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USING NEW TOOLS AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT: PROMISE AND LIMITS

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on Using New Tools for Decision-Making:
Impacts on Information, Communication and Organisation**

Istanbul, 7-8 October 2004

This document provides background information for Session 1 on Thursday 7 October from 09.30 to 10.30.

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Questions for discussion

Impacts on decision-making

- Centres of Government undertake and oversee a wide range of co-ordination, consultation and communication functions. Where have new tools had the greatest impact?
- What can we learn from current experience of using new tools at the Centre of Government? What are the key challenges for the foreseeable future? How well are Centres of Government equipped to meet these challenges?

Guaranteeing basic rights, confidentiality and national security

- Have new tools affected how Centres of Government handle confidential or classified information for decision-making? How is this reconciled with the need to guarantee citizens' rights of access to information?

Networked government

- Do Centres of Government have a greater role to play as 'hubs' in the emerging networked government? Have these new tools fostered more multidisciplinary and horizontal approaches to cross-cutting and complex policy issues?
- Centres of Government work in close collaboration with line ministries and other agencies in providing support to decision-makers. Will their capacity to do so be hampered if other parts of the executive branch lag behind in the uptake of new tools?

Putting people before technology

- The effectiveness of new tools depends less upon the technology used than on the people using them. How can training, awareness-raising and organisational change help to ensure that Centres of Government reap the benefits of using new tools?

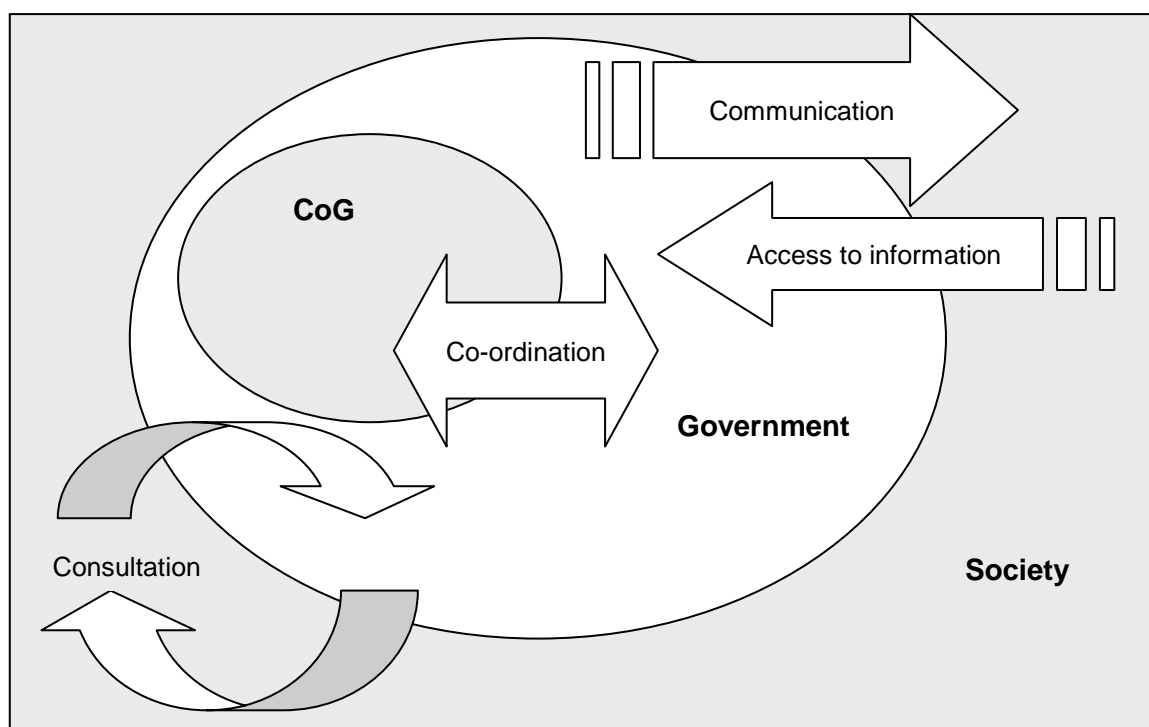
USING NEW TOOLS AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT: PROMISE AND LIMITS

New tools raise new governance challenges

1. Centres of Government in all OECD countries are adopting and adapting new e-government tools in their daily work of providing support to decision-makers. The use of email, Intranet, SMS, wireless communications, teleconferencing, online databases, electronic documents and archiving have become commonplace. These new tools play an increasing role in the management of information flows to and from the Centre of Government, and thus enhance its capacity to ensure efficient, effective, coherent, rapid and accountable decision-making. While promising significant rewards in terms of greater co-ordination, speed and openness of decision-making, these tools also raise new governance challenges for the Centre of Government.

2. Balancing confidentiality and openness; rapid response and due reflection; technology-mediated and face-to-face dialogue; ministerial accountability with accountability to a wider public are just some of the issues faced by Centres of Government today. While not all of these governance challenges are novel, the uptake of new technologies across government and the demands generated by the emerging 'knowledge society' place new pressures on Centres of Government.

Figure 1: Applying new tools to Centres of Government (CoG)



3. This year's annual meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government will focus on the impact of new tools on the role, functions and procedures of Centres of Government, review the approaches adopted in different OECD member countries and identify the key governance challenges they raise. **Session 1** will serve to identify key issues, map the experience of using new e-government tools at the Centre of Government, and identify current trends. It will also focus on the impact of new tools on the capacity of Centres of Government to act as a 'hub' in the emerging networked government, provide oversight and guidance when balancing national security concerns with the respect of constitutional guarantees of basic human rights (e.g. privacy) and scope future policy challenges. **Session 2** will seek to determine how, and to what extent, new tools have had an impact on Centres of Government structures, procedures and capacity to ensure **co-ordination** within government [see GOV/PUMA/MPM(2004)2]. **Session 3** will examine how new tools affect interactions between Centres of Government and actors outside government, via online **communications, consultation** and **access to information** [see GOV/PUMA/MPM(2004)3].

Centres of Government: the hub of networked government?

Networked government

4. Greater emphasis on cross-cutting policy issues, progress in decentralisation, the devolution of decision-making power and the increasing use of public/private partnerships has led to the proliferation of actors involved in public governance. Today, the role of the Centre in ensuring co-ordination and policy coherence is more important than ever before. New tools may serve to strengthen the relative position of Centres of Government with regard to other actors within an extended network.

5. Internally, new tools can enhance capacity for information sharing (e.g. joint information resources) and collaborative policy development (e.g. via secure web-based workspaces accessed by members of cross-agency task forces). To be effective, however, they require regular human contact (e.g. via 'face-to-face' meetings) in order to build trust and a common understanding of key terms and goals.

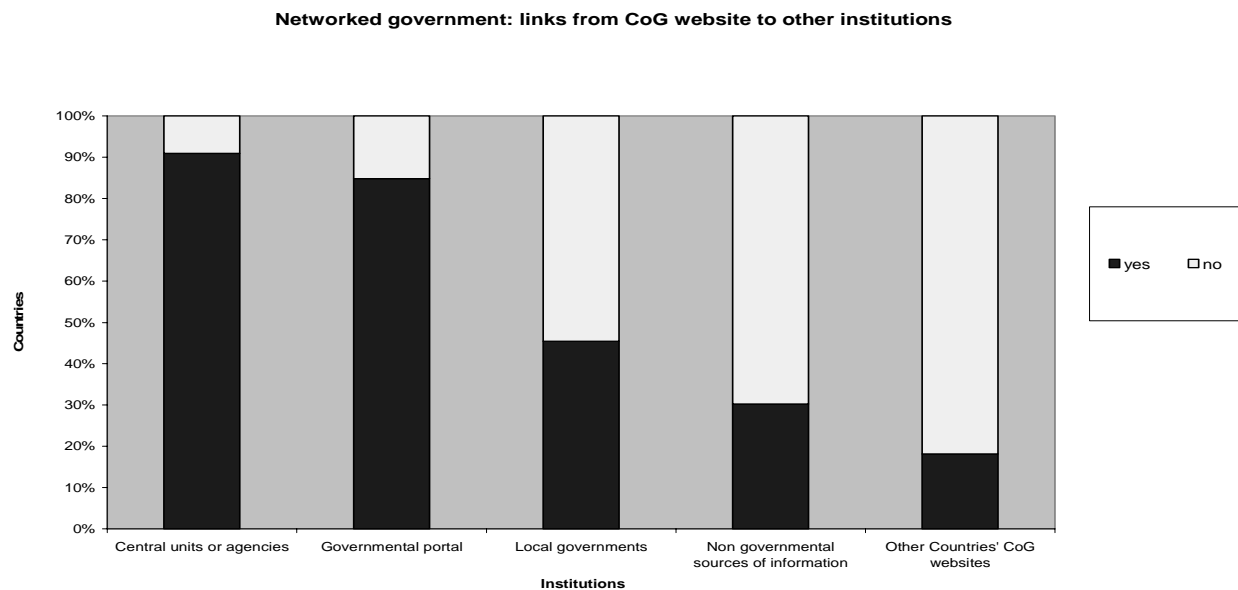
6. From an external perspective, a review of CoG websites reveals that over 90% provide links to other central government units, thereby serving as a central hub for networked government at the national level.¹ However, this figure falls off rapidly with regard to their links to local level government units (less than 50%) and non-governmental sources of information, such as the media, business and citizens' organisations (around 30%) [see Figure 1].

Impacts and governance implications

7. Internally, Centres of Government are exploring the potential offered by new tools to facilitate information sharing and discussion within government. Such uses may enhance their power and authority within the overall system. Externally, CoG websites represent an authoritative 'entry point' to government information and serve as highly visible 'landmarks' in the web of online information. Surprisingly, given their relative prominence, CoG websites have not yet fully exploited their potential as an online platform for linking different levels of government and other actors in the emerging knowledge society.

¹ The CoG website review was conducted in April 2004 and included all 30 OECD Member countries plus Brazil, Chile, and Slovenia as observers in the CoG network. The review was limited, in most cases, to the English-language web pages of CoG websites [for URLs see Table 1, GOV/PUMA/MPM(2004)3].

Figure 1



Source: OECD

Ensuring security, confidentiality, openness and privacy

Striking the right balance

8. At times, Centres of Government handle highly sensitive information whose unauthorised release might endanger national security. A greater reliance on new tools when handling such information raises the issue of how best to prevent security breaches and ensure access only to those authorised to do so. Confidential information may also require specific protocols for electronic circulation.

9. Increasingly, new tools are used in surveillance and intelligence gathering. Centres of Government may play a key role in ensuring that their use is warranted in terms of the public interest and ensure that constitutional and legal safeguards for personal privacy and freedom of expression are respected under all circumstances. As stated in a recent Australian government report: “Laws and rules apply equally in times of normal business, as well as crisis, and are a necessary part of the management of information to protect the interests of individuals, as well as to ensure accountability and transparency of government activities.”²

Public-private partnerships

10. Closer partnership with the private sector, for example in service delivery, may entail granting access to government databases of citizens’ personal data. Centres of Government may play an important oversight role in ensuring that the pursuit of greater interoperability of information systems guards against the risks associated with sharing government-held information with private sector partners (i.e. privacy standards or intellectual property rights must not be undermined).

² Management Advisory Committee (2002), *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia’s Priority Challenges*, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 68

Impacts and governance implications

11. Centres of Government face strategic decisions with regard to the use (and potential abuse) of new tools in the sensitive domains of classified information and personal data. On occasion, they may play an important role in weighing up conflicting values (e.g. protecting national security and guaranteeing individual rights) and will be held accountable for these decisions.

Anticipating future policy challenges and risks

Forward-looking policy making

12. New tools have increased the capacity of governments to aggregate and analyse vast quantities of information in order to identify trends and emerging challenges (e.g. through data mining and content analysis). They have also opened up the possibility to access external networks of expertise and follow discussions under way in various online communities that do not usually interact with government (e.g. youth). Whether Centres of Government have actually made full use of these applications of new tools remains to be seen.

Anticipating and managing risks

13. Conventional risks are taking on new dimensions while new risk areas, such as bio-terrorism and new technologies, are emerging – many of which are characterised by extreme uncertainty and the possibility of extensive harm. Risks often have a strong economic impact (e.g. on infrastructure, tourism, budget, public health, etc.) and know no borders. New tools may make a significant contribution to ensuring rapid information exchange at the national and international level, in order to anticipate and react to risks. A review of the experience to date may identify the necessary conditions under which new tools make a real difference in risk management by Centres of Government.

Impacts and governance implications

14. The growing complexity and global reach of public policy issues, coupled with increasing pressures to anticipate and mitigate future risks, has led Centres of Government to reach for new tools when providing support to decision-makers. They offer an unprecedented capacity for multidisciplinary and *ad hoc* working groups, cutting across traditional government ‘silos’, monitoring current trends, reacting to events as they arise and scoping future challenges. While pilot projects using new tools have been run in several countries, a critical assessment of their capacity to address cross-cutting policy issues has yet to be undertaken.