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Electronic Public Service Delivery: Exploring the Use of Focus Groups for Ex ante Program Evaluation

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Abstract

This paper discusses the results of a research project that the Utrecht School of Governance of Utrecht University and a Dutch Ministry conducted in 2003 to know to what extent focus groups are a useful instrument to get insight into citizens' expectations related to electronic service delivery by municipalities and how the results of such ex ante program evaluation can be used to develop a citizen oriented policy in this field. We asked citizens for which service(s) delivered by their municipality they would like to use new media (such as e-mail) and for which ones they would rather prefer old media (such as a letter). The conceptual framework which Mayer & Greenwood (1980) developed for investigating a policy problem will be used to analyse the results of the focus group for ex ante program evaluation.

1 Introduction

EGOV 2003 argues that 'Seen from afar, e-Government looks like the perfect success story: yet there is another side as well. Although powerful and ambitious systems have been produced, users - intern and extern to the governmental realm - seem to be dissatisfied. (...) There is a challenge from critical questions arising about whether the systems we use are adequate and user-friendly. (...) What are the needs of users and how can e-services be designed to fit their needs and to bring benefit and comfort to them?' [6]

This paper explores the use of a tool which can be used to answer this question: focus groups. It discusses the results of a pilot case study in the field of electronic public service delivery. The Netherlands Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations asked the Utrecht School of Governance of Utrecht University to conduct this empirical research at a municipality in 2003 to know to what extent focus groups are a useful instrument 1. to get insight into citizens' expectations related to electronic service delivery by municipalities and 2. whether the results of such ex ante program evaluation can be used to develop a citizen oriented policy in this field.

In its report *Citizens as Partners* published in 2001 the OECD suggests that 'New forms of representation and public participation are emerging in all countries. (...) Citizens are increasingly demanding greater transparency and accountability from their governments, and want greater public participation in shaping policies that affect their lives. Educated, well-informed citizens expect governments to take their views and knowledge into account when making decisions on their behalf. Engaging citizens in policy making allows governments to respond to these expectations and, at the same

time, design better policies and improve their implementation.’ [1] Though most people will agree that it is important to respond to citizens’ expectations, it is not easy to know how to proceed to actively engage citizens in policy making.

Our contribution will therefore first discuss the possible use of focus groups as part of ex ante program evaluation for policy making related to electronic public service delivery (section 2). Then, in section 3 we present Mayer and Greenwood’s conceptual framework [3] which can be used to understand the relationship between alternative courses of action and a policy objective, in this case a policy leading to citizen oriented electronic service delivery by municipalities. Section 4 presents the results of our case study at a municipality, Hengelo in the Netherlands. Finally, section 5 discusses the conditions for successful policy making related to citizen oriented electronic public service delivery.

2. Inviting citizens to participate in focus groups

If we really want to engage citizens in active participation ex post program evaluation is not sufficient. It is necessary to offer them the possibility to propose options for new policy. Such ex ante program evaluation recognises the capacity of citizens to discuss policy options with policy makers. The OECD argues that ‘only a few OECD countries have begun to explore such approaches and experience to date is limited to a few pilot cases’ [2].

Our pilot case is an example of such an exploration. We used focus groups as a tool to actively engage citizens in policy making. A focus group is a qualitative research method which uses group interviews to gather data in an effective way by focusing on a specific topic. Participants are invited to participate and to react to each others opinions which promotes a dynamic discussion and allows us to get a better understanding of their wishes: ‘The comparative advantage of focus groups as an interview technique lies in their ability to observe interaction on a topic. Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants’ opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements of each interviewee.’ [5] Focus groups are an excellent opportunity for citizens to speak, to listen to their voices and discuss policy options with them.

We asked fifty citizens, present at a meeting organised by the social service department of Hengelo’s municipality, to make a choice out of one of five workshops related to different aspects of service delivery. Nine of them (aged between 35 and 45, five women and 4 men) told us they wanted to participate in our workshop which focussed on electronic public service delivery. In this focus group we asked those citizens for which service(s) they would like to use new media and for which ones they would prefer the use of old media.

The focus group was prepared and conducted by a researcher from the Utrecht School of Governance of Utrecht University and a civil servant from Hengelo’s municipality responsible for policy making related to electronic public service delivery. First, the civil servant explains the participating citizens that Hengelo would appreciate discussing the municipality’s future policy in this field with them in this

focus group. Accessible information and interaction between the municipality and its citizens are important key words. Then, the researcher explains the procedure which will be used in the focus group. Each citizen receives five yellow self-stick notes to be stuck to one or more of the old or new media (phone, letter, fax, “face-to-face” communication, website, e-mail or an electronic information screen in the town hall) related to citizens’ communicative goals ‘getting information’, ‘asking questions’, ‘ordering forms’ and ‘sending forms’, which are indicated on a white board. In this way they can make clear which medium/media they wish to use for which goal of service delivery by their municipality. After having done this they discuss their choices with each other and the civil servant.

Before we present the results of our pilot case study in sections 4 and 5, we present a conceptual framework which can be used to get insight into the conditions leading to citizen oriented electronic public service delivery.

3 A conceptual framework of policy making

In this section we present the conceptual framework which Mayer and Greenwood [3] developed for investigating a policy problem. The heart of their conceptual framework is the relationship between the alternative courses of action (the independent variable) and a policy objective (the dependant variable):

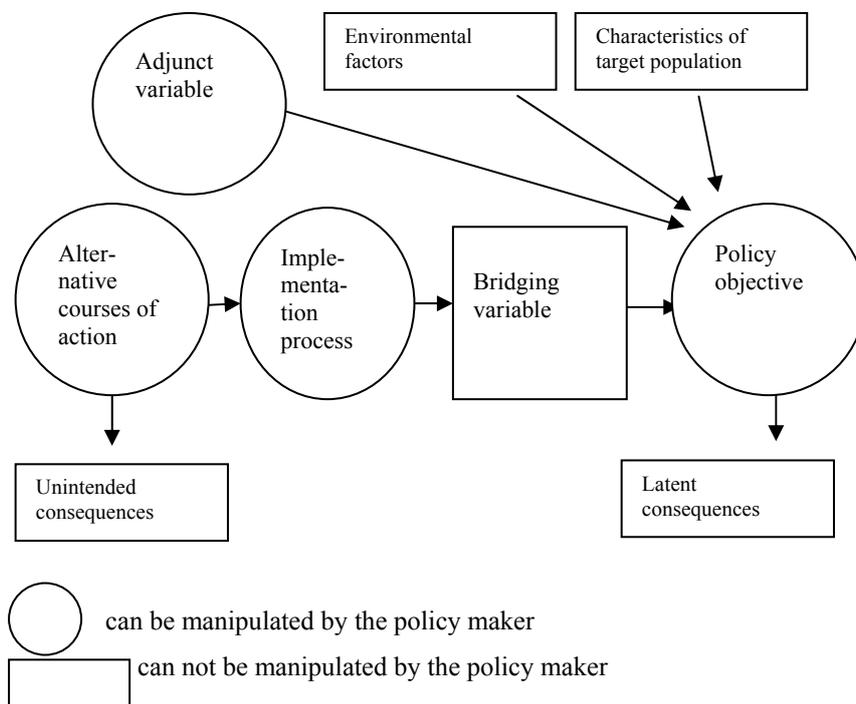


Figure A conceptual framework of policy making

Mayer and Greenwood (1980: 125) distinguish between two intervening variables:
'implementation variables: specific administrative strategies adopted to carry out the policy or program; as such they are distinct from the substance of the program. (...)
bridging variables: intermediate outcomes that must occur as prerequisites to the attainment of the policy objective. (...)

The difference between an implementation variable and a bridging variable lies in the fact that the policy maker can presumably manipulate the first but not the second. Thus an implementation variable may be thought of as an action to which the policy maker can resort to achieve the policy objective, whereas a bridging variable is an attitude or behaviour necessary to attaining the policy objective but beyond the policy maker's direct control. Understanding the success or failure of policy may hinge on the decision maker's awareness.'

Then, they explain that adjunct and constraint variables as factors influencing the policy process (1980: 127):

'An adjunct variable refers to any auxiliary action the policy maker might take to enhance the effectiveness of the adopted policy or program. It might be thought of as a supplementary policy or program. Because an adjunct variable can be instituted independently of the alternative courses of action, it should not be considered just another alternative. (...)

A constraint variable represents any factor influencing the policy process over which the decision maker has no control. Constraint variables may be of two types; *environmental factors* or *characteristics of the target population*. (...)

The final type of variable which they present is the side effect, or secondary effect, of policy (1980: 128):

'When the side effect flows directly from the fact that a course of action has been taken (the independent variable), it will be considered as an *unintended consequence* of the policy. (...)

When the side effect flows directly from the fact that the policy objective has been achieved (the dependant variable), it will be considered as a *latent consequence* of policy.'

Mayer and Greenwood focus on *policy makers* and use their framework for *ex post* program evaluation. In our opinion it is possible to use it also for *ex ante* program evaluation, conducted by *policy makers and citizens*. It enables to get insight into which conditions have to be fulfilled in order to implement a policy leading to citizen oriented electronic service delivery by municipalities. In our pilot case study the alternative courses of action refer to citizen oriented electronic public service delivery and the policy objective is to improve electronic service delivery by municipalities. In section 5 we will interpret the results of this case study - presented in the next section - by using Mayer and Greenwood's framework.

4 Case study at the Social Service department of the municipality of Hengelo

Hengelo is a town in the eastern part of the Netherlands. As explained in section 2 we used a focus group to ask nine citizens for which service(s) they would like to use new

media and for which ones they would rather prefer old media for the communication with their municipality. Most citizens prefer using a website if they want to get information. They have a preference for “face-to-face” communication if they want to ask questions. Letters and websites are favourable media for ordering forms, and websites for sending forms. This shows that citizens do not always prefer using new media. It depends on the communication goal whether a new or an old medium is favoured. Finally the following interesting remarks were made:

1. The citizens asked the civil servant if the municipality could give financial support (PC, phone costs) to poorer citizens.
2. They also wanted to know whether the municipality could support citizens, for example older people, needing a training in using websites and e-mail.
3. More PC facilities in libraries to guarantee access for those who do not have a PC at home, is a wish some citizens express.
4. The citizens explicitly asked the civil servant to guarantee that their municipality will not substitute old media by new ones. They prefer having the opportunity to make a choice between new and old media.

The civil servant promises that both old and new media will be used in the future by the municipality to communicate with its citizens and that the other three questions will also be part of the future municipality’s policy related to electronic public service delivery.

5 Citizen oriented electronic public service delivery: conditions for successful policy making

The wish of the Netherlands Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to conduct a pilot case study at a municipality to get insight into citizens’ expectations related to electronic service delivery by municipalities and to see if the results of such ex ante program evaluation can be used to develop a citizen oriented policy in this field was not easy to fulfil. Almost all municipalities we asked did not have time to participate or their citizens did not want to participate in focus groups. The municipality of Hengelo was an exception. The Social Service department of this town organises regularly different meetings with its citizens. As explained in section 2 we used one of those meetings to offer a focus group as a workshop to the citizens which allowed us to know their expectations related to electronic public service delivery.

In our opinion focus groups can only be used by municipalities which already discuss policy options with their citizens on a regular basis. If this is not the case the whole concept of “e-government”, and specifically that of “citizen oriented electronic public service delivery” will appear to be what McGee calls an “ideograph”: ‘an ordinary language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.’ [4] (see also [8]) If, however, the use of focus groups is imbedded in a practice of continuous dialogue between the municipality and its citizens, it can be used as a tool to understand citizens’ expectations related to electronic public service delivery. Acting in this way minimises the risk of devaluing the fruitful concept of “e-government” to a useless “ideograph”.

Finally, we will show how Mayer and Greenwood's conceptual framework which we discussed in section 3 can be used by municipalities as input for new policy in the field of electronic public service delivery. In the pilot case study *the alternative courses of action* refer to citizen oriented electronic public service delivery and *the policy objective* is to improve electronic service delivery by municipalities. Investigating citizens' expectations regarding the use of electronic public services can be considered as *implementation variable*. Citizens being able to use a PC can be seen as *a bridging variable*. The results show that citizens fear that old media will be substituted by new ones, this can be considered as *a latent consequence*, which has to be avoided according to them. *Unintended consequences* are not mentioned by the citizens, but what could happen is that civil servants who are going to answer more and more questions by e-mail and less and less by phone, will formulate their answers more vaguely because in case of difficulties citizens could use e-mails to prove what has been promised. An example of *a constraint variable* to be taken into account is that people who do not have a PC at home and therefore do not have access to websites and e-mail (*an environmental factor*), which could be to be solved by offering PC's in libraries (*an adjunct variable*). Older people's possible lack of knowledge of websites and e-mail use is another type of *constraint variable (characteristics of target population)* to be taken into account, and training facilities to learn to use a website and e-mail are an example of another *adjunct variable*.

Our pilot case study shows that ex ante program evaluation in the field of electronic public service delivery offers interesting possibilities. More empirical qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to develop and implement a real citizen oriented policy in this field. Conducting focus groups as described in our paper and using Mayer and Greenwood's conceptual framework for the interpretation of the results are useful tools to travel the road of excellence. Those who travel this road 'will be rewarded, when they closely perceive the impending e-transformation of society; for them the journey might become an overwhelming experience.' [7]

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