Empowerment and E-Participation: Policy Recommendations

In 2012 Netherlands won the world award on e-participation due to the United Nations Public Service delivery ranking on that subject. Filled with pride we read in the report that our country managed to adopt the citizen inclusion as a key component in providing "customer-oriented" egovernment services. According to the jury the Netherlands had excelled in providing horizontal and vertical e-government linkages among various institutions and nodal points, creating enhanced opportunities for greater participation and social inclusiveness. These included not only e-information and e-consultation aspects, but also innovative modalities of edecision-making, thus highlighting the potential of e-governance for engaging the public in the decisions.

Today there are four trends I would like to share dealing with empowerment and e-participation. They would be, in my perspective: efficiency, electronic identification issues, a paradigm shift and the role of the individual in the system.

Efficiency vs empowerment and e-participation

All our governments are facing tough economic times, and so do our citizens. Today, more then ever, e-government is placed in the discussion on how to reach a more efficient or smaller government. Government departments and procedures are commonly held to be inefficient because they have little motivation to meet citizen expectations, and citizens do not have an alternative provider for government services (*E-Government: Evolving relationship of citizens and government, domestic, and international development Donna Evansa, David C. Yenb*). The increase in technology and communication has changed some of these attitudes on the part of governments. During the 2000-2010 period a more enlightened view begun in the ranks of government to treat the citizen like a consumer where transaction satisfaction is important. This change in attitude is actually more efficient for the government, as well as for the citizen, as it allows the government to deal with the citizen one time instead of multiple times and allows the government to process information more efficiently and collect data while doing so. An important byproduct of this efficient transaction is customer/ citizen satisfaction. Or…so we hoped to happen!

In order to cost effectively deliver the increasing number of services, the government is required to provide, services must be increased while costs must be reduced. One of the greatest opportunities to accomplish this is by increasing the efficiency of the delivery of these services to the citizen.
Given that more then 60 percent of all current Internet users interact with government Web sites; this is a logical way to reduce costs. The goal of empowering people and e-participation at the same time may somehow be envisioned as less important at a national level. I see this as a potential threat to our goal. I am however at the same not that pessimistic for I see a global trend coming from initiatives like the Open Government Platform in which there is a very strong calling for national governments to produce a national strategy on to stimulate several innovate initiatives by open data and national laws to open government by which citizens have a stronger position to express their rights.

Electronic identification: raising the safety level

Access to e-government means an electronic identificationtechnology that is both easy and safe. Recent history research shows that there is a fast speeding trend of the increase in identityfraude, approcamitly 5% has have had the experience with identityfraude in the Netherlands. 68 procent thinks that government should be the one to take precautions. Although most of it seems to happen outside the public sector it is a growing concern also within the public sector. Many specialists urge governments to raise the safetylevel on as well identificationtechnology as the systems in itself. In Dutch public sector incidents like the DDOS attacks and Diginotar meant millions of extra investment and also a policy to furthermore increase the safetylevels. The dark side of this might mean extra costs for citizens or a higher barrier to participate or access governmentservices and policies. The times for a somewhat pragmatic approach seem to have lost the battle in the public opinion that safety comes first.

From participation by citizens towards participation of governments

The Dutch advisory board on public administration presented a report in 2012 on participation with the title: letting go based on trust. The board reflects on Dutch society and finds that there is a paradigmashift from citizenparticipation to publicadministrationparticipation. Many public services started out as private initiatives and evolved from a local responsibility to the central governmentpolicy area. In the Dutch context the secular organizations took their position in the implementation. After that central government started to involve businesses and the public private partnerships were an upcoming trend. This trend has turned around in the recent years and shifted towards society and citizens. The new government knows it is dependant on knowledge and experiences in society. This means not only decentralization but also a true shift in responsibilities. So, the advisoryboard states that, it is not how citizens can participate in formulating, implementing or evaluating the policies but on how government can contribute to initiatives in society. They suggest a new term for this: publicadministration participation. In many societies there are people who want to commit themselves for their neighborhood, association, community or an ideal without a compensation. We have a vital society that might give the government an opportunity to become more compact. It is in that order and not the other way round. This paradigm starts with the notion that what is necessary will grow in society. The next step is the question if public administration should offer support. This however does not mean that all the public tasks should be the citizens challenge, or that individuals might dictate policydesicionmaking. Many tasks will remain the responsibility of democratic elected people and public administration. For example to rule out that certain groups or individuals will fall out of crucial services. But it does mean another way of thinking about complex issues in a network of government, citizens, businesses and NGO's.
With this shift from citizenparticipation to publicadministrationparticipation the instruments on the traditional participationladder are no more sufficient. The instruments that do fit are:
- Cooperation with the aim to engage as many people as possible to the (local) government
- Cooperation where there is a delegation of responsibilities to citizens
- Cooperation with the focus on innovation starting from an invitation from governments or by the initiative by citizens ore institutions. The Danish example of right to challenge where governments will take a step back

(even contraire to legislation) in order to offer room for innovation is being implemented in the Netherlands for this reason.

In the years to come the Dutch care and social system will be decentralized and transformed. The new system should be more efficient, coherent and cost-effective. Recently the municipalities adopted a paper in which they state that their goal is to create a more vital society. Municipalities state that they want to combine the decentralization with more participation of citizens but they want a true freedom in doing that in their own way facing however serious budget cuts somehow between 15 en 40 procent. The allover message is however that citizens should regain control in tough times.

Citizens and their participation within e-government

E government faces several challenges and therefor also the e participation. We have learned by recent study (Motivaction) that age, education and social environment (by which we mean the way people live their lives and have their set of values) indicate how citizens participate in e society and e government. Mainly young people, higher educated people and social environments that are quite open to new technologies and self reliance embrace the e society and also e government. Statistically the social environment is the most defining aspect. In the Netherlands we see three different segments with each their own specific attitude towards e society and e government.

~ the worried citizenry;
~ the enthousiastic self sufficient;
~ the indifferent consumer.

The worried citizenry
The worried citizenry denotes by being conservative, have difficulty with changes and are less self sufficient. This segment is less digital and looks for more traditional ways to keep informed. They are often nota ware on internets possibilities or ways to use new technology in a safe way. They are not so positive about e government and show reluctance in sharing personal information with government and are not very active in using e services.

The enthousiastic self sufficient
The enthousiastic self sufficient denote by being open to new (technologic) developments in society and are self sufficient. This segment is (very) digital capable and are in the middle of e society. They know what happens on the internet and how to protect themselves. They have high trust on safe trafficking on the internet. This segment is (very) positive about e government and uses the digital services and information. They are however not keen on sharing personal information by governments with other institutions. To share information with the government in itself is no problem to them. They do demand several things from government, like the need to protect privacy and making the system safe, especially when it concerns personal data.

The indifferent consumers

This segment is mainly consumption and amusement oriented and less involved in society and government. They are (very) digital capable and participate in e society. This segment is neutral about e government and uses not many the public services. They are not very worried about privacy on the internet and do not have many demands on e government.

In this research you can see that the way people see the rise of the information and e society is perceived very different. Governments need to realize that in their policies and communication for empowerment and participation. The worried citizenry is not very open and will prefer traditional communication. They need to be supported in the digitalization process. The indifferent consumers participate a lot in e society but not as much in e government. They are vulnerable when it comes down to privacy and internetsafety. It is not clear on how to reach this segment, they need to be reached but since they are indifferent it is a hard segment to reach. People who are enthousiastic and self sufficient will find their way and already have in e government. They do have concerns about privacy and safety and there for governments should emphasize this aspect, also in communication.

Then, where is the individual in the system

He question that has to be raised in this debate is how the individual is being protected within this era of massive participation on both sides (prof dr Marseille). There is nothing wrong with all these policies and activities because it just might help to use the 'legal control' because it gives us opportunity to at least reconstruct all the policy decisions, but there is a tension within the e systems of today, the rules and the way governments communicate with citizens. It's the clash between the world of the system and the individuals that are targeted and lives the effects of the decision making process. There is a role for the system for justice who needs to understand the working of this system and the tension between objective and subjective justice, between general rules and individual consequences and the necessity to sometimes be more flexible. E government complicates this tension because adaption is less easy within the system. This means that working within e government requires high skills from civil servants and those who have to deal with answering the complaints about the system. There is also needed room for flexibility on the workfloor and after that new input in the system or else very well systems might turn into huge frustrations both for government and the citizen.

How to move on from all this?

Europe is bursting with examples of democratic innovation and civic driven change. Citizens are taking public matters into their own hands and driving change through efforts to improve the neighborhoods and cities in which they live. Public officials are experimenting with new forms of practical deliberation

that remake relationships with citizens and other stakeholders. These new forms of cooperation and cocreation challenge us to make sense of how roles and responsibilities are changing. It also raises important questions on how to support and facilitate grass-root initiatives and safeguard public concerns at the same time? How to make civic initiatives durable and lasting? How to respond as governments to bottom up developments in civil society? The Netherlands have taken the initiative to examine these questions at the conference Borders to Cross on 29 the till 31 october in Amsterdam in which we will bring together practicioners from government, civil society and market to discuss possible answers in practice to these questions.

Our ambition is to form an international learning community, where professionals from government, civil society and market can learn together about cocreation and cooperation between civic initiatives, government and market. This causes a shift in roles and responsibilities for all parties. Borders to Cross will provide a setting for reflecting on experiences, dilemmas, around forty selected cases of democratic innovation and civic driven change We envision a laboratory for active learning surrounding themes as new forms of ownership, new forms of joint decision-making (G1000 in Belgium, efforts to formulate a bottom up constitution in Iceland), inclusive participation, and the role of entrepreneurship in the public domain. In learning labs, participants develop insights that they can bring into play in their own work.

Who will attend?

Up to 200 civic professionals will participate in the Borders to Cross conference. Our goal is a balanced group of government, civil society, and market actors together with researchers. Their diversity will create opportunities for surprising encounters and innovations that challenge our thinking. Approximately 20% of the participants in the conference will originate from the Netherlands. The conference will also host representatives of 40 most inspiring initiatives and projects that cover diverse themes concerning democratic innovation and civic driven change.

What will the participants gain?

O Gain a new perspective on the transitions that are underway in democratic practice and the shifting roles for government, markets and civil society actors that this implies

o Develop your own practical strategies from 40 innovative cases from which you can learn and which you can implement in your own work.

o Learn from and about cutting edge participatory methods;

o Reflect with scientists about practical insights and innovative theories;

o Listen to leading figures in the field of civic driven change;

o Enlarge your vision and learn from initiatives and projects by visiting the marketplace;

o Visit civic driven change initiatives in neighborhoods in Amsterdam;

o Talk with peers about the daily challenges you face and the borders you have to cross

o a renewed network of government professionals and citizens who are engaged with similar challenges