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Chapter X

The Enschede Virtual Public Counter: Ole 2000–A Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and the Association of Dutch Local Governments (VNG) initiated an ambitious program to improve public service delivery. The aim of this so-called Public Counter 2000 (in Dutch: 'Overheidsloket 2000' or 'OL2000') program was a nation wide network of one-stop government agencies, providing citizens and trade and industry with information and public services. These one-stop government agencies should have both physical and virtual incarnations. The services delivered are primarily those of local government. However, also services of the national level and of (semi-) private agencies may be incorporated.

The first phase of the OL2000 program consisted of piloting. Enschede was the host of one of the 15 pilot projects. This chapter describes the background to OL2000, its results and its future plans. It will then focus on the Enschede pilot, Ole 2000. Ole 2000 is a virtual, online public counter for a range of local housing and building services. This chapter discusses the problems encountered in the Ole 2000 pilot and draws out some lessons to be learned from this project.

The Problem

The public counters envisioned in the OL2000 program are to solve some of the problems the public sector faces. Currently, the public sector is highly fragmented, both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal fragmentation manifests itself in the many sectors in which the public domain is divided (housing, social affairs, trade and industry, etc.) and the fact that each sector has its own institutions, ministries for instance. Each of these institutions itself is subdivided in smaller agencies. Vertically, the Dutch public sector is

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divided in three layers: national, provincial, and local. On each layer, the horizontal division in sectors of the higher level is more or less replicated. Each level develops policy, aimed at solving the problems of its level. National government makes policy for The Netherlands as a whole, while local governments only develop policy for the local level. With respect to service delivery, the picture is more complex. Services based on national policy and legislation, such as the Inland Revenue, may be delivered on the national level, but also on the provincial or local level, e.g., General Assistance (see Svensson, this volume). This results in a patchwork of service delivery agents. The specialization underlying the fragmentation may be efficient from the perspective of developing policy, it is not from the perspective of the average citizen as a client (Lips, 1998). For simple citizen-government contacts, such as renewing a passport, or applying for rental subsidy, most citizens know where to go and a single visit often suffices. But for more complex problems, such as 'building,' 'moving house' and 'becoming unemployed,' that involve multiple services, the segmentation does pose serious problems. Citizens have to address various offices, desks and counters.

From the perspective of the addressee, the fragmentation of public services is problematic for obvious reasons. The citizen in need of services is sent from pillar to post, often being asked the same questions over and over again. But also from the government's perspective, fragmentation is something to address. Data collection at different locations pertaining to the same individual may lead to erroneous data. The accuracy rate of data collection is relatively low in single-service provision (see for instance Svensson, this volume; Petrie et al., 2000). This problem is amplified when multiple services are at stake. Integrating the intake of services may lead to fewer errors overall, and hence to savings. Also the efficiency of service delivery itself can be improved dramatically. Petrie et al. (2000) describe that customers in the Lewisham One-Stop Shop receive a decision about their combined application for Income Support and Housing Benefit within 48 hours, rather than 8–9 days.

Within the Dutch public administration, there is also another reason to pursue a solution to the problem of fragmentation: the urge to improve policy effectiveness.[2] The Netherlands have an extensive network of services for specific (low-income) groups of citizens. Among these are the National General Assistance, subsidies for exceptional expenditures, remissions of local taxes (council taxes), housing/rental benefits, etc. In many fields, especially in the field of local policy on poverty, there is serious non-use of facilities (e.g., Smolenaars & Van Oorschot, 1993; Algemene Rekenkamer, 1997; Ernst & Young Consultancy, 1999). Smolenaars and Van Oorschot (1993) show that the non-use of Housing Benefits in their sample is between 8% (Nijmegen) and 20%-26% (Rotterdam). The subsidies for exceptional expenditures even show a greater non-use. The non-use varies between 50% (Rotterdam) and 72% (Nijmegen). These studies give rise to the conclusion that target reach of public services in the social welfare domain is insufficient. This is seen as undesirable. It is widely felt that people who are entitled to certain benefits and refunds are supposed to receive these benefits. The fragmentation of services is one of the reasons why target group reach is less than optimal. Other reasons are (Smolenaars & Van Oorschot, 1993; SCO, 1991; Vrooman & Asselbergs, 1994):

- The lack of knowledge about the existence of a particular measure. One survey (SCO, 1991) shows that 38.4% of the respondents mention this to be the source of their non-use.
- Perceived non-applicability. 22% percent of the respondents in the SCO (1991) study report that they (wrongly) thought the measure would not apply to their case.