

THE VIGNETTE SURVEY METHOD

WHAT IS IT?

Vignettes are systematically elaborated descriptions of concrete situations. The vignette survey method is a social science method that can identify whether identical cases (vignettes) are treated or responded to identically. Relating this to auditing, vignette surveys can be used to investigate whether identical cases are treated identically by different public agencies, i.e. whether they have a more or less identical outcome. With reference to the *principle of equal treatment*, it is presumed that equal cases are treated equally unless good reasons exist for discriminating practices or exemptions to the rule. Vignette surveys are suitable for documenting how discretionary judgement is exercised in case processes, and how regulations are applied.

WHEN MIGHT SAIS CONSIDER THE VIGNETTE SURVEY?

Vignette surveys are especially relevant when...

- *risk assessments* indicate that the same type of public offices treat similar cases differently
- the audits focuses on policy *effectiveness*, i.e. the *outcome* of a certain policy
- the *quality* of public administration practices is a main focus
- the audit aims at calling attention to which *consequences* unfavourable case treatment have for the users of public services

HOW? EXAMPLES OF AUDITS

EXAMPLE I DOCUMENT 3:9 (2011-2012) THE OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S INVESTIGATION INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF AQUACULTURE

The OAGNs Investigation into the Management of Aquaculture used *actual aquaculture cases* that had previously been processed by two district offices of the Norwegian Food Safety Authority (NFSA) and one county governor office. Cases were sent to selected district offices and regional offices of the NFSA and to selected county governor offices. The purpose was to assess the extent to which there are variations between the offices of the NFSA and the county governor offices in the processing of identical cases, including the use of criteria and the exercise of discretionary judgement. The vignette survey showed that the exercise of discretionary judgement when assessing environmental aspects of aquaculture cases could lead to the NFSA arriving at different outcomes in identical cases.

EXAMPLE II DOCUMENT 3:8 (2011-2012) THE OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL'S INVESTIGATION INTO THE NORWEGIAN FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITY (NFSA)

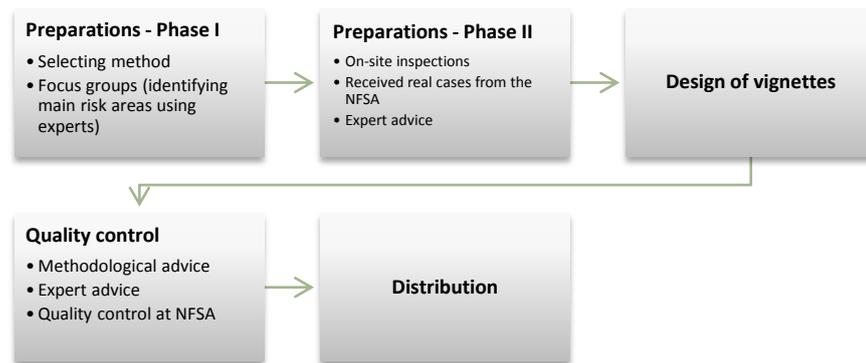
The Office of the Auditor General of Norway conducted an audit on the Norwegian Food Safety Authority (NFSA) that was able to show, based on vignette surveys, that

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different district and regional offices of the NFSA dealt differently with inspection, approval and appeal cases.

EXAMPLE OF PROCESS (EXAMPLE II CONTINUED)

The figure below illustrates the process of constructing vignettes, based on experiences from the project group of Example II.



In order to construct **good** and **relevant** vignettes, the project group made use of focus groups, joined inspections, received samples of real cases, used external experts, and involved the NFSA in the quality assurance process. In order to **avoid cooperation** between and coordinated answers from the district offices involved, the project group constructed several (different) vignettes, and **8 out of 11** constructed cases were distributed. 20 offices received vignette A, 20 received vignette B, etc. Most offices received more than one vignette, but the same offices *did not receive the same mix* of vignettes. The project group found it highly necessary to involve the NFSA in the quality assurance process.

GENERAL ADVICE

It is recommended that constructed vignettes are *based on real cases* and have characteristics that are crucial for the expected outcome or decision.

It is useful to construct and distribute *several types of cases*

- Distributing too many vignettes will result time consuming for both the project group and the public offices that are being audited. However, constructing several cases is often useful in the design process, as some may be rejected in the quality assurance process.

Auditors should exercise due care and attention when interpreting results

- Observed variation in the treatment of cases should be *considerably larger than what one would expect based on existing laws and regulations, and the scope of individual discretion.*
- Maintain communication with the relevant public agencies when analysing and concluding on results.

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SOURCES

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Document 3:9 (2011-2012). The Office of the Auditor General's investigation into the management of aquaculture.

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