

Chapter I

The Social Shaping of Transformational Government

Vincent Homburg

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Public Sector Transformation initiatives do not exist within a vacuum. This chapter analyzes how Public Service Transformation initiatives are intrinsically linked with the values, norms, informal rules, and taken for granted beliefs (in short: institutions) that characterize the context in which the initiatives are introduced. Using two case studies (describing the Criminal Justice System in the UK and social security in Belgium and The Netherlands) it is exemplified how Public Service Transformation initiatives sometimes transform institutions, whereas at the same time, institutions, through judicial and professional norms, and through power structures and path dependencies, shape ways in which technologies are designed and used in specific practices. The chapter argues for a better understanding of the working of institutions in specific Public Sector Transformation initiatives, in order to be better able to deal with the difficulties, contradictions, and sometimes mindboggling features of Public Sector Transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Public Sector Transformation as a topic of discussion has moved from the realm of utopian thought into the realm of actual practices at the shop floors of government agencies (Borins, 2007; Dunleavy, 2006). Transformation has also become an emerging topic of study for scholars in many academic disciplines, including information systems, organization theory and public administration (Homburg, 2008).

If one discusses the topic of Public Sector Transformation, at least two questions come to mind. The first one is what exactly constitutes 'Public Sector Transformation'. What changes exactly can be discerned, what properties are important, and how does a 'transformed' public sector look like? The second one is the relation between technology on the one hand, and context in which the technology is applied. Context here refers to a set of institutions: the values, norms,

rules and taken-for-granted assumptions that characterize every day practice. For instance, one of the ambitions in many transformation initiatives is to promote client orientation and efficiency, specific values that constitute the organizational context of technology. Such a line of reasoning indicates that technology, in an exogenous way, affects the structure, processes and institutions of public sector organizations (Hammer, 1996). At the same time, one can ask whether and how prevailing institutions affect ways in which technologies are applied, implemented and used. For instance, comparative studies have shown that comparable applications yield completely different effects if they are applied in various national contexts.

In this paper, a social shaping of technology perspective (Homburg, 2008; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001; Williams & Edge, 1996) is used to answer the following research question: how are technological and institutional change in public sector transformation related and why does public sector transformation result in tensions? As such, the ambition in this chapter is to document and reflect upon the dynamics underlying the notion of Public Sector Transformation. This question is answered in a literature review of the concept of social shaping of technology, and a subsequent analysis of two transformations in the public sector, one of the criminal justice system in the UK, and one of social security reforms in the Netherlands and in Belgium.

This chapter is organized as follows. In section two, the concept of Public Sector Transformation (PST) is unraveled and analyzed. Furthermore, the social shaping of technology (SST) perspective is elaborated upon. Underlying concepts of PST and SST are used to analyze actual transformations in the UK Criminal Justice system and in the Dutch and Belgium Social Security sector in section three. Discussions and reflections are presented in section four.

BACKGROUND

What is Public Sector Transformation?

Nowadays, governments around the world enthusiastically claim that they are or are about to reengineer the apparatus of government and governance. These kinds of attempts have been coined redesign (Bekkers & Homburg, 2005), reengineering (Hammer, 1996), or reform (Pollitt, Van Thiel, & Homburg, 2006), depending on whatever seemed appropriate. Throughout this chapter, the terminology of the book as a whole will be used and changes will be referred to as Public Sector Transformation. In general, it is possible to identify two antecedents of Public Sector Transformation.

The first one is that Public Sector Transformation is an instantiation of a specific wave of managerial or administrative reforms that usually go by the name of the *New Public Management* (Pollitt et al., 2006). New Public Management marks a move away from the so-called *classic public administration paradigm*, which had remained relatively undisturbed from the late 19th century until about the 1970s. The classic public administration paradigm is generally assumed to be based on a political public service, hierarchy and rules, permanence and stability, an institutionalized civil service, internal regulation and equality.

Since the 1970s governments throughout the Western world and beyond have been confronted with budget deficits, lack of performance of the public sector and generally public distrust in public administration. As a consequence, various waves of reforms have been carried out, emphasizing a move away from the classic bureaucratic model of organization, and emphasizing values like *results orientation*, *customer orientation* and *value for money*. These values were emphasized by a series of organizational and managerial changes, among others (Pollitt et al., 2006):

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/social-shaping-transformational-government/35976

Related Content

E-Government in the Information Society

Lech W. Zacher (2008). *Electronic Government: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 23-31).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/government-information-society/9690

A State-of-the-Art Review of Applied Forms and Areas, Tools and Technologies for e-Participation

Kostas Ergazakis, Kostas Metaxiotis and Tassos Tsitsanis (2013). *E-Government Services Design, Adoption, and Evaluation* (pp. 1-19).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/state-art-review-applied-forms/73031

The Prospects for eGovernment and eGovernance in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Case Study of Zambia

Joshua C. Nyirenda and Robert A. Croft (2010). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* (pp. 23-45).

www.irma-international.org/article/prospects-egovernment-egovernance-sub-saharan/38962

E-Government Implementation: Balancing Collaboration and Control in Stakeholder Management

Eric T.K. Lim, Chee-Wee Tan and Shan-Ling Pan (2007). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* (pp. 1-28).

www.irma-international.org/article/government-implementation-balancing-collaboration-control/2028

Impact of Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, and Citizen Trust on the Adoption of Electronic Voting System in Ghana

Isaac Kofi Mensah (2020). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* (pp. 19-32).

www.irma-international.org/article/impact-of-performance-expectancy-effort-expectancy-and-citizen-trust-on-the-adoption-of-electronic-voting-system-in-ghana/267138