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**NEW TOOLS FOR DECISION-MAKING: IMPACT ON CENTRES OF GOVERNMENT**

**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 2 on Thursday 7 October from 11.00 to 12.30.*

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## NEW TOOLS FOR DECISION-MAKING: IMPACT ON CENTRES OF GOVERNMENT

### Questions for discussion

#### *Uptake and application of new tools*

- How has the uptake of new tools affected the way Centres of Government are organised and their capacity to ensure the three ‘Cs’ of coherence, continuity and co-ordination? What lessons can be drawn from the successes and failures of OECD member countries to date?
- When applying new tools, how do CoGs balance the pursuit of greater transparency in decision-making with the need to ensure national security and confidentiality?

#### *Costs, benefits and impacts*

- Has the widespread use of new tools had an impact on the political/administrative interface?
- Do new tools help foster a multidisciplinary approach to cross-cutting policy issues? Do they help CoGs to provide forward-looking policy advice?

#### *Electronic vs. human tools*

- New tools contribute both to creating and to managing the information overload. Do they solve more problems than they create?
- New tools can support better decision-making by speeding up information collection, analysis, and display. To what extent do they enhance or undermine the role of human judgement?

## NEW TOOLS FOR DECISION-MAKING: IMPACT ON CENTRES OF GOVERNMENT

### **New tools: opportunities and challenges**

1. The introduction of new tools has a significant impact upon the organisation, working methods, culture, capacities, skills and human resources needed at the Centre of Government. Ongoing OECD work on e-government shows that new tools may act as catalysts for re-engineering long-established processes and undertaking substantial re-organisation of support structures. Many issues raised by the use of new tools under normal circumstances are exacerbated during situations of crisis management (e.g. network security).

### **Key functions of Centres of Government**

2. While the Centres of Government in OECD countries vary greatly with regard to their structures, their functions are often similar given their common concern to ensure the three 'Cs' of coherence, continuity and co-ordination. Many have specialized units to handle the tasks of: organising government sessions and support to law-drafting; reviewing policy proposals; strategic planning and monitoring; and managing relations with line ministries and other State organs. Senior officials from Centres of Government are responsible for providing strategic direction in the application of new tools to these tasks.

### **Organising government sessions and drafting laws**

#### *New tools for old tasks*

3. Centres of Government have the prime responsibility for the smooth and timely preparation of Government meetings, which in most OECD countries meet weekly. To do so they provide leadership and ensure co-ordination in: scheduling preparatory meetings, setting and enforcing deadlines for the submission and circulation of documents, preparing the agenda. In preparing government sessions, extensive use is made of new tools including: email, Intranet, electronic distribution lists.

4. The application of new tools to the preparation of government sessions has had little direct impact on the organisation of Centres of Government. It has had greater impact on the use of human resources as the digitisation of repetitive and administrative tasks (e.g. document formatting and handling) has freed staff for higher value added tasks and has obliged them to acquire new skills and capacities.

5. The confidential nature of certain items discussed at government meetings (e.g. national security issues) calls for a high degree of reliability and security of the electronic systems used in circulating information amongst ministers. The frequent use of 'air-gaps' to insulate high security electronic systems from other, more public networks (e.g. government Intranet, Internet) in turn, requires user authentication based on the level of security clearance. Restricted access rights may also apply for items that are considered confidential (e.g. in a preliminary stage of discussion within government).

#### *Paperless law-drafting*

6. Centres of Government in many OECD countries have a special responsibility for ensuring the legal conformity of all draft legislation submitted to government meetings, and approximately half have specific legal units charged with this task. Proposals from ministries are usually checked for conformity with the Constitution, with other national laws and regulations, international laws and treaty obligations (including, where applicable, those of the European Union), and the national legal drafting style. The use of searchable online legal databases of national, EU and international law have greatly facilitated this task.

New tools open up the possibility of ‘paperless’ law-drafting by making it possible to circulate virtual drafts, use legal word-processing software which highlights amendments and secure servers on which to store all intermediate and final versions.

### ***Impacts and governance implications***

7. Centres of Government must consider the trade-offs between using new tools to increase the transparency of government decision-making and preserving a necessary degree of confidentiality to allow for frank discussion and disagreement. At the same time, a legitimate concern to safeguard network security must be balanced against the realisation that indiscriminate application of high-security options to CoG business which is not of a confidential nature, can generate inefficiencies and constitute unwarranted barriers to public scrutiny. The practically unlimited capacity for data storage, retrieval and online access provided by new tools, combined with strong legal provisions for access to information, has meant that the process of law-drafting – once largely shielded from public view prior to submission to the council of ministers or parliament – may now be conducted under conditions of far greater transparency and accountability. This may have far-reaching implications for relations between coalition partners, governing and opposition parties as well as the executive and the legislature.

### **Reviewing the content of policy proposals**

#### ***New tools, better policy?***

8. Most policy proposals are initiated in line ministries, but Centres of Government play a key role in checking that each submission is in line with the government’s programme, overall strategic and budget priorities, ensuring quality control of the underlying policy analysis, resolving any disagreements between ministries and briefing the Prime Minister and the Chairs of Ministerial committees. Among the new tools applied in this field are: collaborative online workspaces, electronic templates for submissions, electronic tracking systems, and online search engines.

9. Rules of procedures developed by Centres of Government may be ‘embedded’ in electronic templates which define the type of information (e.g. background, evidence, alternatives, recommendations) that must, or could usefully, accompany policy submissions (e.g. mandatory and optional fields). New tools accelerate exchanges with independent or other expert bodies (e.g. antitrust commission, ombudsman) whose technical or legal opinions on a draft law may, in some cases, be compulsory. Electronic systems have been developed in some countries, such as Finland, whereby items for the Council of Ministers (CoM) are drafted and distributed online. Information systems can also generate automatic notification of decisions to the Ministries concerned and, if desired, even to external stakeholders who have registered their interest in a given policy area.

### ***Impacts and governance implications***

10. New tools provide policy advisers at the Centre of Government with the means to cross-check evidence provided by line ministries with other information sources within and outside government (e.g. via online search engines, online media sources). By allowing for ‘real time’, widespread and transparent circulation of policy proposals throughout government, new tools can contribute to ensuring a multidisciplinary approach to cross-cutting policy issues and provide a means of identifying (if not settling) differences on cross-sectoral policy issues prior to government meetings.

11. New tools have highlighted longstanding tensions in striking the balance between openness to public scrutiny (e.g. access to information rules applied to civil servants’ emails containing informal discussion of policy options) and the provision of confidential advice to ministers (i.e. the ability to give ‘free, frank and fearless’ advice). If unresolved, these tensions can give rise to ‘coping mechanisms’

whereby telephone conversations replace email traffic between civil servants charged with policy development. Such behaviour arguably undermines the capacity of Centres of Government to facilitate policy co-ordination today, ensure a smooth transition during changes in government tomorrow and to act as the government's institutional 'memory' for the future (e.g. by preserving a public record of policy deliberations for parliamentary or public scrutiny).

## **Strategic planning and monitoring**

### *Policy in practice*

12. Centres of Government play a central role in ensuring that the strategic priorities set out in the Government programme are translated into concrete work plans for line ministries to be implemented within the constraints of the budgetary resources and parliamentary time available. Intranet-based annual government work plans allow for regular updating and 'real time' information on progress towards meeting government legislative timetables and policy goals.

13. New tools can play a major role in monitoring government performance. Expert systems, which incorporate decision-making rules and combine statistical data from several sources, can help decision-makers deal with the information overload by delivering simple indicators of progress towards policy goals (e.g. Mexico's 'digital dashboard' system designed by the National Statistical Office for the President's Office).

### *Impacts and governance implications*

14. The use of electronic work-flow systems, incorporating the government's main policy milestones and legislative timetable, provide Centres of Government with an instant overview of line ministries' progress towards established goals. They may also serve to foster greater collegiality and policy coherence among ministries and agencies by setting their specific objectives in a wider context. At the same time, such tools remove the information asymmetries between the centre and the periphery, which may affect their respective decision roles and responsibilities. New tools can help to reduce the financial and human costs of collecting, compiling, analysing, and sharing performance data. One unintended consequence of such technical developments may be simply to inflate the amount of performance data available – thereby outstripping the already over-stretched capacity of Centres of Government to act upon it.

## **Managing relations with other State organs**

### *Networked government*

15. Centres of Government are at the hub of an extensive network of institutions at the national (e.g. line Ministries, agencies, the Parliament, the President's Office) and, to a lesser extent, international (e.g. European Union, multilateral organisations) and sub national level (e.g. regional, state and local governments). The use of new tools such as: email, Internet, and secure Intranet systems have all expanded the capacity of Centres of Government to co-ordinate with other actors in pursuing the government's policy programme, particularly national parliaments. New tools may contribute to limiting the legislative backlog by reducing the time needed for exchanges between the executive and legislature (e.g. transmission of electronic documents, electronic tracking of parliamentary amendments to legislation) while preserving the time required for parliamentary debate.

### *Impacts and governance implications*

16. New tools enhance the scope and speed of information exchange between a wider range of public authorities thereby contributing to ensuring better co-ordination of policy responses at all levels of

government. At the same time, they also make decision-making processes more visible to a wider range of actors who may choose to contribute to, or contest, a given course of action.

### **Balancing new tools and old**

#### *New tools or new processes? The human factor in decision-making*

17. The introduction of new tools may lead to minor adjustments, or even a major re-engineering, of established processes. Given the highly specialised nature of work at the Centre of Government, it may prove necessary to invest in the development of tailor-made tools rather than simply applying 'ready-made' solutions. The effective use of new tools requires substantial investments in training, skills and mentoring for those less familiar with the technologies. Over time, with the introduction of more user-friendly applications and generational turnover these tools will become mainstreamed and increasingly 'invisible'. While a number of tasks performed by Centres of Government may be facilitated by the introduction of new tools, much of their day-to-day work entails deliberation, negotiation and advice to decision-makers. In such interactions, human qualities are essential and electronic tools play no more than a marginal role.