

## **Evaluating the quality of internal flows of information and interactions with citizens in Estonian local authorities**

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Last decade's public administrative reform initiatives have brought along various ideas about how to organise public administration as well as how to manage public organisations. While the reform movements vary in depth, scope, and success from country to county, they are still rather similar in the goals both in West and East – better administration, increased quality of services, higher capacity of the organisations.

Comparing the situation in Estonian municipalities ten years ago and now, there is no doubt that significant improvements have been taken place. Some local authorities have developed further than others have and the level of changes varies from municipality to municipality. Even if the improvement process itself is rather slow, the organisations have surely become more open and efficient. Decision making process behind closed doors and one way of communication are giving way to interaction and involvement.

The aim of this paper on Estonian local authorities was to investigate communication and information flow between the municipalities and their external environment. It also analyses interaction processes inside local authorities. The paper juxtaposes theoretical assumptions of change of information with the real world of Estonian local authorities. The author addresses questions such as:

- How do current interaction practices affect the quality of internal flows of information and interactions with citizens in Estonian local authorities?
- What are the common reasons for implementation gap in the area of information provision?

The paper is based on the extensive empirical research conducted by the author in year 1999 (73 interviews with public officials, 156 interviews with citizens, direct participant observations and formal document analysis) and on the in-depth interviews conducted in year 2002 (20 interviews with representatives of municipalities, central government and private and non profit sector.) It also gives some historical perspective what has been changed during these three years and what are the general trends in the relevant areas.

### **Good public governance and good public service quality**

Both governance and quality are widely used terms meaning different things to different people. There are various competing definitions of governance. Bovaird, Löffler and Parrado (2002: 12) define governance as the set of formal and informal rules, structures and processes by which stakeholders collectively solve their problems and meet societal needs. The definition engages different stakeholders and is focused on outcomes rather than outputs. The governance concept by Kooiman and Van Vliet (1993: 64) points to the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed but is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each-other-influencing actors.

For most definitions process of governance encompasses the traditions, institutions, and processes that determine how public authority is exercised and how citizens are given voice. According to Shand and Arnberg (1996: 17) these values differ from country to country depending on cultural and political backgrounds. That is why it is almost impossible to come up with one universal definition applicable for every context.

While term “governance” refers to the processes, “good governance” refers to the normative principles. The European Commission (2001: 10) considers that five principles underpin good governance: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. These principles apply to all levels of government, including local one. The Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) is summarising the component of quality governance in the context of public service delivery: “respect for the rule of law; openness, transparency, and accountability to democratic institutions; fairness and equity in dealings with citizens, ...; efficient, effective services; clear, transparent and applicable laws and regulations...”.

Quality from other hand is meeting customer expectations by building and sustaining the relationships. It is doing right things right and it is uniquely defined by each individual. While quality consists of satisfying customer expectations, the assessing process should start from there. Parasuraman et al. (1995: 146) define service quality, as perceived by customers, as the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers’ service perceptions and expectations. It is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customers’ expectations. Rogers (1990: 241) goes further by arguing that many aspects of quality services can be assessed only by those who receive these services. And importantly, customers might use more than just the service outcome in assessing service quality - perceptions of quality are also influenced by service process. According to Flynn (1993: 149) all services consist of the core and the peripheral elements. The latter are usually unimportant from the providers’ point of view, but they are important for the customers. That all leads to the acknowledgment that service quality should be viewed as continuum.

In addition, public organisations have to consider the political context they operate in. As Walsh argues (1991: 513-14) “the question of quality in public service is not one of meeting service specifications, but of dealing with the shifting value structure of society.” Quality assessment of public services is complicated and provides and excess burden to public sector. Löffler (1996: 28) discusses that “taking customer satisfaction as the difference between the perceived quality and individual expectations shows that public organisations with scarce resources also have to do expectations management, i.e. to make clear to citizens what is feasible and what is not feasible.” That is why private sector principles and methods might not be the best ones to the public sector.

Each governance and quality definition has its strengths and weaknesses in relations to measurement, generalisation, managerial usefulness and relevance. There is no universal definition of ‘governance’ or “quality”, since both terms can be viewed in many different ways.

## **Communication and information flow between the public institutions and the public**

Based on the societal changes it has become increasingly important "...to query and investigate what happens to citizens' priorities based upon the public interest" (Johnston, 1995:13). That is why information flow between the public institutions and the public has become one of the dominant political themes of the 90s. One central assumption in this approach is that public servants and clients closest to the actual production of services in the public sector have the greatest insight and information about the real interaction and problems. It is assumed further that if those ideas and talents were harnessed adequately, then government would perform better (Peters, 1996: 48). That is why investigating interaction with citizens is relevant for any public institution.

Giddens (1998: 75) goes further by arguing that there is a growing need to revitalise representative democracy by introducing new elements like local direct democracy, electronic referendums, etc. with which the government can re-establish direct contact with the citizens, and vice versa. Also Coleman (2001: 6) claims, that traditional consultation methods are based upon one-way flows: governments ask questions and citizens give their opinions. For effective deliberative processes, two additional directional flows have to be established: citizens to citizens (so participants can exchange views with each other) and citizens to governments (citizens can ask questions).

Nowadays there are various ways how local authorities can communicate with the public and vice versa. The development of information and communication technology makes a significant difference in public organisations' ability to respond to citizens' needs (O'Shea, 1992:235). One of the central benefits of ICT is availability and accessibility of information. "The greater the interaction between the public sector organisations and their clients, the more pronounced the orientation towards the clients" (Wood, 1995: 88). With all that technology around, there are new possibilities to improve the communication process and to provide public services directly through ICT. These innovations create "new, still expanding capabilities for... governments and individuals to communicate with each other, instantaneously and independently of geographical distance" (Bellamy, Taylor, 1998: 14). Better accessibility to the public services, faster provision of services to the individuals, will be some examples of direct benefit of the ICT in the public sector.

However, improving the quality of services and governance processes could not be achieved by just moving the main activities of municipalities online. Public services and the organisational arrangement that surround them must not only be supported by new technology, "they must also be *transformed* by it" (Bellamy, Taylor, 1998: 74). It is believed that in the framework of general openness, it will become harder to hide information or to make data unavailable. However, as one of the most successful ways to hide information is to marginalise it by providing data together with a large amount of less important information. Thus, while talking about openness there is a need to differentiate the illusive openness and the actual openness. Real openness depends on quality of information, the extension and accessibility of information that the municipality is willing to provide. It is the question of whether people are really able to access the relevant information or not.

## **The impact of information and communication technology**

Information and communication technology is often considered as a panacea for many existing problems, like functional disintegration, vague or overlapping authority structures, information fragmentation, ambiguous procedures, excessive red tape, etc. Even if it can help to resolve some problems, it is not still an end in itself but rather a mean for achieving desired outcomes. A popular cliché claims that ICT will change everything it becomes involved with, making old business practices and government structures obsolete (Drechsler, 2002: 87). Through implementation of an appropriate information system good management might be one of the results, but it does not have to be per se. There has been evidence that the expected efficiency has not always been achieved by ICT (HM National Audit Office). The need to support two structures – the traditional and the new one focused on using ICT – sure requires more effort from the organisation than supporting just one of these structures. Only in case the amount of new service users becomes high enough the public organisations may end the old traditional service. Until then they need to continue to offer both services meaning also spending more resources on information change.

Ridderstråle and Nordström (2001: 47) believe that the “infostructure” of any organisation will become more important than the traditional “infrastructure”. It also means that it might have both positive and negative effects on organisations. Sure, ICT lifts the burden from officials to spend significant time on repeating similar actions or providing traditional services to entitled citizens. By using e-services, there will be more time spared to deal with broader and more complicated problems that often involve several jurisdictions areas and which cannot be solved only by applying ICT-solutions. From other hand, ICT can also create additional barriers for communication, haze situations or decrease accountability. Thus, ICT might prevent from bad governance practices, but it can also have no effect on it or even foster unwanted outcomes.

ICT can support good governance practices only as much as all stakeholders are able and willing to take advantage of that. Not always both conditions are satisfied. Even if Internet has grown from having 3 million users world-wide in 1994 to a network having 544 million users in February 2002 (NUA Internet Surveys), it does not necessarily mean that different societies are adapted for taking maximum advantage of that. The study done in February 2002 showed that there is still 58% of Estonian population between the ages from 15 to 74 who have not used Internet or use it very rarely (Kalkun, Kalvet 2002: 3). Internet non-users point out the main reasons for that limited skills, difficult user logic, low appreciation of life-learning concept, missing access possibilities.

From other hand the vision is that by 2004, all state and local governments agencies will be providing services on the Internet, and 60% of the population will use the Internet on a daily basis (Vallner, 2001: 43). In case the digital gap could be solved in the future, ICT constitutes a good tool to provide information for different stakeholders. Until then ICT addresses more the results of current systems rather than causes.

## **Transition of Estonian local authorities**

In general Estonia has a good reputation as a successful transition country. Indeed, many facts (number of adapted laws, level of corruption, inflation rate, level of information technology, etc) approve it. From other hand these indicators are based more on statistical data than on sustainable development.

There are several reform initiatives Estonian local authorities have gone through. Many municipalities have adapted to new rules and regulations, they have changed their organisational outlook and relationships of subordination, have hired new people and introduced new information and communication technology, etc. Nevertheless, efforts in reforms have largely concentrated on redrafting organisation's formal structure and amalgamating functions instead of introducing modern management tools.

The legal framework of Estonian municipalities is quite well developed. There are several laws providing the framework for the public institutions how to collect, maintain and provide information, e.g. Databases Act (1997), Official Statistics Act (1997), Archives Act (1998), Copyright Act and Associated Acts Amendment Act (2000), Digital Signature Act (2000), Public Procurement Act (2000), and Public Information Act (2000). The Principles of the Estonian Information Policy (1998) set out the aims of the state in the development of information technology and the related infrastructure. The action plan focuses on four major issues – modernization of legislation, support for the development of the private sector, increased interaction between the state and its citizens, and raising public awareness about information society.

According to the Public Information Act the general public in Estonia has the right to inspect official documents and to access information of public interest. The purpose of the act is „... to ensure that the public and every person has the opportunity to access information intended for public use, based on the principles of a democratic and social rule of law and an open society, and to create opportunities for the public to monitor the performance of public duties.“ (§ 1). The law requires the distribution of information through different channels. „A holder of information shall comply with a request for information in the manner requested by the person making the request for information and shall release the information ... in any .. manner, taking into account the type of medium.“ (§ 17). It also obligates the municipalities to have their own webpage on which they should have forms/applications, drafts of local regulations, information about services and a register of documents.

Nevertheless, the fact that these acts exist is not enough to declare that the information system is in place as many questions arise regarding their enforcement by individual municipalities. The study shows that there is the gap occurring in implementation. Implementation Plan for the Estonian Information Policy presents an overview of associated mechanisms, interested parties, financing, time schedule, risks, and evaluation of results, but mainly on state level. Unfortunately there has never been any concrete action plan for implementation at the local level.

Administrative culture of public institutions and reality do not support the aims stipulated in laws. The new legislation has altered the general framework, but not the

civil service culture (Randma, 2001: 124). The aim of the empirical part of the current paper is namely to focus on this implementation gap and to show the light to the real situation of information provision on local level in Estonia.

### **Information provided by local authorities**

Though many interviewees said, that a process that has rather rapidly taken place in Estonian public sector is digitalisation of all documents, the analysis done on municipal level on November 3, 2002 (Tõnnisson, Lõõnik, 2002: 4) did not approve this statement. It showed that only 137 out of 247 Estonian local authorities had their own webpage. Based on the interviews the three main reasons for this are: limited financial resources, limited interest and limited knowledge about what and how to do.

Of these 137 web pages, only 45 municipalities had a public documents register, only 42 had forms/applications available, only 20 had information about services and only 18 had drafts of local regulations on these web pages. Most communication between the authorities and the public happens still on oral bases (direct contacts, telephone calls) or through information stands, information leaflets or occasional articles in local newspapers. Only in bigger cities where also the users are more equipped with and advanced in ICT, the municipalities are taking more advantage in different options of web pages. From other hand, the web pages should not just store the data - they should also receive the data and serve as interactive cooperation tool for other public institutions and citizens. This is partly the case just in the two biggest cities - Tallinn and Tartu.

Thus, the mere existence of law does not secure transparency. In many occasions, information put out in the different carriers interest municipalities themselves, but its relevance to the public is sometimes questionable. Public information on web pages is not always properly integrated and sufficient. In some municipalities the situation has already improved based on cooperation with different interest groups and non-profit organisations pushing the authorities to produce and disseminate information relevant to actual information seekers. Unfortunately such cases can't still be considered as common ones. Comparing the situation now and in 1999, the development is still significant.

The studies (Kalkun, Kalvet 2002: 6) showed that adding one or two e-services does not increase the number of Internet users. It is logical that various organisational changes and different improvements have to be happened before new ways of working and new channels of information become widespread. It is not enough to declare that some certain services have become available. The real change does not arrive before the municipalities have structured their activities around the new technologies and before the technological innovations have become user friendly and easy to use. Municipalities need time to adapt to the new technologies and the citizens need to adapt to new channels of information flow. Currently it is important to recognize these municipalities who already have started an "e-government journey" (Melitski, 2003) by publishing static information on web page and establishing an on-line presence. Even if the full blossom of the desired stage takes times, the beginning has been made.

## Communication and information flow within the organisation

In addition to external communication internal communication is crucial for quality governance as well. Based on the interviews the information flow inside the municipalities is limited. Many administrators are used to work inside their boxes without changing ideas and information with other units and colleagues. Improved governance comes from more effective communication and co-operation between all those who need to work together to give the customer the service they need. Poor communication not only hinders general workload; it also prevents discussion of the barriers themselves.

While “information is intimately linked to power-knowledge relations” (Wang, 1997: 86), inter-departmental rivalry and certain organisational politics often result in the ideas and information being treated as “secrets”. That is the reason why quite a lot of misinformation is put in circulation. This can lead to the situations where departments are not aware of other departments’ deeds, even if they are dealing with the same issues.

*I spent seven months trying to privatize the land. While visiting the city government for the last signature, I got to know that someone already privatized the land. No one from other departments said it to me before.*

Case described above shows how poor communication and rivalry might have drastic outcomes for governance processes. The current and updated information is not always available to everybody. At the same time, it should be the task of the administrator who got updated information to put it into circulation so that everybody can update his/her own database or knowledge.

Similar situations as described above are results of inadequate databases. Often those who gather information generate raw data rather than useful information for decision-making process. The useful information exists usually in the heads of certain administrators and in order to get it the one has to contact the person. “By focusing on the needs of both external and internal customers, the organisation develops means and mechanisms that benefit agency personnel as well as the people they serve in the process” (Wagenheim, Reurink, 1991:263). This can happen only through better co-operation that is one of the central points of quality governance. From other hand, information collected into different databases would be vulnerable to any organised attack by hackers, virus attacks or technical failures. Municipalities should be aware of both advantages and disadvantages such information system will create.

In order to improve internal communication many local governments have established Intranet. Comparing the situations in 1999 and 2002, the level of intranet usage has increased significantly. In 1999 most administrators still preferred to communicate by phone or through memorandums, in 2002 intranet was considered as a common communication channel. Administrators’ missing backgrounds with computers does represent major challenge in Estonian municipalities anymore. The general computer knowledge and use has risen to significant level during the recent years. Holmes (2001: 59) claims that the “wide availability of online data is pushing government departments to co-operate more along value changes and provide linked packages”. Over time, this will encourage them to harmonise their internal procedures, allowing

collaboration and joint ventures between departments, different governmental levels and between the public and private sector. Step by step this has started to happen in Estonian local authorities as well.

According to the interviews, most information shared inside municipalities focuses on “what” rather than “why”. Different decisions and agendas are delivered to public servants mainly in the form of *what* needs to be done this week, this month, without additional information *why* specifically these decisions were made, what are the reasons and strategies behind them. Without knowing the background information of the decisions and without understanding their core content, it is hard to implement them in the most appropriate way. That is why there is a need for more diverse information that can give insights to employees’ questions while leaving them enough space for their own ideas and suggestions.

Another common problem in Estonian municipalities is “targetology” (Flynn, 1993: 124), where the administrators try to meet the targets, but usually at the cost of quality. Most administrators admitted that due to heavy workload, their main priority is to get the work done. In many cases it was enforced by organizational culture accepting low service standards as a usual way of doing things.

### **Information flow from the citizens to the municipalities**

Also the information flow from the citizens to the municipalities is as relevant as the information flow from the municipalities to the citizens. As Jordan (1999:12) claims “... societies and communities are nothing more nor less than the knowledge that members of those communities hold about their societies”, it is really important to use the knowledge citizens possess. Both studies in 1999 and 2002 showed that the information flow from the citizens to the municipalities is really low. Municipalities are complaining that citizens are passive, they do not have any interest in public matters, they represent just their private interest, and the citizens from other hand are complaining that the municipalities do not care, do not want to listen or even to ask. Based on the interviews it became clear that there are very few channels created for information flow from the citizens to local governments – almost none. In most cases citizens who have to say something or want to express their opinions have to find their own ways through finding appropriate administrator willing to listen to them.

From other hand also through different common project and co-operations between municipalities and the public citizens can express their opinions. Even if it is happening now much more than in 1999, the change of information comes finally down to one of the most crucial questions - how much will be information taken into account? The answer to the question reflects the real level of interaction with citizens. Many respondents pointed out that there is a need for Estonian public sector’s higher willingness to accept input from the public throughout the whole process of different levels of governance. This continuous improvement will lead to organizational transformation and increased citizen participation especially at local level.

Through addressing the organisational drawbacks affecting information flow, both administrators and municipalities’ stakeholders could have more accurate and timely information allowing them to make more correct decisions. Although some argue, that “better information flow does not make an organisational culture less hierarchical and

more open” (Wang, 1997:87), it would still be a strong precondition for increasing quality of governance processes. From other hand, even though new technology improves communication processes between municipalities and the citizens, this is the case only with a system in place. Only then the development can produce desired results. Further, the ICT development does have just positive aspects - various empirical data raise already the problem of digital gap in Estonia (Kalkun, Kalvet: 2002: 1). The number of internet users is stabilizing which means that there are population groups that don't use internet at all. Whatever development strategies a municipality is choosing, this trend should be certainly taken into account as well.

### **Importance of human capital**

The path to the quality governance on local level in Estonia will be following the growth of importance of human capital. Characteristic to a small state administration is that it engages relatively few people in its activities, whereby the generation of ideas may be limited (Randma, 2001: 46). That is why small countries must compensate for their lack of manpower resources by making sure the staff they have are of high quality. The EU underlines in particular the importance to recruit, train and maintain the necessary staff required in all relevant areas and bodies (Negotiation Chapter 21, April 2002). Replacing direct supervision and command line with distinct task and goal areas, providing more flexibility, discretion and the capacity to co-ordinate the public tasks with network partners, would sure improve the governance processes. However, quality of governance processes can not be driven just by leadership from the top. It is not enough for one or two individuals to practice these principles - they must be distributed widely throughout the organisations.

Having considerable managerial capacity does not automatically mean using it. According to the interviews, there are enough local authorities that do much less than they would be able to do. “The challenge ... is to capitalize on the advantages of close personal contact in small societies, where organisation are represented within people rather than through formal institutions.” (Randma-Liiv, 2002: 387). “Personalism” in small societies may give small states an advantage in developing co-ordination mechanism and participative decision-making, but it does not have to.

There is a belief that through more secure working environment, reasonably good entrance qualifications and growing respect towards the civil servants, the public sector might still attract the best of human capital, making it superior to any private sector organisation, in spite of the smaller salaries (Godsell, 1994: 104-115). In Estonia, the qualities and skills of the staff in public sector has not been improved as much it was expected. Though, the respect towards the civil servants is still rather low, many respondents pointed out that in spite of all drawbacks, the quality of skills and the level of knowledge of the staff has improved in Estonian local authorities, especially in bigger cities. Also the empirical analysis done in 1999 and 2002 confirmed the trend. From other hand, in a period of increasing career opportunities and frequent career changes, Estonian municipalities are also facing situations of “brain drain”, where good people who do not find the job satisfying enough move to private sector or take opportunities to prepare themselves in different institutions for working in EU institutions.

Based on the interviews, citizens are not very satisfied with the current services in Estonian city governments. The processes are too complicated and time consuming, the administrators do not always communicate in good manner, it is hard to get adequate and updated information, etc. Leadbeater (1999: 29) argues that “great tides of information wash over us every day. We do not need more information; we need more understanding.” That is why the citizens do not have high expectations about services – they have not got needed understanding beforehand.

In addition, one extra reason for complains seemed to be the lack of the concept of quality service. The administrators do not know what to achieve and the citizens do not know what to expect. This makes the evaluation of quality rather difficult. Lovell (1992: 396) claims that the improving of quality of service should namely start from the clarity of vision. Both city governments and the citizens would benefit a lot if there would exist a general concept of quality service in Estonian municipalities. One way to resolve the problem is through implementing citizen’s charters.

However, in many cases the public does not care what concepts are in place, how many layers do governments have, or what is the most suitable command line. People do not want more government or less government. What public actually needs is a better government (Holmes, 2001: 3). Thus, the discussion about governance processes should actually start from there. If the public servants behave transparently, they are willing to co-operate and allow other to participate in their affairs they are certainly practising good governance.

In addition, there is a lack of accumulation of knowledge on different service improvement practices and innovations. This leads many local authorities to constantly reinvent the wheel when they start on a new project or implement new ideas. From other hand, also the wholesale adoption of off-the-shelf approaches is rather common. Often municipalities are trying to implement the same ideas that the neighbouring municipality or twinning municipality in some other European country has already done without paying enough attention to local context and specialities.

Finally, different studies (Kalkun, Kalvet 2002: 5) have shown that most people believe that public services are very personalised in Estonia. Citizens do not differ the service from the servants offering the service, they believe that different administrators require different documents and there is a need to meet the servants in person in order to get the desired results. Even if the empirical data from the study in 2002 did not affirm this practice in real life, there is still the general belief in society that concrete administrators matter a lot.

## **Conclusions**

During the recent years much have been happening in Estonian municipalities, but there seems to be no revolution in the core characteristics of the interaction between the local authorities and the citizens. The essence of the communication between the bureaucracy and individuals has not been changed, as bureaucracy would still follow largely the same principles while providing services. From other hand, unlike the private sector, the public sector still needs to first follow its legal, socio-economic and organisational principles not only asking how can they carry out their business more effectively.

Only if municipalities take an active role in promoting the competencies that foster good governance, they are able to improve the quality of life and become the force for changes at local level. For that they should consider different approaches in order to reform current management practices and achieve the transition from the current stage to a stage of “quality governance”. It requires a common effort from all involved party aiming for continuous improvements, consultations and partnerships.

The actual effect of ICT on delivering local services depends on whether it leads to a real change or causes just a fake perception, which eventually leads to a desired effect. A fake imagination shared by many can still produce a significant change in reality. There are also some ambivalent effects like the unknown development of more officials managing themselves and the emergence of new network structures that could lead to better governing principles.

Implementing good governance principles depends also on the capacity and on both mental and physical readiness of the organisation. How much are they first able and second willing to implement these principles? There are some preconditions that need to be in place, e.g. appropriate legal and institutional infrastructure, necessary financial resources, positive attitude of political and administrative leadership, etc. Still the most important step toward improving governance processes in Estonian local authorities is strengthening public service, as the main problem usually does not lie in the administrative structures, although outside advice tend to focus on them, but in the lack of well-qualified, motivated civil servants. They should be willing and able to co-operate and involve public that allow better management of public tasks and foster both quality services and good governance principles.

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