Chapter 13
Contingencies and Convergence in European Social Security: ICT Coordination in the Back Office of the Welfare State

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ABSTRACT
In Western European welfare states, one of the uses of ICT is the delivery of integrated public services in social security. In order to do this, the deployment of ICT (especially in the back office) requires coordination among various central and local levels of government, and among social insurance executive institutions, welfare authorities, and job centers. Viewing ICT-enabled integration as a technological and managerial “practice,” the authors analyze ICT coordination in various institutional regimes (in a decentralized regime like Denmark, a decentralized unity state like The Netherlands, and in a federal state like Austria). By a comparative case study, the authors investigate whether ICT coordination adapts to the institutional context in which it is shaped (contingency-approach), or whether in various institutional contexts coordination practices more or less resemble each other (convergence-approach). Two methods are used to gather data. First, for each country policy, documents and strategy papers are analyzed by using a structured code list. Second, in each country five key respondents at ministerial level and five respondents at local/regional level are interviewed. The authors reflect on the findings by discussing the role of ICTs in providing coordinated and integrated services in various welfare state regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

Social security service delivery can be defined as the public task of providing incomes for citizens experiencing loss of income due to illness, disability, unemployment, or old age. It is considered to be one of the cornerstones of welfare state regimes in the Western European world (and beyond), and generally consists of:

- **Welfare Schemes**: Financial aid or welfare services for disadvantaged or deprived citizens, funded through taxes, and commonly executed at regional or municipal levels.
- **Social Insurances**: Benefits for employees in compensation for monetary losses due to illness, disability or unemployment, financed by premiums paid by employers and employees, and generally implemented at national levels.

In this chapter we report on an analysis of ways in which in three European welfare states (Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands), information and communication technologies are implemented in order to provide integrated social security services to citizens, and, moreover, how cooperation of various service providers is coordinated through activities of central-level governments. The chapter is composed as follows. In the ‘Background’ section, we describe developments in European welfare states and identify two competing hypotheses about the relation between technology on the one hand and institutional context on the other hand. In the section labeled ‘Coordination in European Welfare State Back Offices’ we explain the methodology of the study underlying this chapter, and report how coordination of information exchange in social security actually takes place in Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands. Inspired by the results we identify new research trajectories in the section Future Research Directions. In the section labeled Conclusions, we describe similarities and differences in ways in which technologies are implemented in social security, come up with explanation for similarities and differences, and reflect on the implications of findings for the role of technology in providing health and care services.

BACKGROUND

In many European welfare states, welfare schemes on the one hand and social insurances on the other hand have developed along different paths. Welfare schemes originate in voluntary (often religious) sector organizations that had provided basic assistance to homeless and otherwise deprived individuals until about the second half of the 20th century; since then, the task of providing welfare services has been relegated to municipal governments. Social insurances, on the other hand, have a basis in arrangements drafted by associations of employers and employees. During the development of 20th century welfare state regimes throughout Europe, many countries have drafted national legislation in order to provide social insurances, and the implementation of social insurances Acts and schemes was taken up by executive institutions at national levels. Three developments have redirected attention to the way social security service delivery takes place.

First, there is the development of modern information and communication technologies with increased potential for information integration and interoperability. Second, there is the advent of more or less managerial ideas in the public sector like ‘joined-up government’, ‘customer orientation’, and in general individualized and personalized forms of public service delivery (Homburg & Dijkshoorn, 2011). Third, alongside the emerging wave of New Public Management reforms, various national European governments have blended the traditional focus on providing benefits and aids with initiatives to re-activate unemployed citizens and to stimulate citizens to become self-sufficient. Henman (2010) refers to a