

Opening remarks Mrs Bijleveld

WCIT conference Amsterdam

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First and foremost: welcome to The Netherlands.

Welcome to the World Congress on IT and in particular welcome to this session that deals with the changes that ICT brings about in the relationship between the citizens and their government.

Society has incorporated - to a large extent – the digital aspects of modern life.

Kids seem to be born with the ability to move around in cyberspace. Strangers to libraries and newspapers they may be, but they are speeding along the digital highways.

Tell the restaurant through internet if you want your stake medium or rare.

Twitter your bedside secrets to the world.

Anything goes, and everybody does it.

The only surprise is when nothing new has shown itself in a while.

But all that is a cliché.

When we talk about E government however, much is unclear.

E government is not about technology.

E government is not about what is possible

E government is not about sexy novelties or the latest gadgets, how much we might like them.

But E government is about how government and citizens interact.

E government is about how government can provide adequate and needed services

E government is about how government can do what people expect them to do

E government is a search for a more democratic society

In the Netherlands we have been actively searching for the digital possibilities to improve the services of the government.

However; every time we were discussing that, I have also stated that when we talk about electronic services by the government, the point of departure is not the electronics but the service we must provide.

By the same token, we must be very much aware of our tendency – when talking about E government- to look at it from the perspective of the government. That is wrong.

It does not start with the government. It starts – or should start - with what the citizen's want, need or expect. That is leading.

The question for this session was: how society is changing due to the use ICT in the relation between government and citizens.

Answering that question in full, is beyond my expertise and certainly beyond the time reserved for me.

But I see three aspects that have to be considered in the further development of E government: service, efficiency and democracy.

First the aspect of service.

How can the government provide better, quicker, more adequate services through the use of ICT?

Answers vary from the 24/7 availability of information and the possibility to send any request any time. The possibility to reach the desk you need, without a thousand referrals and delegations and the option to check the status of an application. The availability of the proper forms and – as we have in the Netherlands- forms that have been already largely filled out, because the personal information is known by the government.

We even provide tax forms that only have to be signed when there is no new situation from last year. This became possible through the introduction of a national basic peoples registration.

I see especially with the local authorities a great enthusiasm to search for new possibilities. And that makes sense, because they are the ones in daily contact with people. They know what people need.

This is better, more efficient, service oriented use of ICT

A different aspect is the use of ICT to organize the government internally; the efficiency.

We have to set up systems to the information between central government and communities, between departments and services, between police, customs and tax service, between the centers of knowledge and the places where that knowledge is needed.

We experience in The Netherlands that this is quite an enterprise. Not everyone is willing to cede control over what they consider to be their crown jewels.

But departmental pride and false feelings of authority just costs too much money and time.

Then there is our endeavour to combine services of government departments. With modern technology

there is no need for all of them to have their own personnel administrations, accountancy bureaus, archives, you name it.

Again, this goes against the grain. It might even hurt some egos, but much can be saved and it works.

An additional great consequence of ICT is the gradual disappearance of paper: in correspondence, internal memo's, in publishing and consequently in files, registers and archives. My own department has put a ban on paper.

ICT is a tool for efficiency, speed and potentially substantial savings.

The last aspect I want to ask your attention for is E participation: the use of ICT to allow citizens to influence the actions of government. I am talking about democracy.

The Internet can be used to find out what people need or want; for polls, inquiries or chat-sites.

A next step is the use of the net to set up and organise referenda or elections.

That brings the need to solve questions of authentication, digital signatures etcetera.

This is a touchy issue.

We had – for a while - electronic voting machines.

Under public pressure we had to go back to ballots and a red pencil.

Here – as in many things – we ran into the sometimes fundamental distrust of the government coupled with distrust for a not understood technology. The invisibility of digital procedures adds to that distrust.

We also have to deal with the irrational.

Recently we had set up a campaign to inoculate teenage girl against ovary cancer. That failed partly because of bizarre rumours that circulated on the internet.

The net allows us to give information to many. It also allows others to circulate rumours and harmful pseudo facts. This remains a problem when we do not want to censor the web.

One last remark:

Obviously the new social media are an intriguing new venue.

We are carefully exploring the options for the government. We have to know what goes on around us. We employ young people whose world is defined by these media.

But must civil servants and other government personnel be allowed - in their function -

to participate in this exchange? Who will be held responsible for what is communicated?

And responsibility is also an essential part of democracy.

Still, we have to search for the possibilities to reach our citizens and to find ways to get their input. The “web 2.0 “ is not a no-go area.

On the contrary.

Ladies and gentlemen, I offered you questions.

Politicians like to provide the answers as well, but we are usually smart enough to listen first.

That is why I have high hopes for this session.