Commentary

How Digital Government Has Risen as an Essential Tool in Times of Crisis and Lockdown

David Osimo

In these days of crisis and lockdown, digital government has suddenly become an essential service. By and large, many governments have risen to the challenge. Digital teams have worked day and night to provide emergency services (such as financial support to the self employed) and collaboration tools (videoconferencing for meetings, digital signature for decisions). Suddenly, the online channel is the only channel. And luckily technology today allows us to set up services quickly when they are urgent and important.

But the rush couldn't hide the fundamental weaknesses of "normal" digital-government services. Far from making things better, the surge in use has revealed a host of underlying problems which policymakers must move decisively now to address.

Prior to the crisis, most people still visited official government offices in search of documents because the online tools were too complex to use. As the crisis unfolded, researchers had difficulty tracking the epidemic because of the essential lack of communication – or "interoperability" – between "base registries," which are the digital databases that administrations use to keep track of the population. Limited levels of digital skills and experience in some administrations meant some services dramatically

failed (a national social security website revealed sensitive information about people requesting assistance in Italy).

In normal times, these would be inconveniences – costing people some time or frustration. But under the current circumstances, the inability of administrations to deliver services seamlessly online became a question of life or death.

The reasons for poor performance are clear. Digital government has long been a priority on paper, but rarely when it came to implementation. Progress was often held back by a lack of political will to break Europe's many digital silos. Ultimately, there was no urgency: public services had no competition. And there was little evidence to demonstrate the immense savings and improvement in services that would come from, say, bringing public services up to the level of commercial ones online. European as well as national government frameworks were largely voluntary.

To date, the main tool driving policy showed that countries had an average score of 85% on "user centricity" – the technical term for services being easy for citizens to access and use. But this finding is at odds with the experience of anyone who has ever tried to use government services online. The fact is, only one European in three uses online public services today.

But we know what needs to be done, and many countries are doing it:

- In Denmark, the "digital by default" approach mandates citizens and companies to use digital services, creating at the same time a market for private providers through a co-creation approach. Today, this means normal online services are usable and used – not just those created in the emergency – in Denmark.
- In The Netherlands, base registries – where citizens data is stored – are compulsory for public administration at all levels. This means that high quality, trusted statistical data are available to Dutch civil servants in almost real time, allowing quicker analysis and diagnoses of fast-emerging population trends.
- The United Kingdom reduced the number of government websites from 300 to one, and created the Government Digital Team with real power over service design and procurement. Today, this helps streamline information to citizens quickly.

In the end, wide-scale adoption needs to be based on trust and buy in of all parties (citizens, government departments, private companies). But the reality is strong enforcement is crucial too. For starters, it imposes greater responsibility on the service

providers. If you make use of your services compulsory, you better make sure they work perfectly.

And we know how to do this. The priorities – and a roadmap for reaching them – are already in *The 2017 Tallinn Declaration* – signed by 32 European Union and European Free Trade Association ministers:

- Trusted data registries, compulsory to use, can deliver high quality data in real time
- Interoperable services enable fast integration of new modules and help front line local services and third-party providers to collaborate seamlessly through robust and applicable open standards
- Effective service-design capacity is able to respond quickly to user needs by building intuitive interfaces in clear language
- High technological skills allow civil servants to react quickly and make good decisions for procurement and standard setting

What is new is the urgent need for implementation. We need to sustain the political urgency that emerged during the crisis. We need a new pact among all levels of government to accelerate the achievement of the Tallinn Declaration commitments. And we have to get serious about digital government. Literally, lives depend on it.

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