



# eGOVERNMENT IN SWEDEN: NEW DIRECTIONS - EDITORIAL

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## 1. Background and Scope

In January 2008, the Swedish Government launched a new eGovernment action plan which was formulated to serve as “a new basis for IT-based organisational development in public administration” (Regeringskansliet, 2008:1). The main objective in the plan was formulated as “*as simple as possible for as many as possible*”. The definition of eGovernment used in the action plan is the one agreed upon by many other European countries: “eGovernment is organisational development in public administrations that takes advantage of information and communication technologies (ICT) combined with organisational changes and new skills” (ibid, 2008:5). As such, administration-wide cooperation and integration were put forth as important means in order to “make it easier for businesses and citizens to transact with and obtain information from public administrations, improve the quality of administration decision-making and use every penny of tax revenue invested more effectively” (ibid, 2008:5). Behind the suggested course of actions there is a rhetoric that Sweden was now entering a new path regarding eGovernment development: “-eGovernment has been analysed many times - its now time for action” (ibid, 2008:3) indicating major changes in several aspects of government. Taken together, the above declarations made the action plan and the expressed expectations of profound changes in public administration an interesting target for critical review.

Having identified the importance in critically discussing and analysing the action plan, the Swedish Researchers Network in eGovernment ([www.egov.nu](http://www.egov.nu)) arranged a network meeting at the national conference for public sector in Sweden – Offentliga Rummet – held in Västerås in June 2008. The theme for the meeting was “Reflections on the Swedish action plan for eGovernment”. Several researchers and practitioners

shared and debated their reflections during this meeting. In order to continue this very interesting discussion after the conference, we then invited authors to submit an article on the same theme, i.e. analysing different aspects of the Swedish action plan for eGovernment. This call for papers was directed both to participants at the network meeting and others, who wanted to contribute to this on-going debate. The call was to encourage authors to communicate and share their insights and opinions regarding the action plan in order to provide knowledge to decision-makers and other practitioners.

As such, the basic purpose of creating a special issue of this kind is in line with the overall goal of the Swedish Researchers Network in eGovernment; to create platforms and arenas for mutual exchange between academia and practice in order to enhance the rigour and relevance of Swedish eGovernment research.

## 2. The Swedish Researchers eGovernment Network

The Swedish Researchers Network in eGovernment ([www.egov.nu](http://www.egov.nu)) is a national network of eGovernment researchers (from varied disciplines; such as political science, sociology, economics, information systems, etc.), practitioners and decision-makers in public and private sector (at national as well as local levels). It is initially financed by VINNOVA (Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) and the overall aim is to facilitate knowledge development and the possibility to establish contact between researchers, as well as between researchers, practitioners and citizens.

The network should help its members to:

- find new cooperation possibilities; between both researchers and practitioners
- cooperate across scientific disciplines
- exchange research results
- jointly discuss and illuminate the field
- encourage knowledge development and create coordinative profits

An important aim of the Swedish Researchers Network in eGovernment is to create a communication channel between researchers and practitioners where this kind of issues can be addressed and discussed. As such, the network aims at creating shared arenas for researchers and practitioners (including decision-makers) where mutual knowledge development and knowledge exchange can take place. To be able to conduct eGovernment research that meet the criteria of being both rigorous and relevant an on-going discussion between academia and practice must be facilitated. We argue that a joint network can be one such arena on a national level, together with other meeting places and communication channels.

Different theoretical and methodological perspectives were, thus, encouraged in the call for papers to this special issue. Submissions could be of both empirical and theoretical kinds and we especially asked for submissions with a critical stance.

## 3. Reviewers

We would also like to express our gratitude to the following scholars who largely have been contributing as reviewers in this special issue:

- Alessandro Ancarini, Italy
- Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko, Finland
- Linda Dawson, Australia

- Karin Hedström, Sweden
- Arild Jansen, Norway
- John Krogstie, Norway
- Karl Löfgren, Denmark
- Rony Medaglia, Denmark
- Carl-Erik Moe, Norway
- Christina Mörtberg, Sweden
- Björn Niehaves, Germany
- Anne Persson, Sweden
- Agneta Ranerup, Sweden
- Maung Kyaw Sein, Norway
- Maddalena Sorrentino, Italy
- Øystein Sæbø, Norway
- Eva Söderström, Sweden
- Elin Wihlborg, Sweden
- Svein Ølnes, Norway

#### 4. Papers in this Special issue

The six papers in this special issue have one thing in common; they all contain critical analyses of the Swedish action plan for eGovernment. The papers discuss a wide range of problems to overcome in order to realize the intentions of the action plan and some of them also question the expressed main objectives. The authors have focused different aspects in their analyses and they have also related their discussions to theories from different scientific fields. The conclusions in all the papers point out important areas of improvements, but they focus on various solutions. All together this makes the contributions in the special issue a very important basis for further development of the eGovernment field in Sweden. A challenging task that researchers, practitioners, and politicians have to accept together.

The first paper is written by Mikael Lind, Olov Östberg and Per Johannisson whose analysis of the action plan highlights a spectrum of problems. They take the Swedish Government's decision to reclaim its world leadership in the eGovernment ranking within two years as their point of departure. They state this to be easier said than done; policy documents alone will not overcome the age old gaps between the three layers of public administration containing some six hundred independently managed agencies. They state that, at best, it may prove possible to make the agencies in 'the state sector capability cloud' march to the whole\_of\_government tune. Included in the problems faced in the attempted paradigm shift are (i) unrealistic time scale, (ii) governance is not possible without an enterprise architecture, (iii) the modeling of the needs of the end user cannot be left solely to individual agencies, (iv) clusters and federations must be defined by means of federation level agreements in addition to service level agreements, (v) low adherence level to EU's directives regarding e.g. Services and Public Information Re-usage will be rewarded with low eGovernment EU ranking, and (vi) there are very few mandatory standards and profiles for Swedish agencies and no Swedish National Interoperability Framework on the horizon. Among the positive signs are that very ambitious work is taking place in both the defense and e-health sectors. To compensate for the unrealistic time scale, and to secure public value, it is an absolute must for forums with reference to eGovernment discussions, architecting work and information exchange to be established as soon as possible.

The second paper is written by Åke Grönlund and contains a broad problem analysis of the action plan. Grönlund contributes to the discussion by claiming that the Swedish Government's Action Plan on eGovernment offers old wine (focussed on technology rather than on services; production-centred rather than needs-based) in old bottles (closed political systems rather than open infrastructure; no measurements and, consequently, no incentives for government agencies to change). He analyzes the action plan based on an Enterprise Architecture integration perspective and shows why the proposed measures are not productive, and proposes an alternative route to remedy the shortcomings. The fundamental underpinning idea is that an open infrastructure should replace one negotiated in a piecemeal manner by the largest stakeholders. The paper proposes an open information infrastructure model to replace the one based on politics and negotiations suggested in the action plan. Within the Swedish government model Grönlund argues that such an infrastructure has to be placed under the jurisdiction of a dedicated agency.

The third paper is written by Göran Goldkuhl who explores the contrast between 1) the rhetoric and visions in Swedish national eGovernment policy and 2) practical problems in real eGovernment development. In this respect Goldkuhl especially explores possibilities and obstacles for an innovative eGovernment development in relation to the highly regulated environment of public administration. A case study on eGovernment development (allowances for personal assistance to disabled persons) is used for analysis and illustration. Different kinds of regulations are investigated (general administrative regulations, domain-specific regulations, eGovernment policies) and their roles as barriers and enablers are identified. The value balancing between different sets of regulations is seen as a key issue in how to establish an eGovernment with a high degree of process innovation. The paper advocates for a value balancing process characterized as a systemic approach with identifying and prioritizing basic values. Value balancing is in this article investigated through a socio-pragmatic framework on institutions and interpreted as a kind of meta-institutional activity.

The fourth paper is written by Ulf Melin and contains a theoretical analysis of the action plan. Melin analyses the action plan based on three dimensions; (1) the relationship between information systems and organizational change, (2) process orientation, and (3) coordination. The analysis shows that the action plan contains an overall rational perspective on the relationship between information systems and organizational change; several rather specific impacts are forecasted using e.g. e-services in public administration. Rational choices when designing information systems for public administration are assumed to be made based on business needs, citizen needs and business processes. According to Melin, an almost unlimited choice over technological options and an explicit ambition to control the consequences are also outlined in the action plan. The process perspective is also very present in the action plan promoting a horizontal view of public administration and e-services as an antithesis to the vertical, rigid "silos" often reported in government organizations. As such, the action plan is also found to have an innovative view of IT, but a more moderate and reformist view of internal government organizations. According to Melin, the action plan represents an overall top-down approach to eGovernment, providing a framework within which to develop eGovernment. Furthermore, the customer/client needs are expressed explicitly in the action plan, in several contexts

and combined with internal efficiency efforts in a balanced way. Several aspects of coordination are also identified in the analysis, for example regarding standardization.

The fifth paper is written by Åsa Wallström, Anne Engström, Esmail Salehi-Sangari, and Maria Ek Styvén who reflect critically on the action plan from a marketing perspective. They show that the action plan stresses that “the need of the user should always be an important starting-point in the efforts made by administrations to develop eServices”. But, is that the picture communicated in the action plan, they ask? The discussion focuses on citizens as consumers of public e-services and argues that benefits from a market-oriented approach could support organizations in their development of public e-services. Developing online services based on knowledge of citizens’ needs, behaviors, and attitudes presents possibilities for creating customer-oriented services that increase productivity while delivering added value for citizens.

The sixth and last paper is written by Katarina Giritli-Nygren who adopts a labour process perspective in her analysis. She uses two different analytical aspects of organisational life, *the rhetoric of management* and *the reality of work*, as a context for discussing some implications of the action plan. Giritli-Nygren shows that through the lens of these dimensions it becomes obvious that the invisible values within the action plan are embedded in the rhetoric of management and the visible values are found in the reality of work.

## References

Regeringskansliet (2008). “eGovernment Action Plan,” drafted by the eGroup and the State Secretary Group for eGovernment Coordination, Annexe 1 of Government Decision 17 January 2008, no. 8.