Chapter II
Local Level Structural Change and E–Government in Germany

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the link between e-government, organizational networks related to it, and the possibilities for structural reform of local-level public administration. In the general discussion, e-government is often reduced to the electronic delivery of services. However, the most important potential of e-government can only be realized if new ICT solutions are used for inter-organizational network-oriented work structures. Examples of various forms of such networks exist worldwide and are commonly used to increase citizen orientation and/or to improve efficiency. However, the fact that these networks can have a deeper impact upon the organization of the traditional state is often neglected. Even the macro-organization of a state may be affected; this will be the focus of this chapter. It aims to analyze and explore whether new ICT-enabled networks make it possible to change the size of an administrative jurisdiction or even eliminate levels of government. Using the German situation as an example, the main argument of this chapter is that in the e-government era, the amalgamation of municipalities is no longer an adequate reform policy.

BEYOND ELECTRONIC SERVICE DELIVERY

E-government is usually associated with the idea of providing public services over the internet, making it possible for citizens to use public services regardless of local restrictions. Although this de-localization of the provision of services can entail a whole range of advantages for public administration (e.g., better citizen or client orientation), this perspective gives insufficient attention to administrative modernization. Even if all public services are available online, this will not necessarily lead to the modernization of administrative structures. Therefore, we must also include new structures of service delivery which

are based upon new information and communication technology (ICT) in our understanding of e-government.

New ICT means that service delivery or the production of services can be also redesigned, increasingly without regard to physical location, so that more networking becomes possible. This represents an important modernization potential, because it means that processes can not only be redesigned internally, but also between organizations in a variety of ways. This makes it possible to generate additional efficiency and effectiveness increases, compared to the mere de-localized provision of services. Organizational service networks therefore arise which are only possible because they are based on new ICT: informatized public service networks (IPSN).

Nevertheless, IPSNs conflict with existing principles of public organization, which, especially in continental Europe, are based upon on territorial aspects, an important legacy of the Napoleonic tradition (B. G. Peters, 2008). In accordance with the territorial principle, an administrative level executes the tasks to produce the services it delivers. For that reason, a certain minimum territorial size is necessary to achieve the "minimum organizational size" required to efficiently and effectively provide services. This means that one of the central issues in the study of public administration is the optimum size in terms of territory for a local jurisdiction.

But, considering the network potential of e-government, it is questionable whether such a structural change (usually territorial enlargement) is still necessary. This is especially relevant for many European countries where demographic change is increasing amalgamation pressures as a way to realize more efficiency, especially in small municipalities. To phrase the question in a more general way, e-government raises questions about what is the most desirable state macrostructure.

Although the link between ICT and organizational change in general has often been discussed in the literature (e.g. van de Donk & Snellen, 1998,

p. 9; Bekkers, 1998), the debate about macrostructural change and e-government has not. In this chapter, it is not the mutual relationship between ICT and organizational change which will be examined, but rather the enabling potential of ICT for the macrostructure of the state. To clarify, in the German context, the entire structure of the state (e.g., the number and size of administrative levels) is understood as the macrostructure (Frido Wagener, 1983), whereby this chapter is primarily about the local level.

This chapter is structured as follows: to begin, the main characteristics of IPSN and the general state of its implementation in Germany will be briefly outlined. Then, new IPSN will be analyzed against the background of the traditional territorial state model and from the perspective of new organizational models favored in the public governance and public management debates. In these debates, new models of macro-organizational change are already being discussed which refer to new organizational models but do not consider ICT. Third, the results of this enabling perspective analysis will be discussed and clarified through empirical case findings from different levels of local government in Germany. In addition, quantitative data will be used which were collected in cooperation with the German County Association (Deutscher Landkreistag). The empirical findings will be used in an explorative manner to examine and illustrate to what extent state macro-organization has already been affected and to test the analytical results of the previous section. Finally, general conclusions for the future of the state macrostructure and about the possibility of unintended negative effects will be drawn from these analytical and empirical results.

FORMS OF INFORMATIZED PUBLIC SERVICE NETWORKS

In general, the network phenomenon in state and public administration structures is not new and

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