Social Security Co-ordination and Social Security Reforms

Workshop on data exchange and social security

Tirana, October 7-8, 2008
Report by the contractor

Expert team

The seminar was conducted by the Estonian e-Governance Academy, with the involvement of three senior experts:

Dr. Arvo Ott

Dr. Arvo Ott graduated in electrical engineering and computer systems at Tallinn Technical University in 1977 and received his doctorate in speech technology and expert systems at The Estonian Institute of Cybernetics in 1987.

Dr. Ott joined the e-Governance Academy on November 1st, 2005. His main responsibilities include the coordination of e-governance training programmes and general management.

Prior to joining the e-Governance Academy, Dr. Ott served as the Head of Department of State Information Systems at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications for over twelve years. He was the first person to hold the general responsibility of CIO (Chief Information Officer) of Estonia, with the task to build the necessary institutional and legal framework as well as to establish the methods of coordination of ICT in the government sector.

Dr. Ott is an expert on e-government strategy planning, design of action plans, planning of state ICT budgets, IT-related legislation, design of state ICT architecture and organizing joint working groups, and international co-operation in these fields. He has a pragmatic approach to the needs and organisation of information societies, and a keen insight in those aspects that touch the concrete initiation and organisation of governmental IT projects.

Mr. Hannes Astok

Mr. Astok is a former Deputy Mayor of the City of Tartu, Estonia's second largest city. Currently he is a Member of Parliament, and taking seat in the Parliamentary Committee for Economical Affairs, which deals amongst others with information society development issues.

Mr. Astok is an enthusiastic speaker and expert in the field of information society, especially promoting role of local governments. Relevant to this seminar, his expertise lies in his knowledge of the impact of policy on administrations, and in his experiences in developing concrete government-to-business and government-to-citizen services.

Mr. Steven Segaert

Mr. Segaert holds a Master degree in law and in international social security. He has been a key player in the modernisation of Belgian social security administration and continues to focus on business process analysis in administrations. Having been deeply involved in both the mechanisms that determine decision-making and the challenges that lie in concrete implementation, Mr. Segaert has a keen understanding of theory and practice, and the communication involved to connect both.

Mr. Segaert is an expert on national and international social security systems (including co-ordination), and understands the specific challenges the introduction of ICT and changed organisational processes pose to these specific fields.

Mr. Segaert has been involved in the SSCSSR programme as a lecturer in the summer schools.

The seminar took place in Tirana, on Tuesday October 7th and Wednesday October 8th. All three experts were fully involved, in accordance with the agenda and the format of the seminar.

Proceedings

Meeting expectations

The approach of the e-Governance Academy is practical and pragmatic, not technical nor academic. The Academy focuses on policy and organisational issues, builds on our experiences of what works in practice, and brings together lessons learned. This approach was reflected in the agenda for the seminar, and maintained throughout the sessions.

To this end, and to emphasise the value of interactivity and participation, participants were asked to shortly introduce themselves and to express their expectations of the seminar as a whole (session "introduction"). The remarks recorded revealed the following topics to be of special importance:

- Social protection systems in other countries[1];
- e-government in general (the basics);
- Information exchange between countries (social security co-ordination), including the legal basis for (electronic) information exchange;
- New ideas on organising information exchange, also on a "local" level;
- Modernisation of systems and digitalisation of archives, including the legal aspects;
- Ways to abolish unnecessary or outdated paper obligations (specifically the "work book" was mentioned)

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[1] While this was not the scope of the seminar, this question was in part answered by an added overview of the social security system in Estonia (relevant to situate the Estonian system of information exchange) and by the addition of an exogenous differentiation of social security systems (relevant to the different information needs of different systems) to the sessions on the second day.

A first observation, reviewing these topics, is that most expressed expectations were consistent with the planned modules, which in turn indicates that the target audience for the seminar was reached. However, to ensure that the topics were developed as much as possible in line with the interests and expectations of the participants, the agenda was slightly adapted and some modules were given a different emphasis:

- An overview of the Estonian social security system, relevant to better understand the context of information exchange in Estonia, was added by Mr. Hannes Astok;
- The order of the sessions on the first day was slightly changed, leaving the session on legal frameworks for the end of the day;
- An explanation on the specific issue of "e-health" was added to the session concerning document management;
- On the second day, the two sessions by Mr. Steven Segaert and Dr. Arvo Ott were merged into one continuous session, and the content was adapted to offer participants sectoral (within an organisation or within a social security system), national and international examples of information exchange.

This flexible approach allowed for a result aimed at the wants and needs of the participants present.

The presentations used during the seminar are attached to this report. It should be noted, however, that these presentations – while exhaustive – are mere guidelines used by the lecturers. Much of the content of the lectures was further shaped through interaction with participants and between the experts themselves.

The timing of the agenda was largely followed, and attendance was good during the whole seminar.

Assessment by the participants

An assessment of the seminar by the participants was sought during a moderated reflection session at the end of the second day[2]. Participants were asked if any remaining questions persisted, and if the seminar had met their concrete expectations.

Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina were generally content with the overview and insights offered, but retained concern on how they could actually put the knowledge gained to effective use. Appreciation was expressed to the inclusion of a real-life example of a project that employs the principles brought forward during the seminar, offering a partial toolkit to concrete implementation.

Attendees from Croatia sought and found concrete information on cross-border information exchange and its legal basis. The Croatian pension service saw their current policy and working procedures confirmed, and expressed the feeling that what was explained was indeed current reality and not theory on some possible future. Information gathered from the seminar will serve to further refine strategy.

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[2] The result of the evaluations made by the participants by way of the *evaluation form* distributed by the Secretariat of the Council of Europe is not known by the expert team at the time of writing of this report.

Interest from the Albanian participants was foremost in the legal sphere. The overview of relevant legal instruments was therefore highly appreciated. A follow-up question on the necessity of a separate database in which foreigners are listed was discussed, pointing out that it is preferable to build on existing databases, while adding additional features.

The immediate challenges faced by the participants from Kosovo[3] are situated in the field of health care. Both the general overview of what e-government entails, and the specific advice on concrete organisation, were highly appreciated. The seminar highlighted for them that reform is not only needed, but also feasible and rewarding.

Participants from Turkey foremost appreciated the very concrete information and policy advice given, and expressed the desire to follow up on the topic of co-ordination of social security in the European Union and the specific challenges this brings concerning information exchange. A subsequent event which brings in examples and experience brought by working methods in different countries, would meet their specific interest.

Members of the delegation from "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" expressed their appreciation for the fact that the agenda was broad, and showed how important and encompassing e-government is to the business of government.

Serbian participants were appreciative of the samples shown during the sessions, and would wish further topical technical assistance on selected issues. The wish was expressed to develop subsequent bilateral contacts with the expert team.

Finally, participants from Montenegro reiterated the expressions of content and desire to know more, already expressed by the other participants.

Overall, the assessment of the participants was very positive, leaving them with a feeling that they had learned something new and worth-while, in a way that would allow them to employ these principles in daily business. A wish to hold similar events, aimed specifically towards the political level, was omnipresent.

During the reflection session, further advice was given on (amongst others) how to implement information exchange concretely and how to motivate politicians on the issue of rationalisation and information exchange.

Assessment by the expert team

The expert team is satisfied that it was able to offer a concrete contribution to further institutional development. The mix of competencies found in the expert team[4] was stimulating to all involved, as was the feedback from and interaction with the participants.

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[3] All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

[4] For a profile of the individual experts, see above.

The team wishes to thank the Secretariat for an impeccable organisation, for its active participation and expressions of interest received, and for allowing the necessary flexibility in the proceedings of the seminar.

The e-Governance Academy would like to inform SSCSSR officers to some considerations and observations we feel are necessary to express. These opinions are formed on the basis of the seminar itself, on communication in the margin, and on long-standing insights and expertise.

1. There is an apparent need for awareness building at the highest levels. While the profile of the participants was very interesting and relevant, we feel – with many of the participants – that more can be achieved when decision-makers such as ministers, heads of institutions and policy-setting advisors are given insight in the topic. This would make clear that e-government and information exchange is not an irrelevant or marginal topic, nor something that can be undertaken lightly. The e-Governance Academy has trained high-level stakeholders from over 30 countries. Invariably, participants reveal that topics that were previously deemed too technical are found to be much closer and much more achievable than thought. Routinely, the awareness created leads to new policy and strategy, and sets countries and institutions on the path of real achievements that influence and ameliorate their efficiency and effectiveness to an important extent.

In order to achieve concrete results and allow the participants to employ new insights, action to inform high-level stakeholders on what really is at stake and what is plausible and what not, should be undertaken. It does not take extreme effort to see the gains from effective governance materialise. Progress does however demand vision, and an objective understanding of the sense and nonsense surrounding this topic.

2. While social security administration is not fundamentally different from other government processes in which e-governance is successfully deployed, the administration of social security co-ordination mechanisms holds specific peculiarities. The expert team feels that there is a real possibility for such administration to be organised. In this, countries under the programme can benefit from the developments that are taking place in the EU, where electronic information exchange between countries concerning the co-ordination of social security will soon be a reality[5].

Given the apparent concern for this issue by the participants, the e-Governance Academy advises a close follow-up of the activities connected to the new EU co-ordination Regulation, and streamlined action by the countries of the region along the lines set out by the EU. At the very least, regular updates on the proceedings at the level of the EU, as well as explanatory information, need to be communicated to the countries involved. This will determine when real action becomes possible and appropriate.

Tallinn, October 13th, 2008

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[5] We refer to the document http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/08/st13/st13492.en08.pdf, which fixes the start of effective electronic information exchange in 2010, and contains the prospect of an abolishing of paper communication by 2012.