



Chapter XVIII

Citizen Participation in Public Administration: The Impact of Citizen Oriented Public Services on Government and Citizens

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is on responsive electronic government services. Various changes in the relationship between government and citizens will be discussed by examining theory and practice of electronic public service delivery initiatives in a broad sense. The increasing complexity of society, individualization, new expectations of citizens and the use of modern ICT all influence the behavior of governments in their relations with citizens. What impact does e-government have on some of the most important principles of good governance — such as principles that safeguard “access and transparency”, “accountability and legitimacy” and “effectiveness of policy- and decision-making”?

“What counts most for people is not the programs that traditionally concern political elites, such as diplomacy, defence or macroeconomic management of the economy, but programs providing education, social security, health and housing.” (Rose, 1989, p. 5)

INTRODUCTION

In literature and policy regarding electronic government there is a dominant focus on service delivery. Although in policy documents electronic democracy, electronic accessibility of government information and improvement of operational management are also mentioned as important elements e-government programs, most of the attention seems to be paid to the subject of improving the relationship with citizens in their role as customers of the government. In many cases, the term e-government itself is even used as a synonym for electronic service delivery (Bekkers, 2001a; Office of the e-Envoy, 2001).

By emphasizing the one side of improvement of public service delivery as the main element of e-government programs, one seems to forget — or underestimate — the danger of neglecting the improvement of politico-administrative policy processes with the help of citizens and other stakeholders of the democratic states involved. In this political domain, public and private values are being weighed and legally binding decisions are being prepared and made on the basis of carefully balanced and often long-term processes of policy preparation and evaluation. While trying hard to improve the “economics” of government by focusing on e-government services it could be the case that — as a result of insufficient citizen participation in policy processes — the legitimacy of government is decreasing at the same time. This can be considered to be the so-called legitimacy paradox of e-government strategies: trying hard to improve legitimacy through better services and yet losing territory exactly because of that same focus (Fountain, 2000, as in Bekkers, 2001b).

Secondly, it can be questioned whether traditional democratic mechanisms like elections and referenda by themselves are still leading to an acceptable degree of translation of the needs and wants of citizens into policy and delivery processes (ICT and Government Advisory Committee, 2001; Rosenthal et al., 1996). The idea of a responsive government implies that government institutions are open for social debate and initiatives include a key role for so-called collective learning processes — based on knowledge exchange, communication and “trial and error.” For that reason, it seems only logical that there is a tendency to supplement e-government projects with e-democracy initiatives (Bekkers, 2001a).

In this chapter, we will discuss electronic government services from the perspective of both government and citizens. We will focus on the changing relationship between government and citizens by examining the theory and practice of electronic public service delivery initiatives in a broad sense.

For government and its institutions, we will pay special attention to the promise of a shift from supply-driven service delivery to demand-driven service delivery and to possible changes in governmental behavior towards citizens. Is there really a tendency that government agencies are becoming more responsive through introducing and implementing electronic service delivery? What consequences do these developments have for living up to the general principles of good governance?

For citizens, we will describe and analyze the threats and opportunities to fulfil their role as participants in policy processes in combination with being treated as customers — in terms of increasing accessibility, reducing administrative burdens, providing integrated and tailored services and so on (e.g., OECD, 2001a). In this chapter we will restrict discussion to the consequences for citizen participation linked directly to electronic service delivery. As a result, we will not concentrate on changes (opportuni-

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