

Back to knowledge based thinking

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Many governments promote the development of electronic service delivery. That is to say, policy plans outlining the electronic future of public administration are developed at the national level, while the actual implementation of these plans is often thought to take place at the local level (e.g. (BZK 1995; BZK 1998)). What does this mean in practice? If we look at e-government development at the local level, we can make some observations. First of all, many local authorities are turning their paper forms into online forms and their brochures into electronic brochures. And since many municipalities basically use the same forms, or at least use the same data (name, address, income data etc), this means that many are doing more or less the same work. Secondly, there is little intelligence in the electronic service delivery. The online forms are used as input for back-office procedures with little pre-processing of that input. Electronic service delivery is therefore, in many cases, no more than dumb data entry facilities for the public. Thirdly, where there is any pre-processing, knowledge and interface are highly intertwined. The interaction process is a sequence of forms and not an inference process. In other words, knowledge about (the applicability) of products and services is hard-coded in the flow of screens.

The development at the local level turns out to be development at a local level indeed. Almost every municipality in the Netherlands (roughly 460 out of the almost 500) is busy implementing electronic services for their own products and services without much co-operation with other municipalities. Since resources are fairly limited in most municipalities, this means that progress overall is slow. These conclusions beg the question if it is possible to speed up development by looking for economies of scale and for development tools.

Two important observations about the way the public administration is organised and functions provide a starting point for answering this question.

In the first place we may observe that service delivery in most cases relates to a decision taken by some public body pertaining a right or an obligation of a citizen or an enterprise. Since government is ultimately bound by law, this means that in most cases there are rules and regulations underlying a particular product or service. Of course these rules and regulations may be more or less open textured, but there is an established legal source to base decisions on. These rules can be implemented in knowledge based systems which may serve as a basis for electronic service delivery (Johnson and Sutherland 1996; Johnson 1999).

The second observation relates to the types of services that are provided at the local level. We may distinguish between at least the following three types (Leenes and Svensson 2002):

- Truly local services: i.e. services which are provided based on local policy and local autonomy, concerning the management of the municipalities' own affairs free from interference by the State. Examples of such services are: street and community care and safety, local taxes, sports, recreation and culture.

- Joint governance services: i.e. services which are rooted in national legislation, but which are administered by the municipalities, with the municipalities having their own (additional) policy responsibilities and discretionary powers. An example in the Netherlands is the municipal social assistance, based on the General Assistance Act.
- Municipal delivery of national services: i.e. the administration of national policy by the municipalities, where the policy is completely defined at the national level and discretion is limited and the administration by the municipalities is simply a convenient means of bringing the service to the citizens. Clear examples of such services are the issuing of driver's licenses and passports.

The combination of the two observations may provide a way forward. In our opinion the focus with respect to the development of electronic service delivery should be the development of knowledge based systems at the highest possible level in the public administration or on the largest scale. Let us elaborate a little on the latter part.

For services solely based on national policy, the development of electronic services on a national scale is an obvious choice. The responsible ministry could develop service modules, such as intelligent forms or expert system modules, and provide them to the municipalities to incorporate them in their websites

For joint-governance services there are options for co-operation and centralization of ESD development. Services, such as General Assistance, are typically based on a national core of regulation, which applies to all municipalities. ESD development for the core should be possible at a single location for all municipalities. Where the practice of municipal service delivery consists of combining pieces of national and local regulation, ESD development may be approached as a question of integrating local and national ESD-modules. This limits the effort needed by each municipality. An important question concerning the feasibility of this approach is the amount of variation in local policy. For general assistance in the Netherlands, the viability of this approach has already been shown in the development of the MR-Expert systems which contain the national legislation, supplemented with local rules (Groothuis and Svensson 2000).

Truly local services, addressing local problems and based on local policies are indeed best dealt with at the level of the municipalities. The municipalities determine the content of these services and therefore should also determine and organize service delivery. When a service is really typical for the municipality in question, there seems to be little choice regarding ESD development: it will require the special development of this ESD for this municipality (either by the municipalities staff or by a commercial organization hired for this task). The possibilities of gaining economies of scale are very limited in this case. However, this number of very specific local services is generally limited, and even differences in 'truly local' policies are not always as big as claimed. Many local bylaws are based on standard bylaws as produced by for instance the Association of Dutch Local Governments (logging permit, fire and safety measures), which makes co-operation between similar municipalities a viable option. Initial results of a survey show that over 60% of the Dutch municipalities have very similar regulations concerning logging permits and housing permits (Muijsers forthcoming).

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