E-Government should empower, not pacify

Frank Robben, conceiver of Belgium's most successful e-government initiatives, argues that technology should be deployed to empower citizens, as opposed to lulling them to sleep.

Will technology change the very nature of government or will it simply automate the existing governmental processes? The reality at present is the second: you can fill in your tax form online. But what if technology were to fundamentally change the way that government interacts with citizens? While there has been much talk of participative government, whereby we as citizens vote on every conceivable policy decision, Frank Robben argues that government should be providing tools that enable us, as individuals, to plan our lives better.

How do you see the workings of government change as a result of technological advances?

When people talk about e-government they usually refer to online government services such as tax-on-web, or if looking more in the future they may consider a form of participative government whereby policy decisions are based on online referendums or polls. But personally, I do not think that participative government is the key opportunity. I do, however, believe that technology can help empower citizens, that it can encourage self-determination. This is so important. If you think about it, unhappiness is often related to a lack of freedom or control over your situation. Hence, government should try to stimulate self-determination among people. Too often, people expect government to simply take care of everything. Their expectations are tremendously high. For one, government is simply incapable of meeting those expectations. But also, I wonder if government

should simply 'take care' of everything, because that way we create a stale and passive society. We should be encouraging people to take responsibility for their choices; to take control over their destiny. And that's where technology can help. Not by bombarding people with a myriad of referendums. On the contrary, government should be offering tools that simulate the impact of an individual's life choices on their rights and duties as a citizen; decisions around one's career, studies, marriage, home ownership, etc. That way people can make informed decisions. They can assess the impact of their decisions based on objective, forward-looking information. ICT can make this happen; but it obviously requires that the IT systems in government are well-integrated.

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How do you accomplish that?

We need to define an overarching objective for government as a whole, bridging the siloes, with the right incentives for government managers. The key obstacle is the fact that government is organised in distinct departments and agencies, all with their own agenda and incentives. This type of initiative will need powerful

political backing; at the level of Prime Minister or Vice Prime Minister at least. The achievements in the social security sector (ed. note. the Crossroads Bank for Social Security) were due to the vision and support that we had from politicians like Jean-Luc Dehaene. It can't be housed in a vertical authority because it will need a degree of authority over the other verticals.

Then at the level of the administration, we need to set up a neutral entity which is steered by the various stakeholders. For example, in the social security sector we created the Crossroads Bank for Social Security to coordinate process optimization across the entire sector. But this agency has no vested interest in the actual task of social security. Also, the agency is governed by the users: representatives of the socially insured people, their employers and the social security agencies all sit on the board. This forces me to be accountable to them; to make sure that we create value for them. You need to talk to your users and ask them what their problems are, what their needs are; and build that into your model structurally. We like to describe

this role as being a 'service integrator': we look at the processes that bridge several agencies and will work with those agencies to simplify and automate their processes. Now we are applying these same principles to the health care sector, with the e-Health platform. First we identified our user communities and stakeholders. Subsequently, we created a parastatal and invited our stakeholders—the doctors, the hospitals, the patient organisations, etc—to sit on our board. This way we create buy-in and are forced to think in terms of value add.

The impact of this type of approach can be significant. In the social security sector in 2009 we transmitted 800 million electronic messages between the various agencies; that's 800 million fewer pieces of paper. Any situation where you had to collect a certificate of some sort at one place in government, to claim a right or service from another department, is now gone. Via a single contact with government—for example, announcing the birth of a child—all your rights in the social security system are automatically activated. That's an achievement. But while the average citizen will not notice the impact of this work in their day-to-day life (we simply avoided bureaucracy) e-health will change people's lives. It will provide people with a great deal more information—and control—concerning their health care.

How are we doing in Belgium when it comes to e-government? How are we performing on the international e-government rankings?

In Belgium we have a complex system of government. Our

e-government infrastructure will reflect that complexity. We have the federal government departments, the regions, the communities, local government, and a myriad of government and semi-government agencies. This makes e-government inherently difficult. Ultimately, e-government is concerned with processes: the point is to automate and, where possible, simplify processes. But many processes extend over multiple actors in governments. That typically creates bureaucracy because it is the citizen who ends up playing postman between different government departments. Our problem is that government is organised along demarcated lines of competence or authority. We think in terms of departments and their authority; when we should be thinking about added value for the citizens and the companies. Technology is not the problem; on the contrary, the main challenge is reorganising the processes. It is quite clear: where there is well coordinated, common governance — e.g. in the social security sector—then there is progress in e-government; where there is a lack of a well coordinated, common governance —e.g. justice— then IT struggles.

We should be focusing on the key life events of the citizens and try to integrate all the processes that are linked to such events. And let the agency that is closest to the citizen at that stage take responsibility, but in the back office we make sure that we link up the processes across various agencies. I would rather be served by the agency that I'm closest to, or most familiar with—e.g. the sickness fund when I'm sick—but I do expect them to be working together with other agencies in government

smoothly. We need to think much more in terms of added value for the citizen.

At present we inform citizens about their pensions—i.e. how much they will receive in the years ahead—when they're in the age group of 60-65. If you think about it, that is decades too late, since you can't do anything about it anymore. We should give people an integrated vision on their pension—i.e. combining their legal pension, their supplementary pension and their own savings—much earlier on in their lives. Also, we should be informing people about the implications of their career decisions. That way you empower people; you given them the information on which they can base responsible decisions. And IT can play a key role here, in giving people the tools and information they need to plan their careers and lives better.

In Belgium we're not doing badly when it comes to the technical infrastructure, but we should find a way to help those who want to take responsibility for their lives—who want to be empowered—to make more informed decisions. Otherwise I fear that we are going to create unrealistic expectations and a generally more docile society.

Government can be evaluated on two core dimensions. Firstly, the hand-on effectiveness: does it achieve its objectives, for example, that there is no poverty? And secondly, efficiency: does it deploy its resources efficiently? Often we dwell on the second aspect; but the first is equally important. When we consider investment in technology let's reflect on the objective; the point of it all.

BIO
Frank Robben is general manager of the award-winning Crossroads Bank for Social Security, an institution he conceived and founded. More recently, Frank co-founded the eHealth platform, a public institution that will enable electronic service delivery in the health care sector. Furthermore, Frank is strategic advisor at Fedict, the Belgian federal public service responsible for the co-ordination of eGovernment in the Belgian federal administration. In that function, he developed the concept of the electronic identity card and the company register, and he advises on the general information security and privacy protection policy of the Belgian federal government.