

e-Governed

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Introduction

One possible conceptual framework for understanding e-Government is the theory of Social Institutions (Berger & Luckmann). Government is a legitimisation structure that maintains and controls the rules of the institution. For the citizens, the governed, the rules are supposed to be meaningful. It really makes sense that all drivers of motor vehicles are driving on the same side of the road and it is, indeed, justified to use political power to enforce such useful rules. People are getting added value from the well updated and trustworthy record of motor vehicles and the related systematic inspection of the safety and quality of these vehicles. Sometimes social institutions may degrade by losing the visibility of its legitimacy. Members may start asking, why we should follow such rules. The governed suddenly identifies the government as an actor: the government no longer appears as the natural representative of shared rules, it is an organisational body the the citizen has to interact with. The citizen is governed by the government.

The maintenance of the social rules takes place at multiple structural levels. The parliament formulates these rules as official laws and the courts make decisions about their interpretation whenever sufficient uncertainty or conflicting interests appear. But most often things just happen and citizens perform their projects according to the established rules. The government receives various applications and gives their decisions. Houses are built and cars are driven according to the confirmed rules.

Of course, there are also companies and other collectives that take the role of customer in respect to the government. In this paper, I want to focus to individual citizens, because I have been recently working with ICT in health care and well-being. In these areas the citizen is the primary subject of well-being. One problem in the social government has its origin in this confrontation of one individual against the systemic machinery of government: the two parties do not typically possess equal amount of resources or power.

Government as Service

It is obvious that the relationship between the citizen and the government is asymmetrical also in other ways. This asymmetry bears a clear resemblance with the structure of services between the producer and customer of services. The service is justified by the added value they create. This benefit is supposed to be received by the customer, often in the form of improved or enabled processes. It is therefore natural to analyse the activity of government in terms of services.

Service transactions are not independent of each other. For example, in well-being industry, single transactions build on each other and form service chains with a shared set of objectives, often

aiming at better conditions of a life with high quality. One citizen (patient) moves from one counter to another and receives services from multiple producer organisations, each of which has the patient (customer) records of its own. The introduction of ICT did not automatically solve the problem of missing availability of patient records because information systems do not communicate with each other unless they are designed to do it. One possible architecture contributing to this universal availability is a central national archive of all patient information, medication included (In Finland, such a solution is being implemented within a few years.) This is, indeed, a huge document of services with strong government character. The citizen is very likely to feel him/herself governed rather than the beneficiary or customer of public services. There is no guarantee that ICT has a liberating or empowering effect on citizens' life situations.

Decentralised architecture

In this paper I want to introduce and promote other types of ICT architecture that directly strengthen the resources of citizens as individuals and small communities. The basic innovation is that the citizen collects all his/her documents to his or her own and personally controlled "system unit", converts them into an understandable and meaningful form and starts playing a new role as an active and empowered social actor. The governed takes the initiative and becomes the governor of his/her own life and well-being. This is the main contents in the research proposal I have delivered together with a national consortium to TEKES, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation. The proposed project has three major work packages that also describe and thus define the basic idea of the initiative. In the beginning, the focus is in health services, but it is expanded to other areas of well-being and finally to electronic services in general.

The acquisition of the existing documents.

This is an important step even if it is not very exciting. There are technical operations that may include scanning of paper documents and digitalisation, and the outcome is a collection of electronic documents, sorted for example according to their time stamps. The significance is, however, in the architecture. Many developers are willing to allow citizens to have a restricted access to their patient records stored in the central archive, but they refuse to see any meaning in the suggested personal ownership of these records.

This kind of doubts is eliminated by the fact that there is no need to make the choice between a centralised or distributed architecture. Rather, it should be the normal practice that both the producer and customer of all services always receive their own copies of all service transactions. The acquisition of the documents to the citizen's system unit is therefore not an unnecessary duplicate, but rather a natural dual system of the other party (customer). One immediate consequence of this citizen's personal system is that it solves the problem of collecting all documents about one individual in one system unit and making them available in a trivial way, with no need to manage the access rights permitted by the citizen. After this phase we can conclude: Yes it is possible to collect all this information.

Interpretation and sense-making of the records

Here the documents are translated into a form that is understandable and transparent to the citizen. In the first part the medical or juridical terminology is translated to natural language. Also other possible hindrances are removed. The second aspect of this phase is the creation of the meaningfulness of the documents. This objective needs the answer to the question: for what purpose are these

documents needed. This question cannot be answered unless the added value generated by the services is identified and embedded in the processes or projects of the citizen. Transactions are aggregated to service chains and these chains need to be purposeful and goal-oriented. These chains include holes that should be filled.

The second step connects the efforts of seamless chain of services to the correct unit of analysis, to the citizen who is the customer of all transactions in the chain. It also becomes obvious that the citizen lives the life of his/her own, and this is not the same thing as the service processes drawn by the service producer.

Action platform

Here the citizen broadens the scope of the system unit to deal with any types of services, including those offered by the government. The system unit grows up to an “electronic identity” around him/her. This identity surrounds the citizen and has at least three main functions

- to protect the host against unwanted interventions and supporting the desired ones,
- to give an integrated platform to the electronic contacts (addresses, passwords, identity checking, status of active projects, etc.),
- to support various self services, i.e. services that the citizen provides for him/herself (e.g. take medicin, motion activity, etc.)

Discussion

The suggested “system unit” for the citizen is a vision of eGovernment integrated together with other e-Services. It is an empowerment tool in at least two ways. Firstly, it gives the opportunity to the citizen to integrate all services and avoid the danger of fragmentation. Instead of running from one counter to another the citizen establishes a counter of his/her own and invites service providers to work with it. Secondly, it gives a hint, how government could be made more transparent. The citizen could, for example, have a version of the government software (the rules of the social institution) and check the correctness of government’s decisions and other services. He/she could follow up the progress of his/her issue in the organisation processing it. And finally, the “system unit” would develop to a de-facto-standard that could be implemented on different platforms, even in mobile ones.

The particular issue to be discussed is clear: Do citizens need emancipation towards government? Can such an empowerment be supported by means of giving the citizens tools for collecting and storing information and documents of their government projects and for taking better control of their cases, agreements and plans?

References

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