The eCitizen Charter as a tool for public sector innovation through citizen engagement and social accountability

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During the last 15 years, almost every country has adopted a kind of eGovernment strategy. Although these strategies differ according to nation and culture, there is a remarkable similarity. Not surprisingly most governments have been preoccupied with efficiency, since it will save costs for the supplier and reduce administrative burdens for citizens and businesses.

However, better Government is not only about digitization of existing products and processes, but about designing new ways in which to serve the customer and to create public value. Both the challenge and the benefit lie in collaboration: within the public sector and between the public sector and civil society.

Web 2.0 and Social Media change the interaction in a network society. The eCitizen Charter is a quality standard for e-Government written from the citizen's perspective. It consists of 10 quality requirements for digital contacts, both in the field of information exchange, service delivery and policy participation. The charter establishes rules of engagement between citizen and government and ensures involvement of citizens by providing a framework for transparency and social accountability in the fight against corruption.

From electronic to collaborative government

The UN eGovernment Report 2012 ranks the Netherlands second worldwide (and first in eParticipation). Even taking into account that most rankings mainly concern the supply side and not use, let alone satisfaction, the country obviously has done a good job in eGoverment, and probably the focus on eParticipation is part of the explanation.

Almost 20 years ago in the Netherlands the first program started of what later became known as Electronic Government (eGovernment). Public Counter 2000 introduced the one-stop shop model and did so under the motto "Thinking and working from the citizen's perspective". Ever since, each eGovernment project has called itself "citizen centric". However, the past years prove that rhetoric is easier than actual implementation. Citizen centricity not only requires a change in attitude, also necessary are practical methods and tools.

Electronic Government as we used to know it is aimed at efficiency and cost reduction. In order to reach those goals, countries strive to build a digital highway. This is composed of building blocks like access portals, digital IDs, common registers, and secure networks. As such, this electronic infrastructure is supply oriented and focused on service delivery. The citizen is treated as a passive consumer.

Although even in the frontrunner countries this virtual infrastructure is not yet fully finalised, we are heading into a new paradigm: Collaborative Government. This approach to government takes into account that performance should be measured by quality and participation. Using the virtual infrastructure means using mobile technology, open data, cloud computing and social media. This triggers a shift to demand orientation and interaction. The citizen is behaving like an active co-producer.

Citizen engagement

From the realisation that citizen awareness requires a paradigm shift, the Netherlands started some 5 years ago a nationwide programme in order to merge public sector reform and civil society innovation. This was called the Citizen Link Engagement model which consists of three steps:

1. Design quality requirements: the eCitizen Charter,

2. Measure citizen satisfaction: conduct annual surveys about life events, and
3. Stimulate citizen engagement: develop eParticipation instruments.

The first step was to develop a common standard for quality principles. The eCitizen Charter intends to match the ambitions of government with the expectations of citizens. The charter consists of 10 quality requirements that can be applied both as design requirements beforehand and as evaluation criteria afterwards. As design requirements, the quality standards have been incorporated into the Dutch Government Reference Architecture (NORA). Internationally the charter was adopted as an example and translated into 23 languages.

The second step was to use the quality standards of the charter as evaluation criteria to measure citizen satisfaction. From 2008 to 2010, the ICTU CitizenLink program annually surveyed how citizens appreciate the performance of government. This was done by letting them evaluate their actual experience in real contacts with government agencies helping them to solve 55 different types of life events (such as registering the birth of a baby, or obtaining permits for founding a company). Thus delivery chain deficiencies were discovered, such as a lack of communication and coordination.

The results of the satisfaction measurement show that people rate the importance of the requirements and the degree in which these are fulfilled differently according to the type of service. So quick response is appreciated, but real solutions are preferred. The overall conclusion of analysing the 55 life events was that out of the ten requirements citizens prefer transparency, accountability and choice most.

This led to the third step of the engagement model being undertaken in an innovative way: involving customers from the very beginning in service process redesign, using eParticipation instruments and social media tools. Several engagement platforms were created to facilitate interaction and empowerment. These were set up as a combination of representative and participative democracy.

Public sector innovation

The eCitizen Charter (see box next page) has proven to be an innovative instrument to involve citizens in improving service delivery, civil society participation and public policy renewal. It supports collaboration within the public sector and between the public sector and civil society. By providing "rules of engagement", it bridges the gap between top down and bottom up incentives and matches different intentions for change that otherwise would fail. Apart from being applied in public management reform, it can very well be used in actual problem solving, such as rallying support for austerity measures. But most challenging and rewarding it appears to be when implemented in the area of fighting corruption, the single most important cause for human inequality and economic poverty.

eCitizen Charter

1. Choice of Channel - As a citizen I can choose for myself in which way to interact with government. Government ensures multi channel service delivery, i.e. the availability of all communication channels: counter, letter, phone, e-mail, internet.

2. Transparent Public Sector - As a citizen I know where to apply for official information and public services. Government guaranties one-stop-shop service delivery and acts as one seamless entity with no wrong doors.

3. Overview of Rights & Obligations - As a citizen I know which services I am entitled to under which conditions. Government ensures that my rights and obligations are at all times transparent.

4. Personalized Information - As a citizen I am entitled to information that is complete, up to date and consistent. Government supplies appropriate information tailored to my needs.

5. Convenient Services - As a citizen I can choose to provide personal data once and to be served in a proactive way. Government makes clear what records it keeps about me and does not use data without my consent.

6. Comprehensive Procedures - As a citizen I can easily get to know how government works and monitor progress. Government keeps me informed of procedures I am involved in by way of tracking and tracing.

7. Trust & Reliability - As a citizen I presume government to be electronically competent. Government guarantees secure identity management and reliable storage of electronic documents.

8. Considerate Administration - As a citizen I can file ideas for improvement and lodge complaints. Government compensates for mistakes and uses feedback information to improve its products and procedures.

9. Accountability & Benchmarking - As a citizen I am able to compare, check and measure government outcome. Government actively supplies benchmark information about its performance.

10. Involvement & Empowerment - As a citizen I am invited to participate in decision-making and to promote my interests. Government supports empowerment and ensures that the necessary information and instruments are available.

Download (English):
http://www.mattpoelmans.nl/blog/wp-content/uploads/eCitizenCharter-Workbook-English.pdf

Translations in other languages: http://www.mattpoelmans.nl/blog/burgerservicecode/