A Comparative Account of Joined-Up Government Initiatives in Dutch and Belgian Social Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this article, organizational and policy aspects of two national clearing house concepts are compared and discussed. In social security, Belgium has witnessed the emergence of the so-called Cross Point Bank and the Netherlands have produced the RINIS initiative. Although both countries are rather comparable, they differ in terms of their politico-administrative structures. From the comparison of the antecedents of both initiatives and their form and shape, it is concluded that e-government is not a universal, necessarily converged concept and that institutions and institutional matter, not so much as to how e-government is talked about (rhetorical convergence), but especially for the ways in which e-government technologies are implemented in the real world of public administration. From the case study, there is little support for decisional and operational convergence of the e-government phenomenon.

Keywords: information architecture; issues in organizing IS; IT in public administration; public policy; national culture

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

One of the goals for many governments throughout the world is the realization of an administrative apparatus that not only is digitally accessible, but also works seamlessly: it should not suffer from fragmentation and lack of responsiveness. In order to achieve this goal, insights from various disciplines are used and actually implemented.

In the public administration literature, it has been said repeatedly that improving coordination inside public administration is an eternal quest (Peters, 1996, 1998; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). In the Anglo-Saxon world (notably the United Kingdom), in the slipstream of new public management reforms, emphasis has been put on the phenomenon of joined-up government (Bogdanor, 2005; Ling, 2002). Joined-up government, in general, refers to consistency between organizational arrangements of policy programmes, policies, or agency strategies, which enables them to collaborate. Joined-up government is implemented by means of (among other measures) new (merged) organizations, new ways of working across traditional organizational boundaries (for example, joined teams, pooled budgets), new ways of service delivery (joint front offices), or new accountabilities and incentives (shared performance targets, regulation) (Ling, 2002).
In the e-government literature, in many cases, there is a focus on the design and implementation of technology that fosters integration of (primarily) service delivery. Through all kinds of measures, government-to-government (G2G) exchange of information is nurtured in order to coordinate activities and processes between formerly disparate governmental bodies.

Probably inspired by technological and managerial developments; politicians, commentators, and consultants have argued for a digitally accessible, seamlessly integrated administrative apparatus that is customer-oriented, and, moreover, is able to deliver public services efficiently, comprehensively, and fast. To some degree, this ideal is a digital sublime (Mosco, 2004); however, to a certain degree, a successful marriage seems to emerge from the combined trajectories of managerial (JUG) and technological (e-government) reform (Homburg & Bekkers, 2005). One can indeed witness actual e-government initiatives being rolled out in the United States (Fountain, 2001; Moon, 2002; Tat-Kei Ho, 2002), the United Kingdom (Chadwick & May, 2003), Continental-European countries (Kubicek & Hagen, 2000), Australia (Teichert & Dow, 2002) and the developing world (Heeks, 2003; Ndou, 2004). Apparently, the “wired” government does not only exist in the minds and rhetorics of politicians and consultants, but also at the shop floor of public sector organizations throughout the world.

When it comes to reforms, there is a compelling rhetoric of convergence (Pollitt, 2002). From case studies, best practices, talk, and so on, a picture emerges of how managerial and technological reforms spread over countries, produce similar results, and result in comparable practices. One common approach is to design Web-based packages of services around life events. The general aspiration is that front-office integration around life-events obviates coordination and integration through similar, comparable management practices.

In the practice of public management and public policy, however, styles of coordination (for example French centralism, the German decentralized approach, or the Dutch consensus style of coordination) appear to be rather resistant to the pressures of technological innovation as such (Leat, Seltzer, & Stoker, 2002). From the relatively few documented cases and surveys of international e-government practices (Accenture, 2004; Cap Gemini, 2006), it is often concluded that institutional factors constrain (in the sense that they limit courses of action and change) e-government practices. If one takes the point of view of the “social shaping of technology”—stream in the literature (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985; Williams & Edge, 1996), one might hypothesize that inversely, the eventual form and shape technology takes, including the level of integration and interoperability, is largely, although not exclusively, shaped by social and institutional factors. And indeed, in a large European study of back-office integration strategies, the authors conclude that “state structures, and institutional, legal, regulatory and cultural factors can be extremely important in determining the nature, cost and success of eGovernment (…). Progress often depends on whether or not there is a history of back office integration and cooperation, but not necessarily through centralized structures” (Millard, Iversen, Kubicek, Westholm, & Cimander, 2004, p. 61). Apparently, integration and interoperability, as well as means to achieve them, are far more contextually bound than is apparent at first sight, and appears from many e-government writings.

The empirical question, therefore, is whether there actually exists a globally converged ideal of integration and joined-up government beyond the level of fallible rhetoric, and if and how integration is actually achieved on decisional and operational levels of e-government (Pollitt, 2002). From a comparative point of view, it is interesting to analyze if and how interoperability and integration are interpreted in disparate institutional contexts (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004), for example, in a unitary-decentralized country like Norway and in a federal—coordinated country like Belgium. Furthermore, one can ask the question how