20 years, and despite or because of the last amalgamation, it will probably remain so in the years to come.

Compared with the other Nordic countries, Norway has a strong oil-lubricated economy and spends more money than its neighbours on the public sector.⁶ However, local government has been under increasing economic pressure in recent years. An important explanation for this development is that legal individual rights and high-quality services for citizens have not always been followed up with funding from the national government (Haveri, 2015). Unlike its Nordic neighbours, Sweden and Denmark, local Norwegian authorities are largely unable to set the rate of local income taxation (Rose & Ståhlberg, 2005, p. 87). For MCEOs, this has a significant impact on their room for manoeuvre. On one hand, they must comply with policy demands, national legislation, and standardization requirements, as mandated by the central government. On the other hand, they must adapt to local needs and limitations.

The position of today's MCEO is a rather new phenomenon in Norwegian history. Norwegian municipalities were not allowed to recruit their own top administrators until 1922. Before then, the central government appointed its own officials, called magistrates, to administrate the municipality's affairs, in addition to taking care of various central government tasks in the local community (Torjesen, 2022). In the period 1922–1980, only urban municipalities (i.e. 10,000 inhabitants or more) were required to appoint an MCEO, while rural municipalities had to seek the national government's permission to do so. However, an amendment in 1980 of the 1954 Local Government Act (LG Act) removed this differentiation and made it mandatory for all municipalities to recruit their own MCEOs (Bugge, 1986). Until 1992, the MCEOs held a rather strong, independent, and protected position. For instance, if the municipal council decided to fire the MCEO, he (usually) or she could appeal this decision to the Ministry of Local Government. With the passing of the LG Act of 1992, this right of appeal was removed. The law also sought to draw a clearer line between politics and administration, reducing the MCEO's political role while strengthening their administrative position (Baldersheim, 1993).

⁶Norway spent 36,239 USD per capita on the public sector in 2021. In contrast, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland, respectively, spent 30,584, 28,278, 27,985, and 25,518. The average for the 35 OECD countries was 19,035 USD (OECD, 2021, p. 8).

stronger, the new LG Act of 2018 confer full responsibility for the municipal administration to MCEOs, including the recruitment and hiring of administrative staff. In contrast to Denmark and Sweden, mayors in Norway formally play a rather weak role as council leaders (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Navarro et al., 2018). If the mayor wants to investigate matters in the administration, they must do so through the MCEO, as shown in Fig. 7.1.

During the 1980s, almost all Norwegian municipalities adopted the principal standing committee model (PSCM) to rationalize and coordinate the political steering structure. This model consisted of four permanent political committees (*hovedutvalg*), education and kindergartens, social and health politics, culture and leisure, and technical affairs (Baldersheim & Øgård, 1998; Stava, 1993). The tasks of the former specialized bodies were distributed among the new committees. Further, the administration was divided into four departments (*etater*) mirroring the four permanent committees. The standing committee system stimulated the creation of strong alliances between politicians and administration within the four policy fields, and the department heads became so strong that they challenged the coordinating and strategic position of the municipal council and the MCEO (Stava, 1993). Once a committee had made its decision, the role of the municipal council was reduced to rubber-stamping. If the departments overspent, there was not much the MCEO could do about it.

7.2.1 *The Local Government Act (1992)*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, financial constraints became more severe, and the PSCM was increasingly conceived of as problematic, including for the national economy. The LG Act of 1992 was the first step in adjusting the power imbalance between the strategic top and the operative committee level. First, special laws (laws on education, social welfare, health, etc.) had previously held formal priority over the general LG Act, giving the committees exclusive power over their respective policy fields. The LG Act of 1992 upended this legal hierarchy by giving priority to the general law and the municipal council. Second, the LG Act (1992) had a dual impact on the MCEO position. On one hand, the law removed the MCEO's formerly strong and independent position, which had protected them from being dismissed by the council. Therefore, the political influence of the MCEO was reduced. On the other hand, the law gave the

MCEO the formal position as the top leader of the municipal administration (Baldersheim & Øgård, 1998). The main intention behind both of these changes was to make a clearer distinction between politics and administration and define the municipal council as the power centre of local government. Thus, formally, the position of the MCEO was weakened politically but strengthened administratively.

The second step on the road to strengthening the strategic level was the gradual removal of the PSCM during the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium (Monkerud et al., 2016). Today, political committees do not mirror the various specialist departments as they used to. They often have shorter agendas and less decisional power. In addition, inspired by business enterprise models, administrative reforms have led to a rather fragmented organizational structure, one emphasizing single-purpose service-providing entities and the ‘let the managers manage’ philosophy (Torsteinsen, 2012).

The extent to which these changes strengthened the position of the municipal council and clarified the role of the MCEO as the top leader of the municipal administration is, however, an empirical question. Research findings have indicated that new public management reforms have led to increased fragmentation and coordination challenges for strategic leadership in local government (Torsteinsen, 2012). In addition, in the last 20 years, corporatization (i.e. moving or establishing service-providing bodies *outside* the formal authority of the MCEO and giving them separate legal personality) has amplified these challenges (Berge & Torsteinsen, 2022; Jacobsen & Kiland, 2017). Multiple owners, numerous subsidiaries, and several cross-ownerships sometimes transform municipal companies into complex enterprises, reducing the power of the MCEO and making their governance tasks even more demanding. Lately, however, elements of this reform have been partially reversed by merging and thereby reducing the number of service-providing entities *inside* local government, thus somewhat contracting the control span of the MCEO (Olsen & Torsteinsen, 2012). So far, there has been no clear reversal in the corporatization trend (Klausen & Torsteinsen, 2023).

7.2.2 *MCEO Duties and Relationships with the Political Leadership*

Unlike the situation in other Nordic countries (Denmark and Sweden) where the committee-leader form is applied, the Norwegian system uses

the council–manager form. Comparative empirical studies in Europe have found the highest degree of MCEO influence in countries with the council–manager form (Alba & Navarro, 2006; Navarro et al., 2018). Emphasis is placed on the MCEO’s professionalism, political neutrality, and the responsibility to serve all members of the council and community. Through professionalism, the MCEO has the responsibility to ensure that issues related to political decision-making are sufficiently assessed professionally, legally, and economically before they are presented to the executive committee. In accordance with the LG Act, the proposal is then submitted for a final decision to the municipal council. As the yellow arrow in Fig. 7.1 indicates, the council has instructional authority over the MCEO, and the MCEO is responsible for properly implementing all council decisions.

The mayor, however, cannot interfere with the administration without special delegation from the council. The mayor’s main tasks are to set the agenda, chair the council and executive committee meetings, and serve as the legal representative and official signatory on behalf of the municipality (Aarsæther et al., 2013). Most mayors work full time, even in small municipalities, and have impact caused by capacity (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004). The mayor’s power depends primarily on their ability to set the agenda, mobilize resources, build external networks, and build consensus and coalitions across political parties. It is therefore crucial for the mayor to cooperate and complement the MCEO—which gives the mayor access to privileged information that can garner support for policy proposals and lend them legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (Bjørnå & Mikalsen, 2015; Horrigmo & Kiland, 2011; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002).

7.3 WHO ARE THE MCEOs: CHANGES IN BIOGRAPHIES

In Table 7.1, we compiled data from the UDiTE study in 1997 with our own survey data (Karlsen et al., 2017) on the biographical characteristics of MCEOs. First, we observe that MCEOs are middle-aged and that they seem to have become even older over the last 20 years. The average age has increased by 6.4 years, from 48.2 in 1997 to 54.4 in 2017. Thus, these are middle-aged MCEOs, most of whom are men.

The second biographical change shown in the data is the increase in academic education among MCEOs. Nearly 70% of these leaders now hold a master’s degree. Twenty years ago, nearly 22% had less than 12 years of education. The proportion with a law degree 20 years ago was almost 22%, while slightly less than 8% have this degree today. Furthermore,

Table 7.1 Biographic changes (1998–2017) among Norwegian local government MCEOs

	1997		2017	
<i>Female gender, n (%)</i>	23	(7.0)	44	(29.3)
Age				
Mean (SD)	48.2	(7.4)	54.7	(6.4)
Median (IQR)	48.0	(43–53)	55	(50–60)
Min-Max	28–70		38–67	
Level of education, <i>n (%)</i>				
Primary/secondary (≤ 12 years)	22	(7.1)	0	(0)
University/university college (≤ 4 years)	102	(33)	46	(30.3)
University/university college (> 5 years)	185	(59.9)	106	(69.7)
Type of education, <i>n (%)</i>				
Law	69	(21.8)	12	(7.9)
Economics/finance	39	(12.3)	59	(38.8)
Political science	37	(11.7)	37	(24.3)
Technical degree	19	(6.0)	6	(3.9)
Other	152	(48.1)	38	(25.0)
Years in current position				
Mean (SD)	7.2	(6.8)	4.9	(4.5)
Median (IQR)	6	(2–10)	3	(2–7)
Min-Max	0–37		0–23	
Former position, <i>n (%)</i>				
Managerial position in the same community	71	(22.3)	52	(35.9)
Managerial position in another community	136	(42.6)	54	(37.2)
Position at county or regional level	18	(5.6)	12	(8.3)
Position at central level	8	(2.5)	3	(2.1)
Position in private sector	23	(7.2)	11	(7.6)
Other positions	63	(19.7)	13	(9.0)
<i>N</i>	324		174	

there has been a large influx of MCEOs with an educational background in economics, political science, or another social science. The fraction of MCEOs with an economics degree has increased significantly from 12% in 1997 to 38.8% in 2017, representing the highest proportion of any discipline. MCEOs with an educational background in political or social science notably increased from 11.7% in 1997 to 24.3% in 2017.

Third, our data also reveal that 73% of MCEOs were recruited to an MCEO position internally or from another municipality. Thus, MCEOs normally have long careers in the municipal sector, averaging almost 19 years, often working as middle managers in the technical, social/health,

culture, or school sectors prior to applying for the MCEO position. Of those recruited from outside the municipal sector, just 7.6% come from the private sector. The local government MCEO may also be a demanding executive position, with many considerations and requirements. Although most of them (73%) had normal working hours (less than 50 hours a week), 23% of them reported being in the office from 50 to 60 hours per week, while 4% reported that they worked more than 60 hours per week.⁸ In a survey conducted on behalf of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), 16% of MCEOs planned to quit their jobs within the next year. It is likely that many MCEOs hold positions that leave little room for manoeuvre. The leader of Human Resource Norway made the following statement to the *KS* newspaper⁹ about the high number of MCEOs planning to quit:

They wish to contribute to the society's best, but they are in a great hurry to respond to citizens' and politicians' demands with probably little room to make real priorities—which indicates that this position is an exposed position.

7.3.1 *The Increasing Number of Female MCEOs*

There has been an important and conspicuous biographic change concerning the gender distribution among MCEOs, as the proportion of women has increased significantly in the last 20 years. Every third MCEO (29.3%) is now a woman compared to only 7 out of 100 in 1997. Our findings correspond with those of the study of Baldersheim et al. (2021), where the proportion of women was reported to be 31%. In comparison, only one out of 374 MCEOs was female in 1985/1986 (Baldersheim, 1993). Norway is generally highly regarded among the leading countries in the world in terms of gender equality, which means that women are well included among the political and administrative elites in the public sector (Teigen & Skjeie, 2017). Gender equality has long been a stated goal in Norwegian public administration policy. A gender-neutral MCEO title (*administrasjonssjef* or *kommunedirektør* vs. the previous *rådmann*) was

⁸ Most Norwegian MCEOs have permanent positions (87%), and only 8.4% are employed on fixed-term contracts (Baldersheim et al., 2021, p. 32).

⁹ *Kommunal Rapport*, the weekly newspaper of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS). <https://kommunal-rapport.no/ledelse/2018/07/1-av-5-radmenn-vil-slutte-i-jobben>.

introduced in the LG Act of 1992 and repeated in the LG Act of 2018.¹⁰ Rules and instructions along with external and political control systems limit the use of discretion and the impact of social biography. However, more women in MCEO positions will probably translate into a new leadership dynamic in this formerly male bastion (Collinson, 2020; Hlynsdóttir, 2020).

7.4 PRIORITIES OF TASKS

In 2017, we asked Norwegian MCEOs what they paid attention to. Their responses were given in the following order, as shown in Table 7.2:

1. *Ensure that rules and regulations are followed*
2. *Financial management, accounting, and budgets*
3. *Make sure that resources are used efficiently*
4. *Develop and implement norms concerning the proper roles of politicians vis-à-vis the administration*
5. *Stimulate cooperation between departments*

Ensuring that rules and regulations are followed (effect size 2.05) as well as fiscal management, accounting, and budgetary control (effect size 0.86) received significantly more attention in 2017 than in 1997. According to Kjølholdt (1992), these findings were ranked highly among Norwegian MCEOs in the 1980s, but according to Baldersheim (1993), other issues had higher rankings, especially community development and general governance roles. However, according to Baldersheim (1993), the focus on rules and economy, denoted as ‘the guardian role’, seemed to receive more attention among MCEOs in smaller municipalities.

Nevertheless, the contemporary Norwegian MCEOs has an economic focus, as reflected in the fact that ‘fiscal management, accounting, and budgetary control’ are ranked highly as priority number two, in addition to ‘make sure that resources are used efficiently’ as priority number three. The economic focus is also reflected in many of the MCEOs’ formal education in economics and administration. Given that Norwegian municipalities struggle to take care of an increasing burden of new mandatory welfare and health tasks—that is, more legally based rights given to citizens, in addition to a growing elderly population—it is likely that

¹⁰The old male title (*rådmann*) is still in use, although less so.

Table 7.2 Norwegian MCEOs priority of tasks

<i>Year</i>	<i>1997</i>		<i>2017</i>		<i>Effect size for difference</i>
	<i>(n = 324)</i>		<i>(n = 174)</i>		
	<i>mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	
<i>Administration</i>					
Guide subordinates	48.2	(17.8)	49.1	(26.1)	0.04
Fiscal Management, accounting, and budgetary control	65.8	(22.6)	85.1	(22.1)	0.86
Ensure that rules and regulations are followed	52.9	(20.1)	87.8	(13.9)	2.05
Develop and implement new routines and work method	66.1	(19.2)	63.5	(28.1)	0.11
<i>Advice to Politicians</i>					
Give the mayor legal, economic, and technical advice	64.2	(21.9)	57.8	(28.5)	0.25
Develop and implement norms concerning the proper roles of politicians vis-à-vis the administration	72.5	(20.0)	81.0	(23.7)	0.39
<i>Integration and Cooperation</i>					
Solve problems and conflicts of human relationships	68.0	(17.8)	59.9	(25.8)	0.37
Stimulate cooperation between departments	80.0	(16.0)	80.1	(18.6)	0.01
Be informed about the viewpoints of the employees	64.9	(16.1)	52.7	(26.6)	0.57
<i>Innovation</i>					
Formulate visions	72.5	(18.4)	67.8	(24.3)	0.22
Attract external resources	66.8	(20.7)	57.3	(28.2)	0.39
Make sure that resources are used efficiency	84.0	(15.4)	83.9	(18.6)	0.01

Mean (SD) scores calculated from Likert scale scores; ‘No emphasis’ (value = 0), ‘Slightly emphasized’ (value = 25), ‘Somewhat emphasized’ (value = 50), ‘Much emphasized’ (value = 75) and ‘Very much emphasized’ (value = 100). Effect size = Cohen’s delta values (mean difference divided by pooled mean standard deviation). Values 0.2–0.49 = small difference, values 0.5–0.79 = medium difference, values > 0.8 = large difference)

procedural requirements, regulations, and financial discipline are given high and increasing priority on the MCEO agenda. This can also be explained by the fact that the municipality, and then the MCEO, can be held accountable to the courts if individual rights are not met (Feiring, 2006; NOU, 2003, p. 19). However, attention to integrative tasks, that is, the stimulation of cooperation between departments, appeared high in both 1997 and 2017 (means 80.0 and 80.1), as shown in Table 7.2.

7.5 CONTACT PATTERNS

As Table 7.3 reveals, the most frequent contact pattern was the daily contact between the MCEO and the mayor (mean 95.3). The high contact frequency was natural and expected because in the Norwegian system, it is natural and expected that contact between the political and administrative spheres should go through the hub of the mayor and MCEO.

In second place came the MCEO's daily internal contact with municipal department heads (level 2 managers).¹¹ Contact with labour union representatives was ranked as relatively high (mean 54.2) and increased significantly from 1997 to 2017 (effect size 1.2). Norwegian local government seemed to retain the Nordic corporative model—where

Table 7.3 Contact patterns of Norwegian MCEOs

	1997 (<i>n</i> = 324)		2017 (<i>n</i> = 174)		<i>Effect size for difference</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	
The mayor	95.6	(9.7)	95.3	(12.9)	0.0
Heads of departments	89.5	(13.7)	92.8	(14.4)	0.2
Citizens	61.9	(27.8)	60.0	(29.2)	0.1
Journalists, media	51.5	(22.2)	47.8	(22.4)	0.2
Chief executives in other municipalities	37.9	(17.2)	40.6	(26.9)	0.1
Regional government officials	21.7	(18.0)	34.2	(20.3)	0.7
Central government officials	24.8	(17.0)	13.3	(19.4)	0.6
Officials from the national association of local authorities	20.6	(17.6)	26.7	(19.7)	0.3
Labour unions representatives	30.2	(19.0)	54.2	(21.4)	1.2
Private business interests	36.0	(21.1)	43.4	(24.5)	0.3
Political committee leaders			43.6	(23.1)	
Operative managers			60.6	(27.0)	
Managers of inter-municipal entities			35.6	(22.9)	
Others employees in other municipalities			34.0	(27.1)	

Mean (SD) scores calculated from Likert scale scores; 'Not relevant' (value = 0), 'Seldom or no contact' (value = 25), 'Monthly contact' (value = 50), 'Weekly contact' (value = 75), and 'Daily contact' (value = 100). Effect size = Cohen's delta values (mean difference divided by pooled mean standard deviation. Values 0.2–0.49 = small difference, values 0.5–0.79 = medium difference, values > 0.8 = large difference)

¹¹ In many Norwegian municipalities with only two managerial levels, the municipal director is not a separate managerial level and is part of the MCEO's team (i.e. level 1).

consultations between employers and civil servant unions are widespread (Monkerud et al., 2016; Torsteinsen, 1992). Contact with citizens was also quite frequent (mean 60.0). Handling journalists and media took up a great deal of MCEOs' time and attention (mean 47.8), whereas contact with the business community was slightly less frequent (mean 43.6). Contact with leaders from political committees seemed to occur relatively frequently (mean 43.6). Some MCEOs reported daily or weekly contact with the managers of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) or enterprises (mean 35). Contact with IMCs and companies thus appeared to be moderate. Inter-municipal cooperation is widespread among the many small Norwegian municipalities in their efforts to increase capacity, competence, and economies of scale (Arntsen et al., 2018). However, these enterprises and IMCs are autonomous bodies and exist at arm's length from the formal authority of the MCEO. Thus, we observed a reluctance to intervene directly in the daily affairs of an enterprise or IMC (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2011; Klausen & Torsteinsen, 2023). When we consider the contact patterns, we can conclude that there was stability over time (1997–2017), with little change to be observed. One exception was the increased contact pattern with trade unions (effect size 1.2) and regional authorities (effect size 0.7).

7.6 PERCEPTIONS ON ACTORS' INFLUENCE AND THE IDEAL POLITICIAN

As Table 7.4 reveals, the MCEO was perceived to have the highest influence on local policymaking in 2017, moving from third place in 1997. At the same time, the mayor's influence seems to have also increased: ranked fourth in 1997 and second in 2017. The change in favour of the MCEO could be a consequence of the revision of the LG Act in 1992 and 2018—where all responsibility for the preparation of political issues was concentrated in the hands of the MCEO. The strengthening of the MCEO's influence was reported in a recent study focusing on Norwegian municipal administration (Jacobsen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the political majority group was ranked significantly lower in 2017, from first to fourth place. Another interesting change seems to be increased influence from media (effect size 1.3) and trade unions (effect size 1.8) and the eye-catching reduction in upper-level government influence from first to fifth place.

Table 7.4 Influence of different actors on local policymaking

	1997 (<i>n</i> = 324)		Ranking	2017 (<i>n</i> = 174)		Ranking	Effect size for difference
	mean	(SD)		mean	(SD)		
Political majority group	71.5	(17.2)	2	87.2	(18.2)	4	0.9
MCEO	65.8	(16.2)	3	92.2	(15.2)	1	1.7
Mayor	63.6	(19.2)	4	91.9	(16.8)	2	1.6
Department heads	52.5	(16.0)	5	89.3	(14.6)	3	2.4
Private business interests	50.0	(16.2)	6	55.7	(21.2)	10	0.3
The local political parties	49.0	(18.1)	7	56.9	(17.8)	9	0.4
Committee leaders	42.3	(18.5)	8	66.2	(23.6)	6	1.1
Upper-level government	80.3	(22.4)	1	74.0	(24.3)	5	0.3
Media	34.7	(21.3)	9	62.3	(22.3)	7	1.3
Trade unions	27.2	(15.0)	10	58.5	(20.1)	8	1.8
Voluntary organizations	26.5	(15.5)	11	49.1	(18.5)	11	1.3

Mean (SD) scores calculated from Likert scale scores; ‘No influence’ (value = 0), ‘Slightly influential’ (value = 25), ‘Somewhat influential’ (value = 50), ‘Influential’ (value = 75) and ‘Very influential’ (value = 100). Effect size = Cohen’s delta values (mean difference divided by pooled mean standard deviation. Values 0.2–0.49 = small difference, values 0.5–0.79 = medium difference, values > 0.8 = large difference)

7.7 THE IDEAL POLITICIAN: MCEO VIEWS ON THE ROLES OF POLITICIANS

As depicted in Table 7.2, the MCEOs awarded high priority to the following task: ‘Develop and implement norms concerning the proper roles of politicians vis-à-vis the administration’. To do this, they must reveal their norms about politicians and the relationship between politics and administration. To measure MCEOs’ perceptions about political–administrative relations, a set of variables under the framework of ‘the ideal politician’ have been used in several seminal studies (Baldersheim & Øgård, 1998; Magnier & Klausen, 1998; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Table 7.5 includes both the responses relating to each variable in 1997 and 2017 and the grouping of these variables in five distinct roles: governor, stabilizer, administrator, ambassador, and representative.

Table 7.5 The Norwegian MCEOs views on the politicians' roles

	1998 (n = 324)		2017 (n = 174)		Effect size
	mean	(SD)	mean	(SD)	
Governmental roles					
<i>Governor</i>					
Decide on major policy principles	73.9	(21.6)	80.8	(22.1)	0.3
Visionary	87.2	(14.7)	89.2	(17.6)	0.1
<i>Stabilizer</i>					
Create stability for the administration	72.9	(20.0)	79.6	(20.4)	0.3
Formulate exact and unambiguous goals	79.3	(20.0)	80.6	(21.4)	0.1
<i>Administrator</i>					
Lay down rules and routines	32.6	(25.5)	44.8	(29.5)	0.5
Taking decisions concerning specific cases	29.6	(21.2)	39.8	(26.9)	0.4
Linkage roles					
<i>Ambassador</i>					
Represent the municipality	71.2	(18.5)	82.9	(17.9)	0.6
Defend decisions and policies externally	76.2	(18.4)	88.5	(16.8)	0.7
Be a spokesperson in the press	71.0	(22.1)	72.5	(23.9)	0.1
Procure resources	71.0	(22.1)	79.5	(30.0)	0.3
<i>Representative</i>					
Be informed about citizens' views	77.7	(15.3)	79.0	(20.1)	0.1
Implement the political program	53.4	(18.9)	63.3	(24.4)	0.5
Be a spokesperson for local groups	26.6	(17.3)	41.5	(25.4)	0.7
Be a spokesperson for their political party	50.0	(22.0)	62.6	(23.8)	0.6

Mean (SD) scores calculated from Likert scale scores; 'No importance' (value = 0), 'Slightly important' (value = 25), 'Somewhat important' (value = 50), 'Important' (value = 75) and 'Very important' (value = 100). Effect size = Cohen's delta values (mean difference divided by pooled mean standard deviation). Values 0.2–0.49 = small difference, values 0.5–0.79 = medium difference, values > 0.8 = large difference)

The most preferred role for the local politicians, as perceived by the MCEOs, was that of governor. The two indicators measuring this role—means of 73.9 in 1997 and 80.9 in 2017—indicate that most MCEOs agreed that an important role was to decide on major policy principles'. The means for the other statement ('Have visions of how the municipality will develop') were 87.2 and 89.2 in 1997 and 2017, respectively.

The ambassador role seemed to be the second most important role for the local politicians, as assessed by the MCEOs, including to 'Defend the authorities' decisions and policies externally' (means 72.2 and 88.5) and 'Represent the municipality' (means 71.2 and 82.9). The stabilizer role was the third most popular in terms of MCEO perceptions. The task

‘Create stability for the administration’ attracted means of 72.9 and 79.6. In support of the statement ‘Formulate exact and unambiguous goals for the administration’, the means were 79.3 in 1997 and 80.6 in 2017.

The least important role for the politicians, according to the MCEOs, was to ‘Lay down rules and routines for the administration’, with means of 32.6 in 1997 and 44.8 in 2017. The MCEOs did not want political interference in administrative matters, and the separation norm appeared to be paramount, which also seemed to be expressed by the low score on the next claim: ‘Taking decisions concerning specific cases’ (means of 29.6 in 1997 and 39.8 in 2017). This role arguably belongs to the administrative domain. Therefore, it is logical that the top administrator would express scepticism towards politicians seeking to intervene in administrative processes on behalf of individual citizens, although as ombudsmen, they may legitimately ask the MCEO for information about specific cases.

Political representation can be expressed in two roles, that of the ambassador (who represents the municipality) and that of the representative (who is spokesperson for parts of the municipality, such as a local group or political party; however, MCEOs do not provide much support for the representative role, with means of 26.6 in 1997 and 41.5 in 2017 on the variable: ‘Be a spokesperson for local groups or individuals who have issues pending decisions by the authority’. When the mayor acts as an ombudsman on behalf of citizens, it can lead to involvement in the administration’s affairs, leading to tensions between the MCEO and the mayor. Therefore, it is likely that this explains the low numbers. Furthermore, the task ‘Be a spokesperson for their political party’ did not receive high support from the top administrators, with means of 50 in 1997 and 62.6 in 2017. The task to ‘Implement the programme on which he/she has been elected’ is not a crucial criterion for the evaluation of mayors. In this dataset, there was limited support for this statement, with means of 53.4 in 1997 and 63.3 in 2017. Here, it is perhaps an expression of the norm that the mayor should be the unifying figure of the entire council and not primarily promote his own party programme. However, there seemed to be higher support among MCEOs that politicians should be ‘Informed about citizens views’, with means of 77.7 in 1997 and 79 in 2017, which is not very surprising. Regarding the MCEOs’ views on the roles of politicians, our data reveal surprising stability and little change from 1997 to 2017.

7.8 PERCEPTIONS OF THE MAYOR'S WORK AND POLITICAL ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONS

According to Svava (2001, 2006a, 2006b), previous empirical studies have revealed that overlapping roles between top administrators and officials are common in countries using the council–manager form (Alford et al., 2017; Demir, 2009; Nalbandian, 2006). Recent Norwegian studies have confirmed the same tendency and characterized the relationship between local politicians and administrators as mainly cooperative (Baldersheim et al., 2021; Jacobsen, 2007; Lo & Vabo, 2020; Willumsen et al., 2014). However, the more the mayor relies on political parties as his/her power base, the less significant the cooperation. This corresponds to findings about increasing political fragmentation (Baldersheim et al., 2021; Jacobsen, 2020), where it is neither a sharp separation nor a total mix between the two spheres. The relationship is characterized by an apex: The closer to the centre of the politico-administrative system, the stronger the contact, interaction, and cooperation; the more peripheral, the less the contact and interaction. Norwegian MCEOs are not afraid of promoting their professional views; however, they are reluctant to get involved in activities that can be interpreted as being part of a political game. The relationship is described primarily by what Mouritzen and Svava (2002) denoted as ‘neutral competence’. Furthermore, it is common for MCEOs to prefer politicians to keep a distance from the administration while they themselves emphasize their non-partisanship and neutrality (Willumsen et al., 2014). Our 2017 survey confirmed much of the same pattern. In Table 7.6 most MCEOs emphasized separation between politics and administration (mean 81.0) as well as their role to ensure that political decisions are implemented loyally and quickly (mean 88.8). The mayor’s work, however, appeared to be characterized by loyalty and trust in the administration (mean 82.6).¹²

To a lesser extent was the belief that ‘The mayor uses administrative top managers as political sparring partners’ (mean 44.3), as shown in Table 7.6. This relative low score aligns with the MCEOs’ perception of the separation norm, which seemed to be strong (mean 81.0), as shown in Table 7.6. ‘Give advice on legal, financial, and technical issues’ seemed to be modestly important (mean 57.8). Exercising a professional, neutral, and loyal

¹² Unfortunately, we only have data from 2017.

Table 7.6 Perceptions of the mayor’s work and political administrative relations

2017 (<i>n</i> = 124)	Mean	(SD)
How will you describe the mayor’s way of conducting her/his work activities?	67.1	(24.6)
The mayor concentrates on overall political issues rather than administrative details		
The mayor uses administrative top managers as political sparring partners	44.3	(30.1)
The mayor’s work is characterized by loyalty and trust in the administration	82.6	(20.9)
MCEO’s perceptions about political administrative relations	81.0	(23.7)
Separate between politics and administration		
Give advice on legal, financial, and technical issues	57.8	(28.5)
Ensure that political decisions are implemented loyally and quickly	88.8	(17.4)

Mean (SD) scores calculated from Likert scale scores; ‘No relevance’ (value = 0), ‘Slightly relevant’ (value = 25), ‘Somewhat relevant’ (value = 50), ‘Relevant’ (value = 75) and ‘Very relevant’ (value = 100)

role was thus fundamental in how Norwegian MCEOs perceived their performance of their leadership role.

7.8.1 *Increased Influence of the MCEO?*

In consensus-oriented Norwegian municipalities, with low levels of political conflict, there is evidence indicating a shift in power in favour of administration (Jacobsen et al., 2021). As shown in Table 7.4, our data reveal that the MCEO now ranks highest in terms of influence in the municipality. The strong MCEO position could be interpreted in light of a new trend whereby the influence of local politicians has diminished with the introduction of disaggregated and relatively autonomous service-providing entities—organized on the basis of a two-level authority model (Torsteinsen, 2006). In addition, an even more important factor could be that budget processes in Norwegian municipalities seem to have become more centralized in the last decades, which has given more power to the MCEO, both in relation to the administrative service apparatus and the political sphere (Monkerud et al., 2016).

The strong MCEO position would in any way depend on a smooth complementary cooperation with the mayor (Demir, 2009; Lo & Vabo, 2020). Consequently, the mayor and MCEO are expected to take a more

active role in promoting the interests of the community, which require ‘that they pull the load together, like a pair of horses’. It is also obvious that when the MCEO gives advice and assessments regarding the consequences of policy alternatives, he or she is suggesting what the municipal council should decide. Therefore, the ideal MCEO must be both politically sensitive and decidedly neutral.

Today, local government must deal with many new issues or wicked problems that involve participation and engagement of various stakeholders, disciplines, sectors, and funding sources (Bjørnå, 2014; Kernaghan et al., 2000). Local government has become more open to the environment, not least because of the increased importance of partnership, inter-municipal cooperation, private–public partnership, community building, and job creation, including networking activities with authorities at the state and regional levels. This has led to an increase in a new form of decision-making—local governance (Monkerud et al., 2016). Many of these networking tasks are delegated from the council to the MCEO, eliciting discussions about whether these sprawling governance networks are hollowing out democracy in local government (Jacobsen, 2015). These shifts in responsibility have placed significant pressure on traditional local government and the roles of political and administrative leaders and the relations between them. Consequently, the role of the MCEO in contemporary local government involves having to ensure a balance between the ‘old’ way of MCEOs, that is, formally staying at arm’s length from mayors and exercising non-partisanship and neutrality, and a ‘modern’ way involving partnership, influence, and facilitation leadership, where the relationship between the MCEO and the mayor can be described as ‘gears that work together’ throughout the political process: from initiative to implementation (Lo & Vabo, 2020). The ‘modern’ MCEO is somehow expected to be an organizational actor who leverages resources to create new institutions or transform existing ones, often referred to as an institutional entrepreneur (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). Institutional entrepreneurship is the result of the ‘paradoxical’ integration of the two concepts of institution and entrepreneurship. It combines institutions—providing continuity and stability of organizational processes and constraining actors’ behaviour—with entrepreneurship, which is a creative force shaping and transforming institutions themselves. Thus, the ‘modern’ MCEO is expected to take a more active role in promoting the interests of the community, often as a kind of ‘stablemate’ for the mayor. What is crucial is that when the mayor and MCEO do have a good and trustworthy

relationship, this will strengthen the power and impact for both. However, a recent study indicated that MCEOs also adhere to political signals in clear-cut administrative affairs, a trend described as ‘deep politicisation’ (Jacobsen et al., 2021). In these cases, the MCEO may risk sacrificing his/her professional independence and authority for political loyalty. We are not convinced that this is a desirable or beneficial development for a healthy and democratic local government. However, in the event of conflict with the mayor and the municipal council, only the MCEO can lose, as indicated in the increase in MCEO turnover (Baldersheim et al., 2021; Willumsen et al., 2014).

7.9 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we described several aspects and changes in the Norwegian municipal sector that can help us understand the contexts that influence MCEOs and their profession. Based on primary and secondary data, we discovered both changes and stability regarding MCEOs biography and influence and how they conduct their role in the present Norwegian municipal landscape.

Over the last decades, the most striking biographical change has been the increasing number of women in MCEO positions. Twenty years ago, the proportion of female MCEOs was only 7%; today, it has increased to 30%. Although Norway is deemed among the leading countries in the world in terms of gender equality, this development has been more precipitous than many observers would have expected. The trend is also reflected in the LG Act (1992 and 2018), where the MCEO is given a new gender-neutral title. A similar development can be observed in the increase in female mayors.

Second, another feature of today’s MCEOs is the increased diversification or plurality regarding their educational background. In contrast to the past when the dominant educational groups were lawyers and candidates from the Municipal Academy, today’s MCEOs have degrees in economics, business or public administration, social sciences, engineering, professional education in health or social care, medicine, or teaching. However, a common denominator is that nearly 40% have higher education qualifications and diplomas or undertaken courses in the field of economics and administration. The change in CEOs’ educational profile arguably reflects a stronger focus on economic performance management in Norwegian municipalities. In addition, the supply and demand for

management and leadership education have grown rapidly in the last 30 years in Norway, as in many other countries (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002).

Third, the time it takes to reach the position of MCEO has scarcely changed, with an average (mostly the internal municipal sector) career pattern of almost 20 years. Regardless of gender, we still face mostly middle-aged MCEOs—and they are getting older—now with an average age of 54 years.

Fourth, the extent to which contextual factors such as new legislation, amalgamation reform, and demographic changes will have an impact on the role and function of the MCEO remains uncertain. Theoretically, one could assume that an increase in size and autonomy would make it easier for municipalities to increase their capacity to act in a way that corresponds with local problems and citizen preferences (Baldersheim, 2018). As such, increased municipal size could potentially strengthen MCEOs' ability to act; however, in 2024, more than half of Norwegian municipalities will still have fewer than 5000 inhabitants. Therefore, the factors most likely explaining the strengthened position to the Norwegian MCEO are regulative mechanisms and the impact from new legislation in 1992 and 2018.

Finally, to contribute to community development, MCEOs are expected to be innovators interacting with the municipal environment and upper-level government. Norwegian local government also seems to be developing into a more complex multi-level network comprising multiple autonomous service-providing entities, requiring MCEOs to be capable of cooperating with other public authorities, civic society, and business organizations. In addition, as institutional entrepreneurs, MCEOs have to perform roles such as boundary spanners, coordinators, negotiators, and brokers (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). They must also conduct their work and comply with traditional local government values based on democracy, hierarchical governance, formal laws, and regulations. Thus, 'modern' Norwegian MCEOs face the challenges and dilemmas of handling complex and contradictory roles and expectations.

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