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E-Government and Administrative Reform in Germany and Vietnam



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The Digitalization of Local Public Services in Germany

Sabine Kuhlmann/Christian Schwab/Jörg Bogumil/Sascha Gerber

1. Background to the Problem and Theoretical Framework

The digitalization of administrative processes, also called e-government or e-governance,¹ is a favourite modernization theme already since decades. Besides the advanced conversion of analogue data into digital storage formats from the 1990s onwards, it also concerned the introduction of new organizational models meant to achieve the complete electronic configuration of communication channels between clients/citizens and providers/authorities.² The underlining questions in the following text concern to what extent the information exchange, communication and interaction among administration and citizens in local service provision has been transformed by the use of IT, what obstacles have come up, and what impacts can be recognized. In order to analytically grasp the degree of digitalization of administrative services and the *digital depth*, it is recommended to refer to pertinent concepts of e-government research.³ These distinguish usually between four and six stages of digital depth which represent different degrees of progress of the digital services.⁴ For our analysis of the digitalization of administrative services in German local one-stop-shops, a three-stage classification appears to be sufficient and appropriate. Accordingly, the digital depth can be sorted into:

- a) *information* (purely information provision function, for example on the authorities' websites);
- b) *communication* (electronic communication function such as by answering citizens' requests via email); and
- c) *transaction* (service delivery function, namely that the administrative services can be used without any media breaks).

As shown below, these stages of development in local administrations so far have been achieved to different degrees. To our discussion, the other two stages often distinguished in the models are less relevant, namely *participation* (participatory function of the citizens, for example with an online suggestion system) and *integration* (integration function across administrative levels, for example through an automatic notification of address change among the different relevant authorities).

The coming paragraphs present the state of the implementation of digitalized administrative operations in local administrations, especially in regards to the example of local one-stop-shops (2). This includes the analysis of trends and problem areas as well as

¹ Homburg (2018), 348.

² Heuermann (2018), 1.

³ For an overview see Coursey/Norris (2008), 524.

⁴ Cf. Wirtz/Piehler (2010), 12 et seq.

the formulation of practical implications. The empirical basis shapes the results of a current research project on the situation of local one-stop-shops in Germany. A standardized questionnaire of mayors and heads of staff council was conducted in German municipalities with over 15,000 inhabitants (N=721) along with four case studies and supplementary guided interviews in selected cities.⁵ Against this background, a prospect for future developments in the field of digitalization of local administrative services is finally provided (3).

2. Practical Application: Digital Service Provision in Local One-Stop-Shops

It is now widely accepted that the state of implementation of e-government applications in Germany is well behind the far-reaching hopes associated with this modernization theme.⁶ Although meanwhile various IT supports exist in the context of administrative operations, usually citizens are not spared the walk to the administration. E-government does not exist yet as fully digitalized transaction and interaction offer to carry out administrative operations free from media breaks. The current E-government Monitor⁷ points out similar critical developments, too. Hence, the use of e-government offers is not going forward (4 per cent less than the previous year), showing a strong reduction in citizens' satisfaction (8 per cent less) and a satisfaction level with digital administrative services of just about 54 per cent overall. Online pages for administrative services are most common on the local level (43 per cent), compared to state (15 per cent) or federal level (8 per cent).⁸ This should not come as a surprise since 75 to 90 per cent of federal laws are implemented there, where also important decisions shaping citizens' life situation are taken. Nevertheless, it seems that in certain areas of application the degree of digital processing is meanwhile increasing.

2.1 Online Applications: Online Scheduling, Online forms

Local one-stop-shops are among the most advanced users of digitalization within the administrations in Germany. Local one-stop-shops are now being implemented in all German municipalities with over 15,000 inhabitants and can be featured as one the most important success models of local administrative modernization in Germany.⁹ They are characterized by bundling in one place the most requested services by the citizens. This way, citizens only have to visit one single office for those operations (one-stop-shop). Furthermore, in almost every local one-stop-shop a combined offer has been established between a central local one-stop-shop, generally located in the city hall, and some decentralized branches. Municipal offices are thus the central contact points of the local administration with citizens. Against this background, they developed into a significant linchpin of digitalization in municipalities. After their introduction of online forms in the last years, municipalities are now increasingly experimenting with new digitalization

⁵ C.f. Bogumil (2018).

⁶ Köhl/Schuppan (2014); Fromm (et al.) (2015).

⁷ Kremer (et al.) 2017).

⁸ Cf. ISIM (2015).

⁹ Kuhlmann/Wollmann (2014), 222 ff..

elements. It is worth mentioning in particular the online scheduling and the fully electronic or online-based processing of entire administrative operations, which is complemented by electronic file management.

The *online scheduling*, namely the possibility for citizens to book online a convenient appointment (if available) at the local one-stop-shops for specific administrative operations, can be found especially in the big cities with over 100,000 inhabitants (just below 90 per cent). *Online scheduling* is considered to be positive in the local administrations where local one-stop-shops have introduced it. Managers and staff emphasize the better management of the amount of costumers, quicker processing time, shorter waiting time, a better planned deployment of the employees and their arrangement according to technical skills and time, resulting hence in higher customer and employee satisfaction. Problems arise only in case of malfunctions of the displays or with unsatisfied spontaneous customers realizing that those with an appointment have priority even if they came in the office next. Nevertheless, in light of the costs that arise to introduce it, an online scheduling system pays off only when the municipal administration exceeds a certain size. Furthermore, the configuration of the functionality is highly important. The systems showing greater positive effects are those capable of integrating all the branches of the local one-stop-shop, rather than only a specific one, and to offer citizens alternative appointments at other branches.

The picture is different for the *online forms*. Despite online forms enjoy great popularity, they are mainly supply-driven and do not take into account the demand and the actual needs of the citizens/users. This implies that the administration often offers a wide range of forms but citizens barely use them. A practical example of this is provided by the figures of a municipal administration offering over 600 forms, 85 per cent of which have not been accessed, yet. Behind such high offer, there is often the political desire to display an apparent digital progress of administrative services (*window-dressing*), regardless of its actual functionality. This *oversupply* leads also to retrieval issues for the users, who for example, cannot (quickly) find the preferred forms. The usability issues are even more crucial if we consider that – seen from a process perspective – online forms only make sense if the input and transfer of data run without media breaks. Often forms are only offered as PDFs to download, which then have to be signed and sent per standard post to the administration. Since automation capacity is often not taken into account during the configuration of the processes, media breaks remain unavoidable.

2.2 Digital Depth: Information, Communication, Transaction

Going back to the three-stage classification of digital depth per above (*information, communication, transaction*), a clear picture results from the 2017 survey of municipalities. On the one hand, municipalities almost nationwide fulfil the information function, namely informing on the services provided by the local one-stop-shops. On the other hand, the interaction and the partly digital implementation of administrative services (through emails, forms, etc.) are quite rare and the complete online processing of services is barely possible. Almost every municipality offers information on administrative services in local one-stop-shops through their homepage or websites. This way, online information on the ten most common services of local one-stop-shops is available in over 70 per cent of all municipalities. Slightly lower figures are available concerning information on registration and cancellation of residence (in 61 per cent), while the forerunner is the authentication of

certificates, with almost 90 per cent of information availability. Tasks can be carried out partly online in around a quarter of all municipalities, with the highest figures for the registration of first residence and the lowest for the authentication of certificates. The ability to fully finalize administrative services is overall fairly weak. The complete online processing of services can be carried out in no more than 14 per cent of the municipalities. The services that score the highest are applications for criminal records (13 per cent), certificates (9 per cent), and residents' parking permits (9 per cent). The possibilities of information and interaction were more pronounced in particularly developed cities under scrutiny. Regarding the third transaction function, namely the capacity to finalize service provision without media breaks, its use is weak both in the most developed cities studied and in the majority of the local one-stop-shops. Overall, our empirical findings coincide with those of other surveys, i.e. the e-government Monitor of Initiative D21 or the E-Government Development Index of the UN.

Table 1: Digital depth in German local one-stop-shops¹⁰

Services	Information available online	Partially processed online (forms, emails)	Fully processed online	N
Passports	74.8%	25.2%	4.8%	210
Certificates (birth/marriage certificates)	71.4%	25.2%	9.2%	119
Certificates of good conduct	70.7%	27.1%	13.3%	188
Registration of residence	60.5%	36.0%	7.1%	197
Authentication of certificates	89.3%	10.1%	2.7%	149
Dog tax Registration	71.3%	32.8%	5.7%	122
Residents parking permit	75.7%	18.4%	8.7%	103
Parking permit for people with disabilities	80.2%	20.8%	0.9%	106
Housing benefits	75.6%	21.8%	3.8%	78
Vehicle registration (only county-free cities)	75.0%	23.5%	7.4%	68

¹⁰ Data in percentage of cases. Source: Schwab/Bogumil/Gerber/Kuhlmann (2018).

Taking into account use and effect of digital offers, it is possible to recognize a set of issues. Fairly significant usability problems in the area of digital *information provision* arise from the fact that information retrieval and accessibility are inadequate. Thus, poor search tools and content overload of websites make it harder for the citizens to use them to acquire information. Because of the lack of clarity in the offer and the inadequacy to retrieve specific information, citizens do not even access well-functioning services of the municipalities, as they get lost in this *jungle of options*. Clearing the offer, for example by using extra websites that work without media breaks, is still due.

In regards to the communication function, it is evident that the digitalization of administrative services can also lead to unintended dysfunctional effects for the work load of employees in local one-stop-shops. Currently, they still do not see digitalization as a relief – on the contrary. In some cases, the continuous reachability (i.e. by email) and the heightened working rhythm that follows showed in our study that the work load is rather increasing. In fact, some municipalities have already introduced specific regulations on (restricting) the electronic reachability, for example through service agreements. In addition, often the workload is shifted from the front to the back office, without any evident benefits for the employees. The fact that the employees barely perceive a relief of their work load is also linked to citizens' persisting preference for personal contact when dealing with the administration. This way, working out complex issues goes faster and it is less prone to errors. This in turn relates to the fact that most online services so far are not enough attractive or user-friendly to do without a personal contact with the administration. The managers, instead, have a more positive view on the impact of digital communication efforts in local one-stop-shops. They report *inter alia* quicker processing time, shorter waiting time, and lower error rates (i.e. when transferring forms). The staffs often do not perceive these advantages. For example, pre-filling forms or assigning employees only critical, specific cases that cannot be automatized merely reduces the absolute work load rather than their individual efforts.

As mentioned above, the expression of the *transaction form* along with the elaboration of administrative services without media breaks has hardly been realized and only rarely possible. The reasons for this are manifold and span from technical, legal, financial, and personnel to political obstacles and problems.¹¹ A fundamental issue lies within the frequent legal necessity for personal contact. This implies that, at some point in the administrative operation some form of authentication is required. Because of the low acceptance and application frequency of the electronic ID card, due to significant usage obstacles, personal attendance is inevitable and media breaks remain compelling. A further issue is that this card will still not be used without substantial improvements in its usability. In fact, the acquisition of reading devices comes with a cost (AusweisApp2 is not available for every phone), users require a relatively high technical understanding (drivers and software download), finally and most importantly, it presents only few possible uses. In addition, it is not possible in principle to deal with certain administrative services without any media breaks. For example, to apply for a passport it is necessary to personally put a signature. Furthermore, legal obstacles include data protection regulations, non-disclosure of personal information and obligations of document storage. Further barriers to the use of services without media-breaks can be found in the inadequate distribution of electronic

¹¹ Cf. Scholl/Klischewski (2007); Thapa/Schwab (2017).

payment options in the municipalities. In fact, since most administrative operations are charged, without an immediate payment they cannot be finalized free from media-break.

2.3 Political and Institutional Obstacles to Digitalization in Local One-Stop-Shops

Along with the above-mentioned legal and financial problems, the municipalities indicate that on the political side is it the federal or state level, there is hardly any pressure to act and a general lack of strategic orientation or targets. The sporadic e-government initiatives that come about are implemented rather incrementally. In addition, the legislative level (federal and state) often operates unrealistically, while the perspective of the local praxis is not reflected in the relevant legislative procedures affecting administrative activities. The local level, too, often lacks of a coalition of advocates to push for digitalization. This way, at times, the political or personnel dependencies determine whether budgets for digitalization are made available or not, according to the point of view of mayors or heads of department entitled. The problems concerning organization and staff are scarce resources availability for digitalization, along with a shortage of personnel. Despite municipal employees are open to digitalization, the potential benefits like simplification of work, home office, e-learning and continuing education have not set in yet. Thus, a rather critical attitude towards digitalization elements prevails. In addition, there is a lack of professionally qualified staff and know-how for more sophisticated digitalization projects as well as to promote those eServices that have already been implemented, for example through marketing concepts. In addition, staff turnover rates for local one-stop-shops are fairly high, as driven by inter-municipal competition. Finally, there is a general lack of skilled personnel, as reflected in the inadequate quality and quantity of applications.

3. Future Developments

The implementation state of the digitalization of administrative services in local governments is still falling well behind far-reaching hopes and the constant political announcements. On the one hand, in recent years, the use of online forms on internet platforms in particular has been improved as the first stage of digitalization. On the other, significant gaps and deficits still exist in the digital communication between the administration and the citizens. This concerns especially the transaction without media breaks, which is the prerequisite to fully digitally finalize administrative services. The reasons for this are manifold and already known, usually though they are not seriously taken into account. Central themes are the great request for written forms and documentation, as well as the inadequate usability and user-friendliness of the local administrations' electronic services that are mostly requested by the public, such as options for identification via electronic ID card. The review of 3,000 written forms required by federal law to process administrative operations revealed that only 21 per cent of those could be crossed out. These are mainly *simple* cases with low frequency and limited relevance for citizens and businesses.¹² In addition, the abolition of written forms is not enough when the signature is no longer obligatory but certificates and documents still have to be submitted in paper form. In order to ensure processes are carried out completely free

¹² NKR (2017a), 36.

from media-breaks, a critical review and abolition of the requirement for paper-based documentation is thus necessary.

In regards to the governance of digitalization, higher cooperation and coordination among different political and administrative levels is required in the future, especially in the German federal system. Arguably, a certain degree of variance and diversity has to be welcomed in the context of state autonomy and local sovereignty, also in the area of digitalization. Especially if it makes possible to better fit local conditions and to react more accurately to different local needs. However, even this potential asset might result into problems of fragmentation, complexity and incompatibility of the different individual solutions. This could ultimately lead to a hotchpotch and to redundant double or parallel developments, bringing more drawbacks than benefits in the eyes of the users. Against this background, it is advisable to improve standardization, bundling and coordination across levels for the various services,¹³ not last to ensure uniform standards of user-friendliness. In fact, there are already some vertically integrated solutions on the state level, such as the website in Berlin (<https://service.berlin.de/>) or Baden-Württemberg (<https://www.service-bw.de/>). In addition, the federal government and the states tried to advance the goal of e-services that are more strongly integrated and bundled, through a series of legislative projects (e-government laws).

However, it is hard to identify any resounding success so far. Contrary to the objectives of the last coalition agreement, except for the progress made in the electronic registration of vehicles, no further administrative services have been coordinated and digitalized nationwide or offered uniformly. Germany remains far away from the digitalization of the top 100 administrative services for citizens and businesses. This, despite the 2017 Online Access Act commits federal and state governments to offer administrative services also electronically in a portals network, including the creation of user accounts to carry out electronic administrative operations. At the same time, the states are bound to devise the technical and organizational requisites for these portals network, which created a (constitutional) legal basis for more commitment in the digitalization of the administration across levels. However, there are still considerable uncertainties regarding the practical application of the portals network and the effects on the digitalization of local administration. Aside from the lack of uniform user-friendliness standards for electronic services, it is still not clear how the harmonization of IT-offers can actually be achieved across the levels. The current catalogue of measures to implement under the Online Access Act identifies ca. 575 services the public administration will have to offer online by 2022. The implementation of these services depends mainly on states and municipalities and a number of municipal offers have priority over the other services (i.e. birth certificates, vehicle registration offices, certificates and registration of residence, registries, ID cards, residence permits and cards, preliminary building permits, parental benefits, driving licenses, etc.).

Against this background, taking into account local practice when devising and implementing these e-services is indispensable to make sure they are practical and user-friendly. Even the municipalities see the greatest perspectives of future digitalization potential in some of the Online Access Act priority areas of service, such as driving

¹³ For example, cf. NKR (2017a), 35.

licenses, immigration or citizenship and naturalization. In these areas it could be possible to promote e-government integration through greater networking and modularization. This does not have to be achieved necessarily by legislation changes, but also by sharing infrastructures, defining standards or developing (transferable) process modules.¹⁴ However, it remains unclear if and to what extent the harmonization and bundling of the 575 Online Access Act services will really be pursued and achieved – at least with regards to certain minimum standards. Furthermore, it still has to be clarified to which digital depth it should be aimed at. In other words, if the requirements of the Online Access Act could already be met by way of information provision (in which case there would be hardly any need for change for the municipalities) or if rather the actual target margin is to achieve procedures and final transaction capacity without any media breaks. Finally, a further future theme of the digitalization of (municipal) administrative services to be addressed is the modernization of registers, which should become again a central point of digitalization policies on federal and state level.¹⁵ Many (municipal) administrative services are based on public registers, such as civil and business registers. However, these are so far hardly apt for digital operations and, according to the technical and territorial responsibilities, often just as decentralized and heterogeneously organized as other public IT elements. For example, citizens are compelled to pick up the paper version of a birth certificate from the registry of births and then to submit it to another office when applying for child and parental benefits. If these data could be exchanged among the relevant offices (as in Austria), provided the consent of citizens and the legal privacy standards, the digital offer for those administrative services and operations would be simplified. The implementation of the Online Access Act conform to its goals appears possible only on this basis. Only this way it is possible to realize the principle of *once only*, according to which citizens only once have to give certain standard information to the public administration and this can later be used for other administrative processes – in compliance with specific access conditions and through encryption mechanisms. Meanwhile, there are also solutions that could overcome the current data protection and constitutional concerns against the introduction of a uniform identification number, in line with the results of the 1983 census and the right to informational self-determination. The *once only* principle could be implemented at hand of a source PIN register with personal identity numbers for a specific sector (according to the Austrian model). This could simplify and improve the quality of data exchange between citizens and authorities or among authorities, as well as fulfilling data protection standards even better than the analogue processes. Also the onerous effort to carry out a census which in Germany costs more than 700 million EUR, would be considerably relieved if this was automatized on the basis of more modern registers as in Austria, Switzerland, and Denmark.

For the near future it is desirable, along with a much needed increase in the pace of modernization, that online access to administration gets improved first through service bundling (according to the *one stop idea*) and that digital components and modules get increasingly integrated in the administrative processes. The extensive *open-access* provision of administrative services and the total exemption from walking to the authorities (no stop concept) still seem to be more of a utopia than a doable plan. However, in order to start

¹⁴ Cf. Köhl (et al.) (2014), 188.

¹⁵ Cf. NKR (2017b).

basic digitalization projects and to ensure that the desired portals network does not merely correspond to a network of links but fulfils user-friendliness, functionality and service quality, it is necessary an administrative culture promoting innovation, aimed at crossing departments and levels, and prioritizing the perspective of the user.

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