Government for you (EGOV4U): a realist evaluation of "success" and "failure"

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2013 The Author
Version: Accepted Manuscript
Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/IACR_AbstractPresentations.html

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
eGoverment for You (EGOV4U): a realist evaluation of success and failure

Ivan Horrocks
Technology Management Research Group
Faculty of Maths, Computing and Technology
The Open University, UK

ivan.horrocks@open.ac.uk

Abstract

‘eGovernment for You’ (EGOV4U) was a European Commission (EC) funded project developed to pilot models of multi-channel, public and community e-services designed to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage through a range of initiatives delivered by five project partners from a variety of European countries. Project evaluation employed a theory driven approach and the use of mixed methods for data capture and analysis. This paper employs the realist CMO (context+mechanism = outcome) approach to evaluate EGOV4U and produce an analysis of some of the key generative mechanisms, causal powers and contiguous contexts relevant to participants in a large-scale, trans-national development project.
Introduction

‘eGovernment for You’ (EGOV4U) was a European Commission (EC) funded project that ran from 2010 until 2012. The aim of the project was to pilot models of multi-channel, public and community e-services designed to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage through a range of initiatives delivered by five project partners from a variety of European countries.

Project evaluation was undertaken by a small team from an English university, using a theory driven approach to evaluation and the use of mixed methods for data capture and analysis. In terms of the production of outputs (e.g. reports for the EC) the approach employed can best be described as the ‘descriptive-analytical’ method with a ‘configurational’ approach to causality (Pawson, 2002a). That is, the eservice initiatives developed by each EGOV4U partner were examined in relation to a common analytical framework, with the assumption being that outcomes would follow from the alignment, within each case (i.e. partner), of specific combinations of attributes.

Although the descriptive-analytical method is regarded by Pawson as a ‘...giant step on...within the narrative tradition’ (2002a: 172), he notes that, ‘...it is a terribly difficult prospect to identify the potential synergy of an intervention and its circumstances on the basis of the material identified in a narrative review.’ (2002a: 177). Furthermore, the descriptions given are ‘ontologically flat’ (Sayer, 2000). In other words, from a realist perspective:

…the various ‘properties’ extracted in the review are just that – they are a standard set of observable features of a programme. Change actually takes place in an ‘ontologically deep’ social world in which the dormant capacities of individuals are awaked by new ideas, from which new ways of acting emerge.’ (2002a: 177).

This paper aims to address this criticism by applying a realist – ontologically deep – approach to the evaluation of EGOV4U and the utilisation of a generative approach to causation. The paper starts with a brief description of EGOV4U, followed by an outline of the programme of evaluation undertaken. The “programme theory” devised for the project is then introduced through a discussion of its two core components – community capitals and multi-channel networks (M-CNs). The remainder of the paper is then devoted to applying my preferred approach to realist evaluation – CMO configurations – and reporting the results and conclusions.

The EGOV4U project

EGOV4U was an ICT Policy Support Programme (PSP) pilot project funded within the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework of the European Commission (EC). Although funded under the EC’s i2010 programme, EGOV4U was also consistent with the objectives of the successor A Digital Agenda for Europe, particularly in regard to combating social exclusion arising from the digital divide. The project began in September 2010 and ended in June 2012. It offered participants matched funding (50 percent EC, 50 percent each partner) up to a previously agreed maximum per partner. The anticipated contribution from the EC was nearly 2.5 million Euros.

The EGOV4U consortium consisted of the cities (i.e. municipalitities or local governments) of Reykjavik, Iceland; Rijeka, Republic of Croatia; Dublin, Republic of Ireland; Milton Keynes, UK; and the Local Councils Association of Malta. Partners within the consortium were
funded to develop a range of ICT (information and communication technology) based initiatives designed to provide flexible, personalised, multi-channel services targeted at citizens identified as socially disadvantaged and at risk of social exclusion. From the perspective of EGOV4U multi-channel was defined as an approach that sought to integrate public service providers and intermediaries, including friends, family, voluntary and community organisations, into all aspects eGovernment service delivery. By the conclusion of the project over thirty local initiatives had been developed by partners. Examples included the provision of training in the use of ICT hardware and software, including applications such as email and Facebook, for the elderly, women and the unemployed; the development of informational web sites and information points for ethnic minorities, the disabled, the elderly and the young unemployed; and a PC loan service for the unemployed and disadvantaged.

**Evaluation**

A programme of impact evaluation was an integral part of EGOV4U from the outset. This was designed and carried out by a small research team from the Open University in the UK. The team were also responsible for adopting the theory driven approach and formulating the impact evaluation framework (IEF) outlined below. Ambitious in scope and scale, work fell into three phases spread over three years:

- define a baseline of capitals and multi-channel networks (M-CN) for each partner and targeted excluded group.
- carry out an interim evaluation of early “successes” and “failures” in terms of the development of EGOV4U interventions (i.e. local projects targeted at various excluded groups). The focus of attention here would therefore be the actions of partner organisations and their outcomes and the development and operation of multi-channel networks. The intention was that any lessons learnt could be acted upon as the project entered its third and final year.
- Identify and assess the uptake and impact of EGOV4U projects.

The EC terminated EGOV4U at 21 months. This was before the formal impact evaluation phase had begun. However, phase one work had been completed. Baselines for capitals and M-CN (discussed below) for each partner and their planned EGOV4U projects had been collected. Additionally, evidence of the early outcomes and impacts of projects that were operational in the first year were being captured, and interim (phase 2) evaluation had begun. Some of this data had been used in three reports (i.e. deliverables) for the EC (Meehan et al., 2012; Horrocks et al., 2012; Meehan et al 2013). One of the key aims of this paper is to draw on a sample of the unused material to try to deliver on one of overriding concerns of realist empirical research – an EGOV4U based account of ‘what works for whom in what circumstances ...and why.’ (Pawson and Manzano-Santaelle, 2012: 178, original emphasis).

**Programme (project) theory**

An important obstacle to effective progress towards digital and social inclusion is that, beyond assumed short-term cost savings, relatively little is known about the wider scope and value of the impact achieved through the provision of ICT-mediated government and public services (van Dijk, 2010). This makes it difficult to justify significant investment in new eservices, either before or after the event. One way of addressing these challenges is to develop an Impact Evaluation Framework (IEF) that draws on methodologies, methods and measures in order to produce a calculus of net benefits, as well as identifying externalities.
and spillovers. Specifically, how widening access to ICT-mediated multi-channel government and public services contributes to combating social exclusion and thereby increases public value.

**Community Capitals**

The impact factors chosen for the EGOV4U IEF were ‘community capitals’. The use of capitals as the basis for impact evaluation has its origins in the literature on growth and environmental economics (Ekins, et al., 1992; Perlman, et al., 2003). Subsequently, capitals have been used at an international level by the World Bank (Grootaert, 1998) and in regional and sub-regional evaluation of regeneration and community well-being in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Flora, 1997; Emery and Flora, 2006; Green, et al., 2005). More recently it has underpinned the work commissioned by the EC on constructing measures of well-being drawing on the capabilities approach to resource distribution (Stiglitz, et al., 2009). A subset of the EGOV4U capitals was also used in an early evaluation of multi-channel eGovernment (Grimsley, et al., 2007). The EGOV4U variants of community capitals are set out in Table 1, below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Capital</th>
<th>Comprises the knowledge, skills and expertise of individuals. It also takes into account aspects of physical and mental well-being.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Three forms are often distinguished: <em>Bonding</em>: characterised by strong bonds among members of a social group, organisation or community; <em>Bridging</em>: characterised by weaker, sometimes transitive ties that span communities, to connect individuals or groups to others with complementary capacities and capabilities. <em>Linking</em>: characterised by connections within a hierarchy where there are differing levels of power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Capital</td>
<td>Inheres in the processes and structures, especially managerial and governance ones, within and between organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Capital</td>
<td>Any amenity that facilitates social co-production of e-service outcomes and the subsequent social diffusion of their impacts. Such amenities are the ‘interfaces’ between beneficiaries, intermediaries and the e-service network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructural Capital</td>
<td>Comprises principally the computing and communications hardware and systems-level software deployed, as well as supporting resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td>These are the resources that organisations, public and voluntary bodies can draw upon to further their strategic and operational objectives. In the case of the EGOV4U project, these resources were directed at creating and sustaining public value through combating social exclusion using e-services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputational Capital</td>
<td>Is characterised by the extent to which the public reputation of an organisation makes it more or less easy to engage beneficiaries. E-services that readily engage beneficiaries and their close intermediaries in the co-production of outcomes are likely to be more effective and more efficient.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. EGOV4U Community Capitals**

By using changes in community capitals as an input and an output of EGOV4U e-service projects in the various locales, one of the theoretical building blocks of the evaluation
framework is utilised in an empirical setting. Each locale provides the habitus so that, in combination with the community capitals, they become the substantive parts of the EG0V4U field. As well as acting as input resources on which project interventions can draw, these capitals also represent a situation which the intervention seeks to transform. So, for example, a particular technological intervention might seek to enhance technological infrastructure (enhancing infrastructural capital) to support new ICT-based communication spaces (enhancing environmental capital) to develop new relationships and connections between people, groups and organisations (enhancing social capital).

At any given time, the intersection of these capitals defines a ‘transactions space’ (drawn from the concept of ‘habitus’) that determines community capacities and capabilities and the scope for development of the community as shown in Figure 1, below. The utility of the figure is that the “petals” can be varied in size to represent the scale and scope, and/or availability, and/or importance of the different forms of capital over time due to the dynamic and contiguous nature of the context of projects, and how project personnel (i.e. agents) experience and act upon this.

![Figure 1. Habitus determined by level and alignment of Community Capitals (Meehan, et al. 2012)](image)

**Multi-channel networks**

Within certain academic disciplines and related practitioner communities, such as computing, the term multi-channel refers to the use of combinations of ICT enabled “channels” – such as the internet, SMS text, social media and apps – to deliver various types of services. As noted above, however, the definition of multi-channel utilised for EG0V4U was far broader and describes an approach that sought to integrate governmental public service providers with intermediaries, including voluntary and community organisations and friends and family, into all aspects eGovernment service delivery. Two important – and perhaps obvious – points follow from this. First, ICT “multi-channels” were integral to all EG0V4U projects. Secondly, a more accurate and thus appropriate term for the OU team’s approach to theorising and researching multi-channels would be multi-channel networks (M-CN). It is
also important to note that the M-CN concept applies to *inter* and *intra* organisational integration between government and public service providers, such as between different governments (e.g. central, local, regional) and agencies, or between different departments or units within the same government or organisation.

**A realist approach**

As I previously noted, although the descriptive-analytical variant of narrative review represents a significant improvement on other variants of the narrative tradition the programme or project reviews produced inevitably focus on a standard set of observable features (i.e. they are ontologically flat). Consequently, they are also likely to conclude ‘with over contextualized recommendations.’ (Pawson, 2002a: 179). By contrast, a realist approach – a variant of which I aim to employ here – recognises that the social world is ontological deep. I also concur with Pawson and other realist evaluators and researchers that transferable lessons from programmes and initiatives do not arise from generalising from empirical findings but through processes of theory building. Explanations of the effectiveness of programmes are therefore theory driven and then “tested” and refined over time (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012).

Several approaches, framework or methodologies for realist research have been devised over the years. The best known are almost certainly Margaret Archer’s ‘morphogenetic approach’, discussed in many critical realist texts, and detailed at length in *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach* (1995), and the CMO (context+mechanism = outcome) configurational approach introduced by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley in their 1997 book, *Realist Evaluation*, and subsequently mainly developed and popularised by Pawson. Archer’s approach was adopted for my doctoral research and a subsequent publication (Horrocks, 2009). However, as this paper focuses on project/programme evaluation and the CMO approach is usually associated with this activity it is the approach adopted here. Two related tasks therefore form the starting point for that endeavour. The first is to restrict the potentially huge scope of an analysis of EGOV4U data by adopting the Pawson’s suggestion that ‘The basic strategy ... is based upon following the fortunes of the dominant mechanism (M), through which it is assumed the programme works. (2002b: 345). The second is to specify my CMO configurations: ‘...the function of CMO configurations...is that they are rather narrow and limited hypotheses, which attempt to tease out specific causal pathways as pre-specified mechanisms acting in pre-specified contexts spill out into pre-specified and testable outcome patterns.’ (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012: 188).

**EGOV4U CMO configurations**

The discussion of the EGOV4U programme theory, above, contains the core ingredients of the CMO configuration for the project. This can be expressed as:

- **The pre-specified mechanism** (for the development and delivery of eservices targeted at citizens identified as economically/socially disadvantaged/excluded) is the idea and operationalisation of M-CN (i.e. the dominant mechanism).
- **The pre-specified context** is the availability and appropriate levels and alignments of community capitals and access to – and the ability/willingness to utilise these – by the relevant agents.
- **The pre-specified outcomes** are:
i. Targeted, effective and sustainable e-services for socially/economically excluded groups and individuals developed and delivered through M-CN.

ii. enhanced availability, level, alignment and access to community capitals for relevant agents.

This CMO represents the highest level configuration for EGOV4U. The rationale for choosing M-CN as the dominant mechanism is straightforward. The identification of eservices that were appropriate to and accurately targeted at the needs of economically/socially disadvantaged/excluded people, and designed and delivered in such a way that they stood a good chance of being effective at tackling identified needs – and were sustainable – was beyond the capability and capacity of EGOV4U partners operating alone. M-CN were therefore the necessary mechanism for meeting these objectives. Additionally, and as I noted above, M-CN were crucial to the development/enhancement of social and reputational capital and public value – developments which should, in turn, positively contribute to the further development and/or maintenance of M-CN. The formation of M-CN which included other organisations and actual or potential intermediaries and eservice users was therefore considered a fundamental feature of processes of project development and implementation. That is, the “triggering” of this mechanism for each project (i.e. each eservice initiative developed by an EGOV4U partner) was considered essential to the success of EGOV4U. However, as I acknowledged above, generative mechanisms only operate when they are triggered, and there are no automatic reasons why they should be triggered – in which case they may not operate at all – or they may but in a more or less restricted manner. The discussion below contains examples of how this dynamic played out across EGOV4U.

Having identified and specified my dominant mechanism and CMO configuration the next task is to:

...sift through the mixed fortunes of the programme ...attempting to discover those contexts (C+) that have produced solid and successful outcomes (O+) from those contexts (C-) that induce failure (O-). The review process is then repeated across other initiatives featuring the same underlying mechanism with the aim of gathering together the various permutations of success and failure. In realist jargon, the aim is to differentiate and accumulate evidence of positive and negative CMO configurations.

(Pawson, 2002b: 345).

The outcome of this exercise forms the basis of what follows.

**Positive and negative CMOs**

*Availability and appropriate level, alignment and accessibility of community capitals (C+ and C-)*

As was to be expected, these varied from partner to partner over time. However, a uniform feature of the public sectors of every partner country was the extent to which they had been hit by drastic post banking crisis public spending cuts and the degree to which this impacted their own “supply” of the relevant capitals (i.e. financial, but also infrastructural, environmental and organisational, and in some cases reputational). Indeed, for four of the five partners, real or expected cuts were a feature of daily life for the entire period of EGOV4U and beyond. Nevertheless, in theory at least, EGOV4U funding offered participants resources that could compensate for some of these losses and thus generate or regenerate
and/or align the required capitals. We might therefore assume that the additional funding stream had the potential to create or support C+ contexts (i.e. levels and combinations of capitals) that were therefore more likely to facilitate lower level generative mechanisms and potential triggers for the dominant M.

Additionally, and importantly, the nature of the EC’s funding meant that each partner had committed to match the resources provided by the Commission. Consequently, it was assumed that EGOV4U funding would be invested wherever necessary in growing new or existing human, organisational, infrastructural and environmental capital and thus the necessary institutional/organisational processes, structures, cultures and relations for eservice and M-CN development.

From a relatively early point, however, it became apparent that the extent to which these assumptions held varied considerably from partner to partner and, in some cases, from context to context within a locale. For example, the ongoing threat of public spending cuts created a level and environment of uncertainty that some partners appeared unable to overcome. This was significant in creating and maintaining negative (C-) contexts. In one case the result was that no EGOV4U eservices emerged. In another progress appeared slow or non-existent. In both cases it appeared questionable as to whether the organisations were able to find the resources to match those provided by the EC and thus create the necessary C+ contexts in which the actual development of new eservices could take place. Fortunately, and despite the tightly constrained environments in which they had to operate, two partners were able and/or willing to provide agents with access to the necessary levels and combinations of capitals (i.e. C+ contexts), while a third partner enjoyed a lesser, but still positive, C+ context. Examples of the resulting outcomes are discussed below.

Two further features of context/capitals also deserve highlighting. The first relates to the role that EC funding played in creating the space and freedom for people to think about and act on developing new eservice projects built on and delivered through M-CNs. That is, its role as a lower level mechanism or trigger for the dominant mechanism. Given the contextual constraints and pressures that I noted above as conditioning and shaping the potential actions of agents this was a significant occurrence. In practice this required key agents\textsuperscript{w} to identify receptive agents elsewhere in government or public services, or in other organisations/user groups, and then develop relationships with them that could serve as the basis for emergent M-CNs. In this endeavour the second role of EC funding as a trigger was often extremely important: they could be used as an incentive to interest potential M-CN members (including potential users) in becoming involved in EGOV4U projects.

Openness to new ideas and willingness/ability to act

Unsurprisingly, the value of EC funding as a contextual mechanism and ideational trigger for the dominant M-CN mechanism was not uniform across EGOV4U. In some cases agents seemed unwilling or unable to think about the potential and/or actual form and function of EGOV4U projects in anything much broader than IT terms. This is in part due to the kind of contextual issues discussed above. But the ideational dimension, touched on above, was also important. Specifically, agents’ – and particularly key agents’ – willingness to open up to new ideas: the most important of which was, of course, acceptance of the M-CN concept and the supporting argument for its importance for the design and delivery of targeted, effective eservices. Consequently, what might best be called the “strength” of the ideational trigger, and thus scope for the emergence of complimentary, lower level, mechanisms, that might
then spur on or support the emergence and development of the dominant M varied between partners and projects and over time. In some cases, this appeared to be largely due to actual or perceived issues about the practicality of the development of M-CNs, rather than rejection of the idea. But it also appeared that some agents found the concept intellectually challenging, and all the more so once it became evident that there was no single template or model for M-CNs – they were context sensitive (as a realist would predict).

Nevertheless, the idea gained increasing traction across the project and particularly with two of the five partners, leading to some interesting developments. For one partner, for example, the history, structure and culture of government and public service in their particular locale meant that the most appropriate and effective initial M-CN model was one that largely focused on constructing intra organisational networks. Once this was accepted the idea acted as a positive trigger/ mechanism for M-CN and related development, with the intention being to “grow” the intra organisational M-CNs to include other organisations and users/ representatives (i.e. inter organisational M-CNs). This had occurred with a number of projects at the point at which EGOV4U was terminated, and would undoubtedly have happened with other projects.

For another partner the idea of working with what are in the UK commonly referred to as voluntary organisations (i.e. third sector or not for profit organisations) turned out to be how they had traditionally operated, via funding to and regular contact with a wide range of local/neighbourhood groups. Indeed, so accepted as “normal” was this activity that for some time the partner did not realise that this constituted an M-CN approach and did not alert evaluators to the existence of such practices, processes and structures. Once this tradition became apparent examples of these networks were mapped and their extent became clear. Unfortunately, the M-CN concept remained almost totally undeveloped for two other partners. Some of the reasons for this have been touched on above although it was evident there were others which there is no space to explore here.

Evaluation as a mechanism/trigger

Following visits by members of the OU team to partners’ locales in the months after the project began it became apparent that in some contexts the fact that EGOV4U was being evaluated was also acting as a mechanism/trigger for the dominant mechanism. The evaluation team were familiar with the uses and misuses to which evaluation can be put (i.e. instrumental, conceptual, symbolic) as this is a topic that has been fairly widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Bamberger et al., 2006; Taylor and Balloch, 2005; Weiss 1998). However, ‘process use’ – ‘...effects that are stimulated by the process of participating in an evaluation rather than by evaluation findings’ (Mark and Henry, 2004: 36) – had not been considered but transpired to be of particular relevance. As Mark and Henry note, however, ‘...missing from the evaluation use literature in general, is a detailed listing of the mechanisms through which evaluation may achieve influence and of the specific outcomes which would indicate influence had occurred.’ (2004: 40, original emphasis). In response they propose four kinds of ‘mechanism’ (or processes): general influence, attitudinal, motivational and behavioural. These are potentially active across (and thus analysable at) three levels: individual, interpersonal and collective. An example from EGOV4U illustrates this.

From the outset of EGOV4U two key agents from one of the partner organisations were quicker to recognise the importance of evaluation than other participants (i.e. the IEF, which the EC attached particular significance to). The reasons for this appeared to be both personal
and organisational. Previous (non IT) employment and educational background (social sciences) appeared to play a role. But of equal importance was an organisational culture that was relatively open and transparent, with high degrees of trust, where evaluation was regarded as something to learn from – and thus provide the basis for – improvement. The result was that these individuals were quick to elaborate their own positive thoughts about the IEF, including the M-CN approach specifically, and demonstrate a willingness to act as IEF/EGOV4U “champions” within their own organisation and, as time progressed, across the emergent M-CNs (as well as within the EGOV4U consortium more generally).

One particularly significant example of how this commitment translated into action was the organisation within a few months of the start of EGOV4U of a three day visit to the partner’s locale by members of the OU team. This proved invaluable in two ways. It provided an opportunity to present the IEF to a range of people from across the organisation and potential M-CNs and discuss its application and potential issues. And it enabled the collection of a wide range of information/data of significance to phase one evaluation activity (e.g. the baseline report). Furthermore, within a relatively short time this led to reconsideration of policies on intra and inter organisational cooperation and partnerships within the organisation, and, at the time of the termination of the project, the possibility of collective level policy changes that recognised the value of M-CN based eservices were actively being discussed.

It should be emphasised that this was not a lone occurrence. Another IEF/project champion soon emerged within another partner. Taking their lead from the example of the first “champions”, and supported by colleagues who also demonstrated support for both the IEF and EGOV4U generally, they too organised a very productive/informative visit by evaluators. Furthermore – and crucially – the positive attitude of the initial champions soon spread to other key agents and colleagues within their organisations, although, in truth, it was often difficult to disentangle how much of this was associated with the partner’s EGOV4U projects rather than evaluation specifically.

Reactions to the IEF – and thus the extent to which evaluation could be seen as a mechanism/trigger – were more mixed and ambiguous elsewhere, however. In one case attitude appeared to differ between older and younger members of staff. And concern about the ability of a very limited number of staff to carry out the tasks required for the IEF (as specified in the EC contract) also appeared to dampen the potential for influence. In another case the attitude of staff to the IEF never became clear, largely because staffing/resource issues appeared to restrict their ability to actively participate in the project as a whole anyway. For a third partner attitudes appeared to vary over time between positive acceptance, reluctant acceptance and hostility. This was perhaps attributable to a degree of tension between the roles of the evaluation team and this particular partner, other issues related to the management and direction of EGOV4U, and suspicion over – and a far less open and transparent attitude to – evaluation. Ultimately, however, negative and positive examples of the influence of the process of evaluation, and thus its role as a mechanism or trigger for the actions of agents, appear causally related to the availability, balance and mix of capitals. The knowledge, skills and expertise (i.e. organisational capital) of key agents, for example, and/or the processes, structure and cultures of organisations.

Outcomes
The best way to deal with this section is in two parts, each of which relates to the pre-specified outcomes. The first has two related dimensions: eservices and M-CNs.

**Targeted and effective e-services**

In terms of the development of targeted eservices it will probably come as no surprise that the two partners that exhibited the most positive (C+) contexts and (M+) mechanisms/triggers were the ones that developed the most effectively targeted, widest range and frequently innovative eservices. Space does not permit anything more than a brief mention of a few examples. One was the development of M-CNs between the EGOV4U project office, community centres and local schools. Each of these provided a mix and match of capitals which together created a project that allowed school children to provide IT training to the elderly, while at the same time benefiting from the intergenerational interaction this afforded (e.g. verbal history). Another example centred on EGOV4U providing the financial and infrastructural capital to employ and support the work of a group of unemployed youngsters (human capital) to develop a web portal (i.e. informational and interactive resource) for young people. This was developed in partnership with a city centre youth centre who were therefore the providers of environmental capital as well as types of human capital such as expertise, skills and support.

Facing similar contextual challenges, the second C+, M+ partner also developed informational and interactive services (e.g. web sites and one stop shops) and skills and training opportunities for targeted groups such as women, the unemployed, the elderly and war veterans. Indeed, an IT skills project for retired citizens through which participants produced their own documentary film subsequently won a national award for innovative practice and interaction between local government and civil society. Finally – and to give an idea of the range of technologies employed for projects – it is worth adding that another partner where the C+, M+ “score” was not as positive as those noted above nevertheless developed an EGOV4U TV channel as one method by which it could effectively target socially excluded groups.

**(Targeted and effective e-services) developed and delivered through M-CNs**

If the theory that underpins the EGOV4U project is correct then it follows that the two partners that had the most positive outcomes (O+) in terms of targeted, effective, eservices would also make most progress with the development of M-CNs (i.e. success at developing M-CNs underpins successful development – and the sustainability of – eservices). As the discussion above signalled, this was indeed the case. However, the brief outlines above do not do justice to this aspect of the two partners’ projects, nor to the amount of time and effort invested in their creation. For example, in the case of the IT, elderly and school children project the M-CN grew from one social centre and school, plus volunteers supported by staff from the community service department, to a network of over 30 schools, community centres and other organisations and intermediaries supported by volunteers and city employees.

Not all M-CNs were as extensive as this, of course. Nevertheless, the growth of some form of M-CNs was a feature of all projects across these two partners, although given the context sensitive nature of each individual project it is unsurprising that the speed, scale and scope of development was by no means uniform. In many cases no M-CN existed prior to EGOV4U. In other cases they did but on what might best be referred to as an informal level, with their potential and importance for the development and delivery of eservices largely unrecognised.
Interestingly, M-CN activity was also reported by the two partners where the development of actual eservice projects was limited or non-existent. However, at the termination of EGOV4U both the scale and scope of these M-CNs and the extent to which members of the networks were actually involved in the coproduction of the eservice projects of these two partners remained unclear. The fifth partner also reported M-CN activity, although this was largely at a policy development level as they had not developed any eservices.

**Enhanced availability, levels, alignments and access to community capitals**

It is clear from the discussion of context and capitals, above, and the outline of the EGOV4U project earlier in this paper, that EC funding meant that financial capital was bound to increase for all partners for the duration of the project. This statement of the obvious masks several far more important issues, however. Firstly, would – or could – this funding be matched by partners? Second, would it create and/or enhance other capitals? Third, and perhaps most important, were any of these developments sustainable?

The answer to the first question was addressed in the earlier discussion of positive and negative contexts. Consequently, it is enough to note that due in large part to drastic and ongoing public expenditure cuts before and during the period of EGOV4U the answer was sometimes, but with difficulty, and certainly not always. In the worst cases this appeared to create a situation where there were no observable enhancements in capitals (beyond the fact that the partner received EC monies) and thus no wider developments in terms of levels and alignments. Furthermore, access to and usability of capitals beyond those agents directly involved in EGOV4U within the partner organisation (e.g. project officer/manager, etc) appeared extremely limited or non-existent. Several explanations for this type of outcome can be advanced but it is not appropriate to rehearse them here.

As I have also previously noted, for two partners, and to a lesser extent a third, EC funding was matched or exceeded. The result was that increased financial capital fed through into enhanced availability, level, alignment, mix, and access to infrastructural, environmental, organisational and human capitals. That is, a more positive (C+) habitus was created for each project. For example, regardless of the degree to which infrastructural or environmental capital grew (in some cases significantly, in others less so) all projects required the development of new processes and structures (organisational capital) and the development, sharing or passing on of knowledge, skills and expertise (human capital) relevant to the operation and activities of a particular project (e.g. IT training). This was particularly so where the project was based on a relatively large and growing M-CN. Crucially, the agential interaction the new projects and M-CNs created (and that was then necessary for their maintenance and further growth) acted as an effective mechanism for the creation and/or enhancement of all forms of social capital.

The third and final issue centres on sustainability and has two closely related dimensions: were the developments and enhancements of capitals sustainable; and, thus were the eservice projects and M-CN developments also sustainable. In truth, providing an answer to both questions is difficult. This is mainly due to the sudden and early termination of EGOV4U, which, as I noted above, was approaching the end of the second year of a planned three-year project. Sadly, it was also before the interim evaluation process had been completed. Nevertheless, on the evidence that had been collected up to that point and through the limited communication and contact that continued during the termination period, some conclusions can be drawn.
Given the negative contextual conditions that faced those partners where the enhancement of capitals had taken place it is unsurprising that none were able to absorb the loss of EC funding. Consequently, projects where this had been used to employ staff rapidly lost those employees. This meant that there were examples of projects, such as an information service for young unemployed, that did not possess the means to compensate for this loss of human capital and were therefore unable to continue, or only in a severely reduced manner.

In the short term at least, other forms of capital were more sustainable. Once forms of infrastructural and environmental capital – such as IT hardware and software – have been acquired they obviously continue to exist, as do web sites and buildings. In the latter cases, however, without people to maintain them, or funds to pay room rentals and such like, sustainability is called into question. Similarly, the sustainability of forms of organisational capital, such as the processes, activities and expertise that underpin project development and operation and networks such as M-CN, is also likely to be questionable. Crucially, this is more likely to occur where projects are cut back or curtailed before they have had sufficient time to become accepted and/or embedded in relevant organisational, institutional and/or social systems. From an EGOV4U perspective this was all the more significant because the M-CN dimension was an additional but integral feature of the development and operation of specific eservice projects.

However, while it is obvious from the discussion above that the sustainability of capitals – that is, establishing and then maintaining appropriate levels, alignments and accessibility – was crucial to the continuing development, operation, and in many cases, success, of partners’ EGOV4U eservice projects, I do know that there were some positive outcomes. For example, some of the projects that centred on the development of informational/instructional web sites for targeted excluded groups were sufficiently well developed (and thus not requiring further inputs of capitals) to be incorporated into the mainstream web presence of partners. While in other cases, such as IT clubs for the elderly, the number and commitment of those who had become involved was enough to sustain the operation of the clubs when EGOV4U disappeared.

Conclusion

From the outset it was evident that the world into which EGOV4U was born differed significantly from that which had existed when the proposal for funding from the EC had been formulated some years earlier. The effects of the banking crash, subsequent economic depression, and resulting drastic and ongoing public spending cuts, created an extremely challenging and uncertain environment for any new government/public sector initiative. This was even more so when we consider that two of the partners were from Iceland and Ireland – countries that were hit faster and harder by the banking crisis than any others. That said, the austerity programme implemented by the UK government following the general election of 2010 soon began to create an environment for the English partner that was almost as severe. Given these grim contextual situations it might be argued that the fact that the majority of partners managed to develop a fairly wide range of eservices for socially/economically excluded groups is in itself a surprising but positive result. That these were, in many cases, built on or around the additional development of intra and/or inter organisational multi-channel networks is even more admirable.

Nevertheless, no amount of positive spin can mask the fact that, taken overall, the hostile environment significantly constrained most forms of capital and the thinking and actions of
agents. In some cases this was to such an extent that there were few, if any, outcomes. Unfortunately, the early termination of the project compounded matters and meant that much that had been achieved was jeopardised or lost because it had not had sufficient time to become sustainable. It also meant that much that could have been learnt from the evaluation was unreported and is only now – partially – emerging.

What can we conclude about the realist, CMO, methodology employed for this paper? As I hope I have demonstrated, the CMO approach proved effective in terms of providing both a theory-driven framework for M-CN based project development and analysis and the methodology for outcome and impact evaluation. Importantly, the theory turned out to be an accurate predictor of how, why and where effective eservice projects and M-CNs might best develop and be most sustainable, although as work progressed it became evident that “tweaks” and minor revisions were necessary to more accurately represent what was being observed. That said, neither the M-CN or CMO approach are necessarily understood or accepted by practitioners. In the case of the former, some of the reasons have been identified and discussed in this paper. But it is worth adding another: concepts and approaches such as those detailed in this paper appear particularly prone to rejection in environments and context where there is an anti-intellectual tradition or bias, as seems to be the case in many Anglo-Saxon countries.

Unfortunately, much the same can be said about the realist approach to evaluation in general. The preference of funders and evaluators, and indeed, those being evaluated, is more often than not for approaches that identify “properties” that represent a standard set of the observable features of a project/programme. This ontologically flat approach benefits from a world-view that is therefore far less complex – and for that reason, much more preferable to many people – than the reality a realist, ontologically deep, approach seeks to portray. I recognise, of course, that my ability to fully convey and analyse that depth has been limited in this paper due to my narrow focus on the dominant mechanism and related contexts and outcomes. Nevertheless, I hope that some important insights have been provided, through, for example, the discussion of community capitals as contextual variables and the role of evaluation as a mechanism.

Ultimately, of course, much more could be said about the multiple mechanisms, context and outcomes of a substantial project such as EGOV4U, and the structured and shaped situations/contexts through which the people involved in the various initiatives sought to exercise their reflexive powers and interpretive freedom. Vested interests and individual and collective judgements about the opportunity costs of certain courses of action also played a part in conditioning interpretation and action, of course. These have hardly been touched on here. Nevertheless, in overall terms I believe this paper succeeds in its primary aim, which was to make use of previously unused material from the EGOV4U evaluation and provide a realist insight into what worked for whom in what circumstances and why.

References


A commercial partner was also involved but not in the development and delivery of eservices.

www.egov4u.open.ac.uk

EC funding covered direct costs – personnel, travel and related subsistence; the cost of durable equipment and consumables and supplies; and indirect costs – commonly referred to as ‘overheads’.

‘key agent’ refers to an individual from one of the partner organisations with particular responsibilities for the EGOV4U project (e.g. as project leader or administrator, technical officer, advisor, etc)