

**MAKING QUALITY SUSTAINABLE: CO-DESIGN, CO-DECIDE, CO-PRODUCE, CO-EVALUATE**

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## **MAKING QUALITY SUSTAINABLE: CO-DESIGN, CO-DECIDE, CO-PRODUCE AND CO-EVALUATE**

### **THE QUALITY JOURNEY TO 4QC**

The 4QC conference in Tampere has had a lot to live up to. The previous conferences in Lisbon (2000), Copenhagen (2002) and Rotterdam (2004) have shown that the government of virtually every European country is concerned to improve the quality of its public sector. So already there have been hundreds of good practice cases and agoras.

Looking at the QC cycle there is a logical sequence.

- 1QC in Lisbon (2000) was about “Sharing Best Practices”. This first round of good or best practices was about sharing these experiences. It demonstrated the common space in Europe for a high quality public sector.
- 2QC in Copenhagen (2002) was about “Innovation, Change, and Partnership”, three requirements for maintaining quality in public sectors in Europe.
- 3QC in Rotterdam (2004) was about “Making Opportunities Work”. There is a need to keep the strengths. There is a need to watch threats and weaknesses. But there is a need to focus on opportunities and make these work.

Sharing is crucial. Innovation and change are essential. Focusing on opportunities is indispensable. But building sustainability and constructing irreversibility is the next step – so the theme for 4QC in Tampere (2006), ‘Making Quality Sustainable’, is therefore highly timely.

“Seven years is not a long time for this project”  
Vice-President Al Gore at 3QC in Rotterdam, 2004

“Reforms take time – and they are often hard to reconcile with short-term political time scales”  
OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría, at 4QC in Tampere, 2006

It is clear that long term quality strategies cannot just consist of a series of short term initiatives. Indeed, there are indications that an overdose of initiatives can result in reform fatigue or loss of political interest.

But providing old answers to new questions is also a matter of concern. Over the six years since 1QC, Europe has witnessed the steady growth of a set of new environmental challenges. These include:

-growing economic and digital inequalities across particular societies, generations and between certain countries

-demographic change: the ageing of populations brings widespread and various problems for a range of public services, including health and social care, pensions and housing (but also opportunities as today's pensioners are quite fit and desire to be useful to society)  
-migration: this has become a major political issue but it is also a great administrative challenge, both for countries that face high net emigration and those who deal with high net immigration

A key point here is that none of these challenges can be solved by governments acting alone. *Cooperative solutions* are required, not only in the form of co-operation between governments but also through co-operation between governments (centrally, regionally, locally), civil society associations and other stakeholders such as the media and business. To imagine that immigrants can be successfully absorbed without the co-operation of the immigrants' own organizations, or that the elderly (and our children) can remain healthy and active without the co-operation of the food industry and media campaigns is foolish. The achievement of continuing stakeholder participation is a pre-requisite for the achievement of sustainable solutions.

For all these reasons "Making Quality Sustainable" is a timely issue. In this report we will outline a model for a co-operative approach as a key to long term, sustained improvement of public service quality. In some respects it is an ambitious model, and many of the good practice cases presented at 4QC fell well short of what we are about to suggest. But, as you will see, some cases do not fall short. In the most interesting cases we can see, here or there, all the features we are about to discuss. This is a strong indication that our co-operative model is not just an academic abstraction, but rather something which can be achieved by public servants, politicians, citizens and other stakeholders – when they work together co-operatively in a climate of mutual trust and respect.

## **THE QCs IN THE LIGHT OF THESE CHALLENGES**

If we look back at the previous QCs, our overall impression is that:

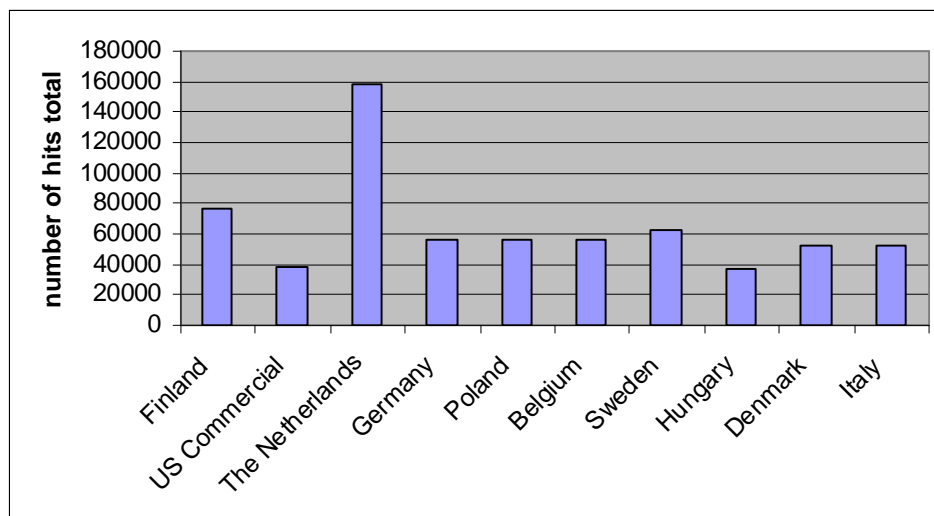
-there are many quality initiatives but their overall impact remains ambiguous (surveys of citizen trust and satisfaction do not yet show significant upward trends) (Van de Walle *et al.*, 2005)  
-some challenges are still seldom addressed (e.g. migration). We know that these issues are being discussed in other *fora*, but they do not yet make a big impact at the QCs  
-good practice case studies are too often inward-looking, and have a bureaucratic/technical character ("we applied CAF like this ...etc"). More outward-looking innovations such as participatory budgeting are not featured at QCs although, again, they are highly topical in other *fora*.  
-too many innovations fade. Our follow-up of good practice cases presented at previous QCs produced rather disappointing feedback (see below)

A quick count of the participants at 4QC suggests that about 20% of those in Tampere attended Lisbon (2000), 40% attended Copenhagen (2002), and 75% attended Rotterdam (2004). This is good news in terms of sustainability because it means there is now a European network of public officials who are interested in public sector quality and in meeting with their peers from other European countries. However, these figures also suggest the need to widen the audience and to bring in new participants with new ideas and different innovations.

Furthermore, a lot of these past initiatives have not been developed further. A telephone survey of former ‘best practice’ presenters undertaken by the three scientific rapporteurs revealed that only 31% percent of the “best practice” cases presented at the previous conference in Rotterdam have been continued in some form or other. And 8% of the cases are no longer operational because the project was finished or the responsible staff left.

What is most alarming is that in 61% percent of the cases it proved to be impossible to find out what happened to the 3QC best practice case, although we used the email address given in the case study and phoned the contact person or the switchboard. It was especially disconcerting that in many cases the staff who answered the phone had never heard of the project concerned, even when they were contacted in their native language. In other cases, the enquiry could not get very far, as the contact points did not speak any English or other official EU languages. In a number of cases, the contact person simply did not respond at all, in spite of multiple emails and phone calls. This all adds up to the fact that the scope of dissemination of best practice from the 3QC cases is very limited.

Another interesting issue is to what degree previous “best practice” cases have been used as a source for learning and transferring innovation. If we consider the number of website visits to former conference websites as a proxy for the interest of the international community in learning from ‘best practice’ the following picture emerges (Graph 1)



Graph 1: Usage of the 3QC conference website from August 2003-December 2005: 'Who was asking information at [www.3qconference.org](http://www.3qconference.org) ?'

From this table (and additional information) we may conclude:

- in a number of countries such as France and the UK the number of 3QC website users is so low that they do not even figure in the above graph
- the graph also shows US commercial as an unexpected user of the 3QC website. Indeed, time series revealed that it became the most important user after the 3QC conference.
- It is striking that most countries with a strong user community have launched national quality initiatives and events with high visibility which provided a link to 3QC, as was the case with the 2005 Quality Conference for Public Services in Belgium.

These results suggest that systematic learning from international practice is still quite limited. And this is borne out by the case studies at 4QC – only a few of the cases presented in Tampere suggested that they had learned from practice elsewhere. This even applies in the field of e-government, where there is enormous similarity in the types of project which are being pursued in most EU countries.

In this report, we highlight some of the key lessons and concerns which have emerged during the conference and relate them specifically to the issue of sustainability.

## **THE SUSTAINABILITY CYCLE**

As we pointed out at the previous European Quality Conference in Rotterdam, improving the quality of public services and the quality of life of citizens means embarking on a long-term journey with changing destinations (Pollitt, Bouckaert and Löffler, 2005). Some travelers will leave the journey while new ones join, and along the way we all make expected and unexpected discoveries. Of course, two years is only a short time but, nevertheless, the Tampere conference indicates that some progress has been made within this period – and, as Al Gore suggested to us at 3QC, we have to recognize that this is going to be a long term project.

### **Making Quality Sustainable**

To make quality sustainable it seems that strategies of participation and knowledge on needs and performance are essential.

This implies that public agencies evolve

-from a closed, self-centered service provider to an open networking organisation which public trust in society through transparent processes and accountability and through democratic dialogue

-from an internal (resources and activities) focus to an external (output and outcome) focus

-and from a classical design-decision-production-evaluation cycle to an involvement of stakeholders in general, and citizens (as customers) in particular *at each and every stage*.

The traditional orientation in the public sector is in principle very internal and supply-driven. Public sector organizations are closed systems, or even 'black boxes', where all design of policies and service delivery, the related decisions taken, the production and delivery of services, and the evaluation by definition depend upon internal relationships. There were several reasons why this appeared to be a good solution. Legal requirements emphasized equal, impartial treatment of citizens. Only a distant approach was supposed to guarantee this. Also, professionals and expert-bureaucrats had the necessary expertise about needs, priorities, and resources and policies that could remedy certain problems.

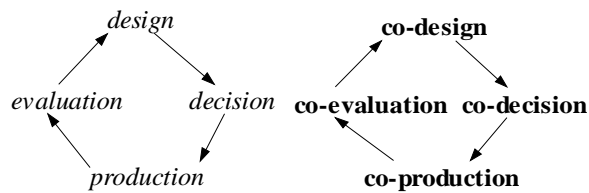
However, complex needs in an increasingly heterogeneous society, the demand for increased transparency, changing perceptions of the legitimacy of governments, and the need to get citizens involved resulted in an opening-up of the 'black box' to citizens. Increasingly, public agencies turn into externally-oriented and demand-driven organisations, developing new types of interactions and relationships with a variety of stakeholders for different sets of tasks. As a number of 4QC 'good practice' cases show this proves to be an important prerequisite in maintaining attention on quality.

A second shift is the focus of attention of the public sector. As well as looking at resources and activities, there is now also a monitoring of outputs and of the related intermediate and end outcomes of public sector activities. Again, this correlates with the previous shift from an inward to an outward focus of attention.

This move to assess the outcomes and impacts has the potential to make the approach to quality in the public sector more sustainable. Yet this move is far from universal. In several quality models there is a prescribed focus on 'facilitators', mainly linked to internal resources and activities, and to 'results'. Even where officially there is supposed to be a 50/50 division of the 'weight' between these (as in EFQM or CAF), in practice a recent survey of CAF users demonstrated that about 80% of their focus is on internal issues (EIPA, 2005; Thijs and Staes, 2006).

It is crucial however to look at quantities and qualities of outputs, and at related outcomes, to keep a policy or an organization heading in the right direction.

An issue of fundamental importance to the sustainability of quality improvement is the level of involvement of other stakeholders, particularly service users and citizens, during the entire cycle of service. Again, a traditional cycle consist of design of policies and services, its decision, its production, and (hopefully) its evaluation. The move to an outward looking public sector organization which opens the 'black box' and also looks at output and outcome levels can only be sustainably guaranteed if citizens are involved in a participatory approach at all stages. As graph 2 shows the sustainability cycle involves the following stages:



Graph 2: The shift to co-design, co-decision, co-production, and co-evaluation

To avoid misinterpretation, we should immediately acknowledge that the real world does not always proceed in neat rational cycles. Experience in production can lead back to changes in design, and evaluation findings can affect any of the stages. What is more, decisions are taken at all stages, not only at the point where a formal commitment is made to a chosen design. Nevertheless, as a heuristic device, the idea of a four stage cycle is useful in allowing us to order our thoughts.

In practice the involvement of stakeholders throughout the sustainability cycle has many gaps. Box 1 shows ten common reasons why this happens. It is worth noticing how each of these reasons for failure is connected in some way with a failure to co-operate.

1. They are political pet projects (sometimes launched to gain publicity at some significant time such as an election). Being identified with a particular politician or party, they are ditched when that individual moves on or that party loses power.
2. They run up against the sensitivities of the upper level officials when the latter realize that quality methods involve co-decisionmaking (with rank-and-file staff, clients, stakeholders) in ways that apparently reduces their hierarchical authority.
3. Similarly to 2 above, in highly professionalized organizations such as hospitals or universities, quality schemes wither away if they appear to be separate from or rivals to existing professional procedures for ensuring standards. The other occupational groups may use the new methods but the top professionals ignore them or actively resist participation (Joss and Kogan, 1995).
4. The initial choice of technique is inappropriate for the particular organizational context. For example, an elaborate, form-filling approach is chosen for a group of staff who have traditionally enjoyed high discretion, or a system that depends on exact measurement is suddenly applied to an organization which has previously used few if any quantitative measures.
5. Improvement schemes are launched with special, additional/earmarked staff and/or money, and when the additional support disappears, the project fades away
6. Those launching the initiative make great claims for it early on, promising 'transformation' 'empowerment' etc. When the actual results are much more modest other staff lose trust in the leaders, and it becomes very difficult to 'embed' the initiative. This is particularly likely to happen when a project is visibly led by consultants from outside the organization.
7. They rely on trained staff but the training is once-only, and the trained staff

- subsequently move on to other posts or organizations (Zbaracki, 1997). Gradually there is no-one left who knows how to do it.
8. They never manage to spread from the enthusiastic minority to the unenthusiastic majority. So they don't take root, and once the (originally enthusiastic) minority gets busy with other things they gently fade away.
  9. Schemes are succeeded by another, newer reform fashion. This often happens in high-intensity reform countries such as the UK or the USA. The result has been called both 'reform fatigue' and 'redisorganization' (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993)
  10. Last, but not least, schemes become bureaucratized. They become box-ticking, formal exercises, only loosely coupled (if at all) to actual results. So they do survive, but only as organizational deadweight. This has happened to some public sector annual appraisal systems.

Box 1: Ten ways in which quality improvement projects sometimes fail to be sustainable

We therefore wish to advance the benefits of the co-design, co-decision, co-production, and co-evaluation model. In the following sections we will set out its implications and we will show that each element in the model is already present and achieved in some of the 4QC good practice cases, or, alternatively, in other examples which are not yet part of QC.

## **From Design to Co-design**

The design of innovations in public administration is crucial. The design phase plots the course for crucial later decisions, for the operational 'production' of services and for the evaluation (and evaluability) of the innovations themselves. Designing innovations is a creative process which cannot be reduced to a simple formula. One of the impressive features of 4QC, as of its predecessors, is the evidence the 'best practice' cases offer of a tremendous diversity of initial launching points and early plans.

However, celebrating diversity is not enough by itself. We need to look more closely at the design process so as to try to draw out some common elements or principles that can be discussed and transferred.

A first general point is that the very possibility of innovation is heavily dependent on the local organizational culture. In some - probably many - European public sector organizations innovation is still regarded with suspicion. Changes, if they come at all, are expected to come from the top, often in the form of an imposing-sounding 'comprehensive strategy'. [We see this even in some of the case studies offered by EU institutions!] Proposals for change from the middle or lower ranks are not expected, not welcome, and, therefore, not often even attempted. Proposals from outside are even worse - outsiders trying to interfere in 'our business'. However, as the Polish case on accurate tax collection explained, customer opinions are often the most valuable source of inspiration. **A prime responsibility of management is therefore to create and**

**communicate an open, supportive attitude towards suggestions for improvement, wherever they come from.** There are various ways of doing this, and the particular style in which a welcoming attitude is communicated will vary with local norms and styles, but the basic point is that innovation should be encouraged and should be seen to be encouraged. The Helsinki City Library, for example, not only has a 15 year history of quality development in which each major initiative is extensively discussed with staff, it also has a system which offers library users several means of giving feedback, *and informs those giving feedback what measures have been taken in response to their comments.*

A further example would be the case of the Rotterdam and Rijnmond police force. The development and implementation of ICT for re-engineering the issuing and processing of police tickets was strongly driven by staff. This included 3500 police officers, 35 administrative police staff and a number of staff of public prosecution agency. The case description reports that “...*on one hand, involving these parties led to development of a good product and on the other it created support for the project.*”

A second point is that the design process should itself model the way you will later implement and evaluate the innovation. **The innovation may come from anywhere, anyhow, but once it is on the agenda it is important to include a wide spectrum of views and stakeholders in its early development.** So the design phase is not one in which a chosen few inside the house work out all the plans, and then later seek consultation. ‘Start as you mean to go on’ as the English saying goes – so if you want your service innovation to involve staff or user participation, begin to seek that participation even in the design phase. And in the Chartermark-winning case of Dyke House School in Hartlepool, UK, it is clear that the head teacher and deputy involved a very wide range of other local institutions and groups from an early stage. In the case of the development of a new approach to the care of people dying in hospital, the Irish Health Service Executive and the Irish Hospice Foundation quickly set up a Project Committee which included a wide range of stakeholders – people from the community, representatives from the Hospice Foundation and not just clinical staff but also administrative and household staff from the hospitals themselves. The Provençal Family Assistance Association sums it up well: ‘The quality process is a participative process which requires the involvement of many sectors’.

A third point is that, however good the original idea, **it is always advisable to conduct an early search to see what others (in one’s own sector and country, but also in other sectors and countries) have done.** In some of the best practice cases there is explicit mention of this stage, but in others there is no reference to the improvement team ever looking outside their own organization. Fortunately, the existence of the internet means that scanning the experience of others is now far quicker and easier than ever before. Helsinki City Library has taken ideas ‘from all over the world’, and offers comparative performance statistics with libraries in many other major European cities. The Irish project to improve the care of people dying in hospital drew upon international best practice standards in palliative care. When the Lithuanian administration wanted to

introduce a one-contact approach they looked at experience in Austria, Latvia and Estonia.

A fourth issue which arises during the design phase is that of defining standards and/or other kinds of performance criteria. Many authorities on quality emphasize that **without clear standards or measurable targets quality improvement efforts can easily degenerate into ‘feel-good’ rhetoric and rituals, the effects of which on final outcomes are highly uncertain.** A key point here is that other stakeholders than top management need to have their voices heard in standard-setting. Unless front-line staff make an input, the standards set may be unrealistic. Worse, unless users/citizens have a voice the standards set may be simply irrelevant (important for the bureaucracy, but not important for those actually using the service). The first version of the UK Citizen’s Charter, in the early 1990s, included standards decided upon by the civil service into which there had been zero organized input by the citizens in whose name the Charter was announced. Standard-setting is not, however, a once-only business. Continuous improvement implies the regular re-setting of standards. The Provençal Family Assistance Association found that an annual improvement plan was important for sustainability – ‘to keep the process going’.

This issue of standard setting manifests itself in a particularly acute form in the many cases where a public service has been contracted out. There is an implication here that such contracts must include defined standards, but can only do so if the public authorities have already carried out an analysis of citizen priorities and expectations, to inform the design process. We found very few good practice cases which addressed this increasingly important issue.

**A fifth and final point about the design stage is that it needs to design not only the decision and production stages, but also the eventual evaluation stage.** Many evaluations are weakened because there is no baseline – no measure of what service quality was before the innovation. This is often because evaluation is not thought much about until the ‘show is already on the road’. [This is particularly relevant where a service is contracted out, and the evaluation procedure may well need to be written into the contract.] So evaluations – and therefore learning – can be much improved if a) it is thought about early on and b) a wide spectrum of stakeholders are involved (a particular version of the second general point above). What do staff want to know from an evaluation? What do users want to know? What do sponsors want to know? Evaluation is not just a tool for management. One way of securing early evaluative information is to launch pilot projects, which can be monitored by committees containing all key stakeholders. Pilot projects do not suit all services or all situations, but they have already been extensively used and can probably be applied even more widely.

## **From Decision to Co-decision**

Co-decision supports sustainability of quality because citizens come to see themselves as 'owning' these decisions. Also citizens may become more knowledgeable through the debate which precedes decisions, and this creates more legitimacy. It is clear that participation in itself may increase satisfaction.

There were not too many examples of co-decision in the cluster of cases presented at 4QC in Tampere.

One very obvious and famous example is participatory budgeting, as in Porto Alegre, but also in European cities such as Saint-Denis in France or Sevilla in Spain. While more complex, this form of co-decision may strengthen the quality of our democracies whilst ensuring responsive public services meeting agreed priorities within the community.

A second type of co-decision is devolving budget envelopes to neighbourhoods. Again there were not too many examples of this type of co-decision, where neighbourhood councils or platforms decide on how to spend their envelopes on e.g. playgrounds for children, or public gardens, or street lights. It creates a higher level of responsibility and ownership of the neighbourhoods by those who live there. However, as public budgets are getting increasingly tighter, many local authorities have delegated the allocation of funds for particular associations or projects to umbrella organisations or community chests. A particularly good practice of such a participatory community chest can be found in Bradford, UK.

A third example are referenda as an input for formal decisions. This has been traditional in Switzerland, but it is becoming increasingly common in other European countries to shape co-decision. Until the late 1980s, the only German *Land* whose local government statute provided for local referenda was Baden-Württemberg. In the 1990s, all *Länder* introduced binding (i.e. not merely consultative) referenda. However, the threshold for launching an initiative varies significantly across Germany: whereas in some districts of Hamburg only 2 per cent of local voters have to sign, the threshold in Dresden is 15 per cent.

## **From Production to Co-production**

Once decisions are taken, production and implementation are emerging.

Co-producing services increases the sustainability of quality because the production becomes co-owned and because the way of producing becomes more visible and therefore more understandable (there are fewer 'black boxes'), and therefore more legitimate.

Co-production is a complex term since it implies a permanent or temporary involvement of different actors in different stages of a sometimes complex production cycle.

Co-production is a *conditio sine qua non* for a sustainable public sector in general, and for specific service deliveries in particular.

In education, co-production may mean co-teaching. For example, the London borough of Lambeth trains its Youth Council members to become Peer Educators in secondary schools and youth groups across Lambeth to convey the appropriate messages to their peers to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. Of course, education not only takes place in schools but as the African saying reminds us “it takes a whole village to educate a child”. Indeed, co-production is increasingly practiced in sports and youth clubs which no longer just provide activities for children and young people but give them responsibility for the maintenance of sports facilities and meeting rooms. Last but not least, the school dinners initiative of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver in the UK has shown us that the participation of children may result in noticeable improvements to outcomes, such as making them appreciate healthy food. All these activities are essential for a comprehensive education of a child and go well beyond a limited focus on schools.

The same applies to other ‘services’ like e.g. health (hospitals), social services for specific target groups (minorities, elderly), museums, fire services, nature reserves, etc.

The actors involved in co-production can include, of course, private sector firms or other external providers. Both PPPs and contracted out services can involve either for-profit firms or non-profit associations, or a mixture of both. However, here we want to emphasise that it can also include citizens (as customers) individually (as a parent, as a guide, as a fire service volunteer) or collectively (e.g. faith based organisations for social services, not-for-profit associations for park maintenance) who play a role in the service (at some stage from its planning, through its delivery, to eventual monitoring and evaluation). Their input is time and expertise or perhaps their fundraising efforts or sometimes just their expression of preferences and priorities – vital information for public officials who are planning services.

Their involvement could be active or passive. Timewise, this involvement could be permanent (recurrent service delivery like e.g. assisting in a library) or temporary (during peak moments), or even ‘on call’ (e.g. volunteers of fire services are also ‘on call’ when there is a fire or a calamity).

This involvement could be from the back office or from the front office (desk and window service).

A significant difference is co-production as a kind of self-service, or as other-service. To a certain extent, electronic government requires people to download documents and submit information, and to be structurally involved in the production in a self-service mode. A different story is when people assist others in delivering services.

A special case of co-production is co-management. Here, there is an involvement in guidance and control of an organisation. Managerial participation requires a special type

of involvement and has an impact on the distribution of responsibilities for e.g. citizens in neighbourhood park maintenance, or parent governors in schools.

However, there are some challenges in co-production. The real challenge is the relationship between professionals and volunteers since professionals do not always take them seriously and tend to be patronising so volunteers get frustrated and give up. It is also necessary to consider a possible and deliberate trade-off between professionalism and representation of staff in the organisation. Finally, there is a need to make explicit arrangements on responsibility and accountability – citizens quickly become disillusioned or frustrated unless they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. There are also dangers in co-production: delivery capture by one of the citizen/customer groups is a possibility.

Six issues emerge from a co-production agenda.

There is a shift from an organisation based production focus to a 'chain' based production and delivery of services. A good example is the food-chain. The case of the Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain demonstrates the necessity to expand the chain of production beyond single public sector organisations to keep sustainable quality control.

Increased numbers of agencies, part of the general trend within OECD countries to disintegrate major ministries into autonomous entities, means that steps need to be taken to counteract the risk of fragmented silo-production. The more there is a shift to autonomous arrangements in the back office of the public sector, and the more there is a one-stop-shop window policy, the more there will be a need to get a range of internal customers involved and integrate them in a co-production model. The Vilnius one-stop-shop example demonstrates this clearly.

Vertical chain production within the context of intergovernmental relations, between local government, provincial authorities, regional and central, but also European institutions, also requires a co-production philosophy and practice. Citizens cannot and should not have to distinguish between different levels of government. Intergovernmental relations is another variation on the theme of co-production, and one which is desperately needed.

Outcomes are by definition co-produced. Security, anti-corruption, trust, or a good environment all require the active (or passive) collaboration by citizens or customers. Whether it is neighbourhood watch, or separating garbage for split garbage collection, or building trust in major institutions – these all require co-production. Citizens should not just trust their public institutions but these public institutions should also trust their citizens and customers in a sufficient and functional way to realise a particular level of outcomes.

Self-service through e-government and ICT increasingly involves the citizen as citizen and as customer in the production process. The SMS-case of Chomutov in Czech Republic is a clear example of this.

Finally, horizontal co-production relies on volunteers, not-for-profit organisations, and faith-based organisations. The Dutch Living Library is a clear example of such synergy. The Human Library is a bookmobile set up as a conversation space. In this Human Library project, visitors have the opportunity to speak informally with “people on loan”. The subjects include social biases, especially towards ethnic minorities. It is a concrete, easily transferable and affordable way of spreading some tolerance and understanding. It is a ‘keep it simple’ contribution to the cohesion our society so desperately needs.

## **From Evaluation to Co-evaluation**

In the public sector, we have too often experienced low quality services, which have generated and perpetuated low expectations. The result has been great dissatisfaction and frustration, but not much action (Gaster, 1995, p.1). The increasing number of quality initiatives at each European Quality Conference has demonstrated that quality of service has indeed been improving. But what has been the effect of this so far? Are users now more satisfied than in the past? Or are they simply more dissatisfied because their expectations have been rising faster than the quality of the services they have been getting? And what has been the cost of all these quality improvement projects? In particular, have the benefits outweighed the costs?

In order to answer these questions we need to carry out evaluation. However, the normal reaction to being evaluated or inspected is to avoid it if possible. This even applies to some degree in the UK, which has a long-standing reputation of having more auditors, inspectors and regulators than taxi-drivers (Hood, James, Jones, Scott and Travers, 1998). Indeed, when we compare the control regimes in the public sectors across Europe a great imbalance becomes evident. Whereas public agencies in the UK have to undergo a high number of mandatory inspections and audits every year external evaluations are much less common in other European countries. So there is a need to address this imbalance – a bit less evaluation in the UK may give public agencies more time to focus on their core business, while more external evaluations in other countries would give public agencies much needed feed-back on their quality improvement activities.

Yet, more and more public agencies in those countries which have a less rigid control regime in government than in the UK are now carrying out self-assessments based on the CAF. This shows that attitudes towards evaluation are changing. Indeed, the CAF-Centre at the European Institute for Public Administration reports more than 1000 registered CAF-users by 2005. Clearly, self-assessment is normally better for organisational learning than the inspection by external auditors who may have little understanding of the context of an organisation. At the same time, self-assessments may easily become myopic and self-deluding, in particular, if a public agency has not clearly defined targets and strategic objectives at the start of the exercise. And there is another risk which has

emerged from the 4QC ‘best practice’ cases based on the CAF and other assessment tools: given the lack of evidence of any service improvements there is the risk that the tool becomes an objective in itself.

In fact, **an assessment tool cannot be a replacement for a proper quality management system**, which presupposes a shared understanding of quality within the organisation, the definition of strategic objectives and, related to the objectives, the specification of appropriate targets. As we pointed out above, the objectives and targets already need to be defined during the design phase of a quality project.

At the same time, it is encouraging to find that a significant number of ‘best practice’ cases have used quality measures to produce a baseline against which to assess changes in the level of quality. Obviously, the types of measures which have been used to measure quality depend on the underlying objectives of each quality improvement project and the type of services involved. Nevertheless, some key trends emerge:

- Many ‘best practice’ cases report efficiency gains and savings achieved. This is particularly true of ICT projects which focus on automation of processes and simplification of procedures. It suggests that ‘doing more with less’ is still a strong driver of quality initiatives. However, it is often unclear whether these efficiency savings for the public agency outweigh the costs of the ICT project itself. The overall effect on productivity is also unclear.
- Indeed, there is very little information relating to the financial costs and staff time invested in quality initiatives. There is also the implicit notion in some cases that, if a project is financed externally, then it does not cost anything. In practice, of course, the time which staff spent on the project involves very real opportunity costs – their time might have been spent on activities with a higher added-value.
- It is also encouraging that public sector organisations are now seeking to assess the results of quality initiatives not only through objective performance data but also through the perceptions of service users. Typically, such qualitative approaches are based on opinion surveys and explore the level of user satisfaction. Of course, some important issues remain e.g. user surveys do not gauge the views and opinions of current non-users and likely future users.

More generally, when it comes to vulnerable and disadvantaged users, it is becoming recognised that more active forms of dialogue are often more effective than surveys - this can take the form of user panels, focus groups or quality action groups. For example, the Dutch Ministry of Finance (in a 4QC agora presentation) shows how a focus group with disabled people helped them to simplify benefit claim forms.

However, there is little evidence from the 4QC presentations that users or other stakeholders are encouraged or trained to take part in the monitoring and evaluation of service quality. Nevertheless, there are already many case studies in Europe of citizens being involved in the evaluation of services. An example of a real bottom-up initiative is the citizen panel in Bobigny in France which audits the local authority and publishes an annual report which is presented to the mayor in a public meeting. In the UK, tenants of

social housing are recruited to work as 'tenant inspection advisors', joining the inspection teams which assess the quality of social housing providers, in order to ensure that inspection remains clearly focused on the customer's experience of housing services. A famous example comes from Seoul, where the City Government involves citizens in inspections of bars and restaurants. Honorary food and sanitation monitors are selected from people working in 10 consumer organizations and 5 NGOs organizations, after their credentials are reviewed. Training to up-grade the skills of honorary food and sanitation monitors is carried out once a year and on-the-job instruction is often given during checks of food and sanitation premises. As citizens become more educated and want to be better informed there will be increasing pressure on public agencies to admit citizens and interest groups as co-evaluators.

Clearly, the availability of performance information on its own cannot improve quality. Performance measurement "needs to be part of a policy and culture that welcomes and uses the results of measurement to assess and develop the level and type of quality required by the organisation's values and objectives" (Gaster and Squires, 2003, p. 91). This is particularly a danger with self-assessments – although they may come up with interesting diagnoses and proposals, they are less likely to be effective if there is not a performance-oriented culture. In such cases, only external threats (e.g. from inspections) are likely to stimulate real improvement.

However, the increasing use of the CAF in Europe and elsewhere indicates that more and more public agencies are eager to use performance information for organisational learning and development and not simply for control and accountability. One precondition for such learning to happen is that the results of such exercises have to be communicated to all staff in a comprehensible way and relate to their everyday work. Some 4QC case descriptions suggest that this still remains a major challenge to performance managers. Of course, the communication of identified weaknesses within a public agency requires a great deal of trust - otherwise it may set in motion the dysfunctional reactions associated with the old 'blame culture'. It is striking that given the importance of trust as a key asset in a learning culture, there are no indications in any 4QC presentation that trust is measured within public agencies on a regular or systematic basis.

By the same token, there is an increasing recognition that it is not sufficient to pay lip-service to transparency - public agencies need to make more information available to external stakeholders on organisational performance and service quality. Of course, when done badly this is less a communication initiative and more a subsidy to the printing industry – e.g. where thick reports are published and circulated to every household. Indeed, public officials and politicians are often quite disappointed to learn that, in spite of big and costly information campaigns, citizens are still uninformed and continue to ask the same questions again and again. However, this does not mean that citizens are uninterested in all public issues. Actually, research suggests that we all care strongly about at least one public issue. So the challenge is not to provide as much information as possible to all citizens but rather to provide each stakeholder group *only* with relevant information about the issue it really cares about, through a communication channel which

it regularly uses. At the same time, we need to assess the quality of information given out. Again, there is no indication in any 4QC case that a public agency asks service users and the public at large how easy it is for them to access the information they need and how useful they find information which is provided to them.

The same applies to diversity. Even though it is now widely recognised that diversity within government and society is an asset, the County Administrative Board of Stockholm and the Cabinet Office in the UK were the only agencies which presented performance measures for diversity at 4QC.

Similarly, many keynote speeches underlined the importance of equal access to services, which remains a particularly important value in the French context, as stressed by Mr. Plagnol in his keynote speech. Other plenary presentations considered citizen participation and social capital as key in solving social problems and producing outcomes which matter to citizens. As Mr. Wutscher pointed out “the barriers to citizen participation are not technology-driven but have social, cultural and intellectual reasons”. Therefore, it is important to measure who participates, who doesn’t and why. Again, there was hardly any example in the 4QC cases of such measurement, even though the agora on citizen participation indicated that there is a lot of concern about reaching out to those who do not get their fair share of services.

Last but not least, it was surprising that not a single ‘best practice’ case attempted to measure sustainability. Indeed, most case descriptions paid little attention to this issue, even though this was the theme of 4QC.

## **CONSOLIDATING THE QUALITY PICTURE**

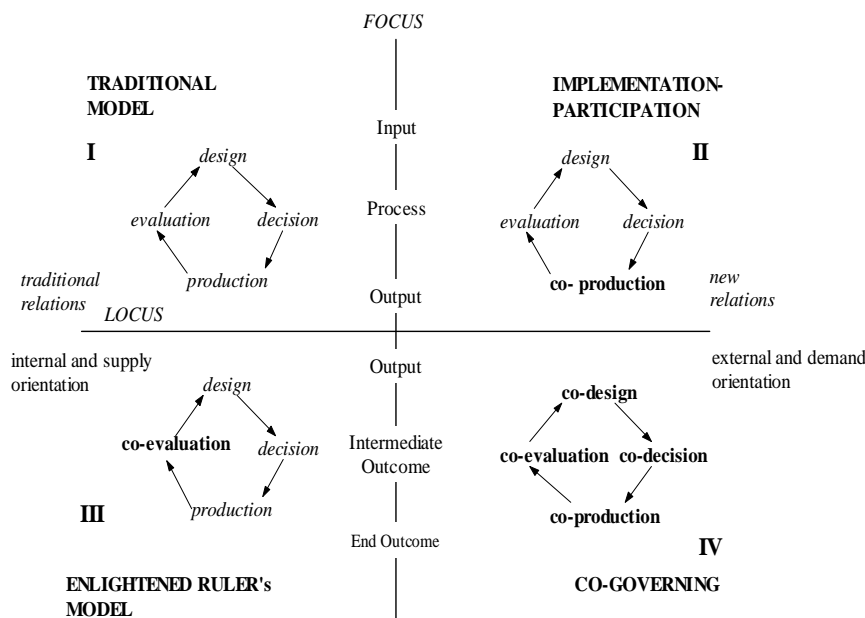
So where does this leave us? The case studies presented at Tampere continue the tradition of highlighting the wide variety of innovative practices in the European public sector which has been the hallmark of all the European Quality conferences to date. There are some encouraging aspects in consolidating the components we have just described.

In a traditional model (Quadrant I, graph 3), there is a dominance of internal activities which are supply driven and with a focus on inputs and processes. Citizens as consumers are not involved at all. There is a focus on the quality of resource spending, due process, and activities. It is assumed that this will lead to a well performing public sector, especially since legality of interventions is central. Ultimately, this appears to be necessary but insufficient for a recognized, visible and sustainable level of quality.

Quadrant II gets citizens (as customers) on board for implementation, as co-producers. There is an outward looking orientation of the public sector organizations. However, there remains a focus on resources and activities. Taking volunteers on board is predominantly for cost reasons, to remedy peaks of delivery, or to deliver supplementary elements. Museums, schools, social services, but also fire brigades happen to be often in this corner of the service map.

Quadrant III remains in the closed shop for design, decision and production. There is, however, an awareness that citizens (as customers) have something to tell. Surveys are being organized by the administration, also on issues of quality of output, satisfaction, perceived effects, sometimes even about expectations of delivery and standards, or willingness to pay for services. This information is judged and evaluated and may be taken on board by those designing, deciding, and producing.

Quadrant IV is the most developed part. It integrates co-production and co-evaluation, but adds also co-design and co-decision. These two crucial participative steps are only possible if there is a combined external and open orientation with a focus on outputs and outcomes. This results in co-governing.



Graph 3: Models for sustainability in the public sector (Van Dooren, Thijs and Bouckaert, 2004, p.99; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1995, p.163)

We see, therefore, that the debate on quality has come a long way since the founders of the European Quality Conferences set to work. As the notion of quality has expanded from a question of applying technical solutions to a broader agenda of consultation and participation so ‘quality’ has outgrown its original ‘home’. We can now see that – if sustainable quality really is the goal – reformers must move beyond purely administrative considerations. They must co-operate with politicians and with citizens. They must steadily expand the range of matters on which stakeholders are ‘part of the process’, with the model of ‘co-governing’ as the fullest expression of this trend. Getting there is not the work of days or weeks, and it cannot be achieved by a ‘technical fix’. It involves no

less than the piece-by-piece re-constitution of the public sector as a common space in which all citizens can have their say and notions of the public interest can be formed and re-formed. Finally, it may be expected that, increasingly, this common space will be a European space.

## **WHAT IS NEXT?**

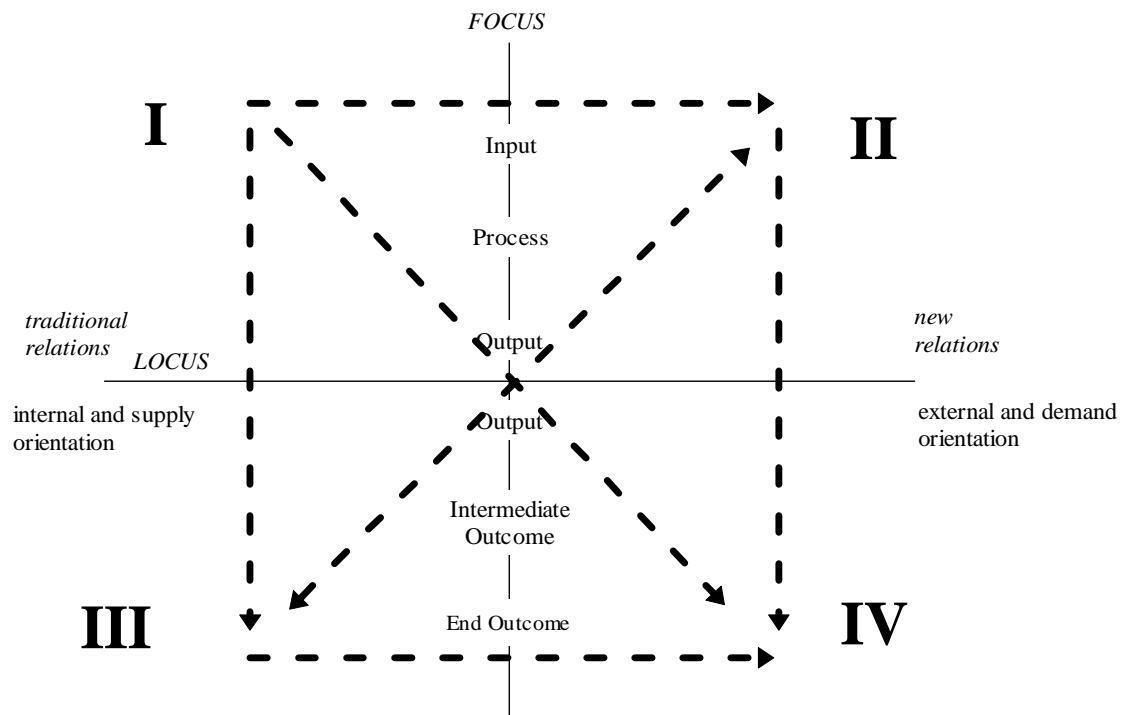
This implies that strategies must be informed and shaped by stakeholder participation. Key performance measures and standards must be chosen and set with stakeholder input. Citizens are essential to all four stages of co-design, co-decision, co-production, and co-evaluation. Finally, knowledge is hardly ever all in-house. Therefore building sustainable knowledge requires the participation of citizens and other stakeholders.

This diagnosis means that many agencies are in some transitory stage between a traditional inward oriented pattern of relations towards an outward, citizen/customer oriented pattern. However, quite a considerable number of “best practice” cases are still in the quadrant “internal and supply-oriented” and only very few “best practice” cases have moved to the cell “externally and demand-oriented”.

In reality there is no fixed pattern in upgrading participation and in implementing the “co”-agenda to make quality sustainable. Patterns are mixed, not linear, may regress, or make detours. Depending on the starting position and the political and administrative system, on the pressure (e.g. crises) or constraints (e.g. resources), different starting positions are possible.

Within the context of self-assessments many organizations start with organizing surveys on their citizens and customers. It is a non-threatening way to be informed, especially if the results are not made public. However, if citizens get no feedback they will suspect that they have not been listened to and have wasted their time. Many sectors already have experience with getting parents involved as volunteers in schools, or ex-patients in hospitals, or men in fire brigades, or mothers in social services. In some cases these answers are being copied to other fields. Sometimes there is an incremental or ‘hidden’ participation through changes in technology where suddenly citizens are re-acting and driving activities. Sometimes, hearings, referenda, citizen action groups have positive impacts and this type of involvement is being expanded to other policy fields. It is certain that there is a shift away from quadrant I. However, it is still uncertain how large-scale and how systematic this is.

Graph 4 shows some patterns for next steps.



Graph 4: Potential patterns for shifting on the quality map for sustainability

## CONCLUDING REMARK

The Tampere conference had two key questions: “What are your organization’s development goals”, and “What are your personal development goals”?

From this analysis it is obvious that a third question is necessary: “What are your citizens’ development goals”?

It is clear that the Paris 2008 5QC on “Le Citoyen et la Qualité” will provide an opportunity for exploring how this exciting challenge can be addressed.

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