THE USE AND IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT) FOR DECISION-MAKING AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on Public Sector Modernisation: the Role of the Central Agencies
Madrid, 6-7 November 2003

This document provides background information for Session 5: "The Use and Impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for Decision-making at the Centre of Government" on Friday 7 November

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Session 5 – Friday 7 November

THE USE AND IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT) FOR DECISION-MAKING AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

Questions for discussion

New pressures generated by ICT

➢ How have Centres of Government adapted to manage an increasing volume of information?

➢ What impact has the acceleration of ICT-enabled exchanges had on decision times within the Centre of Government?

ICT as a valuable tool for co-ordination and communication processes

➢ Has ICT helped to improve co-ordination and consultation when preparing government decisions?

➢ Has ICT helped in communicating government decisions internally and externally?

What impact has ICT had on the quality of decision-making?

➢ Has ICT improved the responsiveness, transparency and accountability of Centres of Government?

➢ Has ICT improved the quality of decision-making both in the preparatory stages and within the Council of Ministers?

➢ Does ICT have a real impact on the daily business of managing government from the Centre – or is it too soon to tell?

Role of the Centre in e-government

➢ What role, if any, does the Centre of Government play in the design and implementation of e-government programmes?
THE USE AND IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT) FOR DECISION-MAKING AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

1. Following contacts with the members of the network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government, the hosts of next year’s meeting together with the hosts of this year’s meeting and the Secretariat considered that the use and impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) for decision-making at the Centre of Government would represent a subject of great interest for the majority of the participants.

2. The session will have as its objectives:

   • To identify the impact ICT has had on the role, functions and procedures of Centres of Government.

   • To identify the key governance issues raised by the use of ICT at the Centre of Government and the different approaches adopted by OECD member countries.

   • To determine the priority issues for more in-depth discussion at the meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government in 2004 to be hosted by Turkey.

   • To suggest issues for investigation by the Public Governance and Territorial Development Directorate (GOV) within its current and future work programme.

3. The speed, volume and scope of interactions made possible by ICT has potentially major implications for decision-making at the Centre of Government. The convergence of information towards the Centre, the elaboration of decisions and their communication internally and externally are all facilitated by the use of ICT. At the same time, these tools also raise new challenges in terms of information management, priority-setting and response times. These developments will be reviewed in the light of underlying good governance principles aiming to ensure greater responsiveness, transparency, openness and accountability in government.

Centres of government in an electronic age

4. The term ‘Centre of Government’ encompasses the body or bodies that provide direct support and advice to heads of government and councils of ministers or cabinets. Centres of Government play a vital role in the functioning of public institutions: they act as an interface between decision-makers at the political level and the administration; they ensure the co-ordination of government work and provide support for the Prime Minister/Head of Government; they communicate decisions to other actors within and outside government; and ensure that decisions are implemented. While their core functions may have remained relatively unchanged, the context in which they act and tools at their disposal have been transformed by the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to the business of governing.

5. Centres of Government also play a role in the promotion of ICT and strategic management of e-government given that, in many OECD member countries, the senior official responsible for e-government reports directly to the Prime Minister. With the growing realisation that e-government is more about government than about “e” and the progressive mainstreaming of e-government initiatives, Centres of Government may be expected to play an increasingly important role in co-ordinating the use of ICT throughout the public sector.
ICT impact on core functions

6. The core functions of Centres of Government include: managing information; ensuring co-ordination; supporting decision-making; guaranteeing communication; monitoring implementation and anticipating future change (see Figure 1). The application of ICT is likely to have both positive and negative impacts on how Centres of Government carry out these tasks (see Figure 2). As the initial findings of the OECD E-government project demonstrate, the introduction of new technologies to government is never neutral.

7. This session will seek to determine how, and to what degree, these impacts have affected the daily business of managing government from the Centre.

Figure 1: Decision-making at the Centre of Government

Managing information flows

8. The management of information flows to and from the Centre have been both facilitated and hindered by the advent of ICT. On the one hand, the quantity of information delivered to decision-makers, the diversity of information sources and the capacity to integrate and handle this information efficiently has increased with the introduction of ICT (e.g. e-mail, electronic documents). In short, more information is available in less time at less cost.

9. On the other hand, by reducing the transaction costs of generating and disseminating information, ICT have produced an information overload where quantity is no substitute for quality. Decision-makers need to have at their fingertips key information on issues for which they are responsible. Coping with this flow of information requires the use of ‘filters’ to identify the essential elements. While these filters may be ICT-assisted, most often they will require human judgment and therefore human resources which will require new skills.
10. Centres of Government handle highly sensitive information and determine levels of access granted to other government actors. A greater reliance on ICT in handling such information raises the issue of how best to ensure security and authorized access.

   How does the Centre of Government manage the information overload? What criteria does it use to identify priority topics and select information which is useful to decision-makers? What impact, if any, has ICT had on the way the Centre of Government is organised? Has ICT blurred the boundaries of its responsibilities?

Ensuring co-ordination and consultation

11. Greater emphasis on cross-cutting policy issues, progress in decentralisation, the devolution of decision-making power and the increasing use of public/private partnerships has led to the proliferation of actors involved in public governance. Today, the role of the Centre in ensuring co-ordination and policy coherence is more important than ever before.

12. The task of co-ordination has been greatly facilitated by the use of ICT, particularly in the management of networks within government (e.g. e-mail distribution lists), work-flow planning and tracking timetables (e.g. online agendas) as well as liaison with other public bodies, such as Parliament. It has also contributed to smoother internal consultation among ministries in the preparation of draft legislation and government decisions (e.g. circulation and comments on drafts) as well as consultation with external actors (e.g. business associations, trade unions, civil society organisations). At the same time, by increasing the number of actors involved in the policy process, ICT has increased the transaction costs involved in preparation of government decisions and exacerbated the challenge of priority setting.

   How has ICT helped with co-ordination in the preparation of cabinet meetings? Has the widespread use of ICT raised any new challenges for co-ordination? Has ICT increased the diversity of perspectives consulted?

Supporting decision-making

13. By making policy-making more transparent both upstream and downstream, ICT has arguably reduced the ‘space’ for confidential discussion and discretionary decision-making at the Centre of Government. By breaking down the physical barriers to information dissemination, ICT has obliged decision-makers to argue the case for disclosure or confidentiality on its merits.

14. At the same time, ICT may contribute to making the activities of the Centre of Government (e.g. decision-making in cabinet) more amenable to immediate public scrutiny. They can also facilitate oversight at a future date (e.g. audit trail of e-documents). The immediacy of exchanges enabled by ICT has also increased the pressure on governments to respond rapidly to new events or crises. This, in turn, has raised the risk of reactive rather than proactive policy-making.

   What consequences has the introduction of ICT had for decision-making in terms of confidentiality and timeliness? Has ICT increased the transparency of government decision-making?

Guaranteeing communication

15. ICT provides the capacity for an unprecedented degree of interactive communication with a host of actors – both within government and outside. It has also raised the expectations of those targeted by government communications in terms of the speed of response and multi-channel delivery of information.
16. Government communications in an electronic age require greater attention to timing and tailoring. Information on government decisions is expected in ‘real time’ and must be tailored to the needs of specific target groups (e.g. ministries, media, business). At the same time, Centres of Government must ensure coherence and consistency in the various forms of information delivered to the public (e.g. press releases, ministerial websites).

**What impact has ICT had on communications within government and with external actors?**

**How does the Centre of Government decide what to communicate, to whom and how?**

**Monitoring implementation**

17. The Centre of Government is responsible for overseeing implementation of government programmes and receives updates on progress from within the executive (e.g. reports from ministries) and from other public bodies (e.g. Parliament, Ombudsman, Supreme Audit Institutions).

18. It also receives feedback on implementation from sources outside government (e.g. media reports). ICT has opened up a new channel for business associations, non-governmental organisations and citizens to voice their discontent directly to the Centre – thereby raising new challenges in terms of responsiveness and accountability. ICT may provide support in handling such feedback and ensuring prompt reaction from decision-makers (e.g. to serious cases of poor implementation or inaction by ministries and agencies).

**Has ICT facilitated the monitoring functions of the Centre of Government? Has ICT encouraged direct feedback on the implementation of government policy from external sources (e.g. interest groups)?**

**Anticipating future change**

19. ICT has increased the capacity of governments to aggregate and analyse vast quantities of information in order to identify trends and emerging challenges (e.g. through data mining and content analysis). It has also opened up the possibility to access external networks of expertise and follow discussions under way in online communities that do not usually interact with government (e.g. youth). ICT can also play a key role in surveillance and intelligence gathering. In such cases, Centres of Government must justify the use of ICT for such purposes in terms of the public interest and ensure that constitutional and legal safeguards for personal privacy and freedom of expression are respected.

**How has ICT helped Centres of Government to identify current trends and scope future developments? What role does the Centre of Government play in guaranteeing fundamental rights given the expanding use of ICT for surveillance and control?**

**Conclusions**

20. The impact of ICT on the role, functions and procedures of government has been significant and promises to grow in the future. How Centres of Government adapt to the new pressures generated by ICT and adopt these new technologies will shape their capacity to support decision-makers in an increasingly complex environment.
Figure 2: Potential impact of ICT on core functions of Centres of Government

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>POSITIVE IMPACT</th>
<th>NEGATIVE IMPACT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INFORMATION MANAGEMENT</td>
<td>• More information (volume)*</td>
<td>• Information overload</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More sources</td>
<td>• Need for filters and skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More integrated (potential)</td>
<td>• Need for data security &amp; authorised access</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Less time/less cost</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO-ORDINATION AND</td>
<td>• Manage networks within government</td>
<td>• Increased transaction costs due to more actors</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONSULTATION</td>
<td>• Facilitate planning</td>
<td>• Challenge for priority setting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Co-ordination with other public institutions (e.g. Parliament)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Consultation with external actors (e.g. business, NGOs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DECISION-MAKING</td>
<td>• More transparent</td>
<td>• Reduced scope for confidential discussion</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Reactive not proactive policy-making</td>
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<td>COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>• Immediate and simultaneous delivery to multiple internal &amp; external actors*</td>
<td>• Risk of inconsistent information and incoherent message</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Better tailoring of information (e.g. media, ministries)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Multi-channel delivery of information (web, TV)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>MONITORING</td>
<td>• Prompt reporting by ministries and agencies</td>
<td>• Handling information overload</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Direct feedback from public*</td>
<td>• Representativity and authenticity of public feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANTICIPATING FUTURE CHANGE</td>
<td>• More analytical capacity</td>
<td>• Risk of infringement of basic rights (e.g. privacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to expert networks and under-represented groups</td>
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* indicates qualitatively novel features made possible by the use of ICT.