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Collaborative approaches to public sector innovation: A scoping study

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ABSTRACT

In the last 15 years, European countries have invested considerable resources to provide e-government services. Despite of its increasing availability, its level of adoption has not been satisfying. On the other hand, over the last years, coinciding with the web 2.0 trend, the e-government services co-produced by citizens start to appear, often without the support, acknowledgement and even awareness of the government. This trend stems from a well-established tradition of offline co-production of public services, i.e. services provided by the voluntary sector, but brought to an unprecedented scale thanks to the advent of web 2.0. Still, the concept remains not well-defined and its impact is not yet well studied. The paper explores on a limited sets of cases what does it mean to collaboratively deliver online public services; what are the success factors based on the cases under study and what are the incentives for service providers (other than public administration), citizens as users and public administration. The authors propose an ostensive definition of the collaborative delivery of public services: collaborative public services are created and run by government, civil society or by private sector building on the re-use of government data or citizens data. Those services are focused on public goods delivery (e.g. health, education, public transport) and are meant to change the traditional government services by engaging in an open dialogue with public administration about the best way to deliver those services. The analysis of six case studies of innovative collaborative online public services suggests that the online collaborative public service delivery increases its quality with the users' growth contrary to the traditional offline service delivery. The study results indicate that the current developers interest lies in delivering complementary services to the government run services rather than substitutive services. The authors propose also the initial list of success factors, enabling conditions, and benefits for all main stakeholders (users, innovators and public administration).

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1. Introduction

In the last 15 years the e-government became an important component of the public sector modernisation agenda. Yet, e-government has not lived up to expectations and did not transform the public sector. While significant progress has been made over the last years in terms of e-government service provision, the take-up of those services is still disappointing. As late as 2012, only 43% of European citizens made use of e-government services, a percentage that drops off to 21% when

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one looks at transactional features, i.e. submitting filled forms (source: Eurostat and Digital Agenda Scoreboard¹). Moreover, the numbers stagnate, barely changing from 2008.

In authors' view one of the reasons for this sluggish growth may be the lack of user-centeredness of the current e-government services. Still, the European governments have for long struggled to become more user-oriented. User orientation of e-government services has been a goal in European policy documents since the Manchester Ministerial Declaration in 2005. Notwithstanding in most of the Member States this goal is far from being achieved. Especially in times of crisis, governments face problems to justify the reasons for investing in e-government when results remain disappointing with respect to earlier promises.

Notably, we are observing an increasing interest in the innovation in the public sector and once again the times of crisis make this interest even more vocal. At the same time the advent of web 2.0 services that build on knowledge and users skills (O'Reilly, 2005) prepared citizens for a more pro-active role. The collaborative production of e-government services appears therefore as a significant opportunity to allow users to directly design public services according to their real needs.

This article presents partial results of a wider study on Collaborative Production in e-Government commissioned by the European Commission (SMART 2010-0075) and carried out throughout 2011. (see Osimo et al., 2011)²

2. Research on collaborative e-government

The collaborative production in e-government (also collaborative) e-government is a novel research field with little literature available. Therefore, the literature overview will introduce the overall framework of innovation in the public sector and discuss the research results in the two neighbouring research fields, e-democracy and co-production of offline public services.

Public sector innovation, i.e. “new ideas that create value for society” (Bason, 2010), is not new a new concept nor practice. Still, it has gained a new perspective in the last 10–15 years when the research showed that effective innovation is related to a more direct involvement of users in the innovation process (von Hippel, 2005). Further to that successful projects are rarely designed using top-down approach and often require permission to disobey the existing rules (Albury, 2005). Hartley (2005) examining the evolution of paradigm of governance and public management (from traditional public administration through new public management to networked governance) observed that the co-producers role of the population is a main factor of recent transformation towards networked governance. Windrum (2008) underlines the importance of public sector entrepreneurship (intrapreneurship) and its role in the development of innovation in the public organisations.

This new role of users in public service innovation processes demands from public sector organisations a more systematic approach in innovation processes. More specifically, building innovation capabilities at all levels of the system, the “co-creation” of services “with” users and not “for” them and the development of improved leadership capabilities (Bason, 2010).

Needless to say, that this new perspective in the public service innovation has received a major impulse from the development of ICT tools. Osimo (2008) reviewing the relevance of web 2.0 applications in the government context also highlights that the impact of web 2.0 on public services is mainly characterised by a more active user role.

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of collaborative e-government the authors position it towards the e-democracy and co-production of public services research field.

2.1. e-democracy

e-democracy refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in order to involve citizens in the political debate and more broadly in the policy-making process. e-democracy has been seen as a cure for results of the democratic deficit (increasing number of citizens not interested in following the political debate and even abdicating from their basic democratic right, e.g. voting) (Coleman, Macintosh, & Laljee, 2005). More recently, it is perceived also as a way to empower citizens (with a new label, namely e-participation) by offering them a possibility to actively participate in the decision-making process in contrary to the more passive e-voting concept (use of ICT to simplify and make more efficient the voting process). Currently, e-democracy remains a strongly practice-oriented field. Therefore there are a number of reports and studies aimed at collecting and analysing practices under different perspective to identify directions and trend of developments. Yet, Coleman et al. (2005) literature review shows that there is very little objective evidence about success factors of e-democracy initiatives. Rather, literature tends to provide some basic principles and recommendations for best practices (Kearns, Bend, & Stern, 2002).

¹ <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tin00079&plugin=1> and http://scoreboard.lod2.eu/index.php?scenario=2&indicators%5B%5D=i_igov12rt+IND_TOTAL+%25_ind&countries%5B%5D=EU27#_chart.

² The study aimed to define the collaborative e-Government, answer how Europe is positioned against the US and Australia; how the collaborative production is implemented in practice and what are its barriers and drivers; why it is important in terms of socio-economic impact; and finally what should be done by government to increase its positive impact.

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