

The State of Client-Centered Public Service Delivery in the Netherlands

Jurjen Jansen¹, Sjoerd de Vries¹, Thea van der Geest¹, Rex Arendsen²,
and Jan van Dijk¹

¹University of Twente, Center for e-Government Studies
P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

{j.jansen, s.a.devries, t.m.vandergeest
j.a.g.m.vandijk}@utwente.nl

²Dutch Ministry of Finance

P.O. Box 20201, 2500 EE The Hague, The Netherlands
r.arendsen@minfin.nl

Abstract. Businesses and citizens demand a better and more client-centered way of service delivery from public organizations. As society becomes more complex, dynamic and diverse, public organizations need to adapt to this demand. Conversely, our perception is that public organizations might still treat their target groups as one. However, the need for client-centered public service delivery is growing. This is widely debated in literature. Nonetheless, little empirical evidence is available about the state of client-centeredness of public organizations. The objective of the present study is to identify the state of client-centered public service delivery in the Netherlands. In order to research this topic 400 people from 194 Dutch public organizations were invited to complete an electronic questionnaire. 105 people responded. According to the respondents the state of client-centeredness is acceptable. However, only 25% of the public organizations seem to take differentiation as the point of departure for their service delivery.

Keywords: Client-centeredness, public service delivery, public organizations, government, differentiation, segmentation.

1 Introduction

“The citizen does not exist, therefore differentiation is needed” [1, p.23]. This quotation about citizenship in the Netherlands shows that there is a need for a client-centered approach. Because people are different, public organizations can only succeed in getting things done by adapting to the behavior and preferences of their target groups.

Although differentiation is needed it is assumed that public organizations treat their target groups equally. At the point of departure for policy making the question rises what ‘the’ citizen wants and wants not, what he thinks is user-friendly and which needs he has. Clearly, citizens have the need for a non-equal approach.

We studied client-centeredness in two projects. Recently, for example, the Dutch Tax Administration has developed a new segmentation model of citizens which is

being implemented in their communications and service delivery processes at the moment. In 2007 the city of Enschede started with a so-called forms squad. This squad visits people who are living under the poverty line and who do not make use of social benefits. The forms squad assists people filling in difficult forms or addresses them the possibilities to apply for social benefits. The squad is furthermore multicultural in order to give better interpretations to language or cultural differences.

The objective of the present study is twofold: to identify the state of client-centeredness and to determine if differentiation is the starting point for public organizations in approaching their target groups. This study concentrates on the service deliverer. In the next study we expect to focus on the receiver of public services, i.e. citizens and businesses. The following research question is addressed in this paper: *What is the state of client-centered public service delivery in the Netherlands?*

Public organizations can learn from private organizations that have gone through the development of undifferentiated mass marketing, via segmented marketing, to one-on-one marketing in the last 50 years. A relevant question is if public organizations have taken notice of this trend.

The need for adopting a client-centered approach by public organizations is growing. Van Duivenboden and Lips [2] appeal that there are three explanations why client-centeredness gets more attention in public service delivery. These are: changing expectations from citizens, a complex societal environment that calls for different ways of direction and a differentiating offer of public services by using ICTs. This need is furthermore prompted by the ongoing bureaucratic procedures and the increase of electronic service delivery which is recognized to be abstract and impersonal. And by society which becomes more complex, dynamic and diverse.

Client-centeredness is a multi-faceted concept. In order to put client-centeredness into operation we utilize the segmentation concept. Segmentation is chosen, because it is a common technique for differentiation. However, little is known about segmentation in a public organizational context. Although there is experimented with several segmentation techniques it is rather difficult to apply segmentation models successfully. Two important reasons are: the generic character of segmentation models and the small scientific basis on which the segmentation models are based.

2 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery

For private organizations it is well-known that in order to provide consumers products and services research needs to be conducted on the wishes, expectations and needs of the (wished-for) target group. Public organizations are increasingly recognizing that they need to take the characteristics of their target groups into account. This means that one needs to understand who the target group is and what kind of relationship they have with the organization [3].

When meeting this kind of understanding and acting to it we speak of client-centeredness. The definition that we give to client-centeredness is: to put a target group at the central stage and to take into account their characteristics, situation and perceptions in order to pinpoint service delivery, enforcement and communication activities.

In order to describe the state of client-centered public service delivery the definition of state needs to be clear-cut. We propose that the state of client-centered service delivery mainly consists of the vision of the organization and of four concrete implementation steps which we identify as: goals, motives, conditions and design. These concepts are further explained within this section.

Visions. With regard to visions we define two broad concepts, namely: a client-centered vision and an organization-centered vision. A client-centered vision in our study consists of one basic stage, i.e. focusing on the average client, and three (more) advanced stages, namely: taking different segments, individuals or the question of the client as the point of departure for service delivery. The starting point for service delivery from an organization-centered vision consists of the following three stages: the organizational structure, the internal processes or the products and/or services. The formulation of the identified visions is inspired by research of Thomassen [4].

Goals. Based on Besamusca-Jansen [5] we refer to four goals of client-centeredness for public organizations: improving the effectiveness of service delivery, improving the internal efficiency of the organization, improving the image of the organization and offering new challenges for managers and employees of the organization. It can be noticed that these goals are primarily internal goals. This is justified, because this study comprehends with the service deliverer. When researching the receivers of public service delivery, e.g. citizens and businesses, other goals would be more appropriate. In that case one could think of goals about: user-friendliness, accessibility, transparency, and the like.

Motives. Besides formulating goals around client-centeredness, organizations can also be triggered by motives to adopt a client-centered approach. Thomassen [4] addresses three motives. The first motive is internal pressure, i.e. (new) policy makers can put client-centeredness (back) on the agenda. The second motive is the introduction of free market processes. However, in a government context this is only possible for semi-government organizations, like hospitals and power companies. A third motive is pressure from national politics, e.g. regulations, or pressure from internal management, e.g. targets and goals.

Conditions. For an organization to be or to become a client-centered organization some conditions need to be met. Thomassen [4] has identified six conditions. Five of these come back in the results section and are formulated as follows: knowing the target group, knowing what the target group wants, delivering what the target group wants, improving the service delivery to the target group continuously and coaching employees of the organization to work in a client-centered way.

Design. Public organizations are more aware that their target groups are heterogeneous [4]. Public organizations could increase researching the differences and similarities of their target groups and use these results to segment their target groups. According to Akerboom et al. [6] segmentation is needed in the public sector. They give the example that the population can not longer be addressed with only one message. They state that in this way the groups that need the message the least will be reached while it is important to reach that group that needs it the most. The design of client-centeredness

is narrowly related with segmentation. Because of this, segmentation deserves additional attention.

In this study client-centeredness is cultivated around segmentation. This concept is introduced by Wendell Smith in 1956. It was introduced to change the scope from a mass marketing to a more client-centered marketing approach [7], [8]. The definition of segmentation that Smith gave at that time was: “*Market segmentation involves viewing a heterogeneous market as a number of smaller homogenous markets, in response to differing preferences, attributable to the desires of consumers for more precise satisfaction of their varying wants*” [9; cited in 10, p.3].

After more than two generations of research about this topic, segmentation both in practice as in science has made a lot of progress. Nowadays, topics like customer relationship marketing and one-on-one marketing are predominant. However, according to Professor Bijmolt [in 11, p.8] segmentation is not an outdated concept. He states that “*the underlying idea that not all consumers are equal, but also are not all different, is still relevant today*”.

In a literature review on user-profiling [12, p.14] the following definition of segmentation is given. “*Segmentation is the process of dividing a population into groups on the basis of similarities in user-related information of individuals*”. This definition pulls segmentation out of the marketing scope and defines it as a broad concept that can be applied in all kinds of situations. It also concentrates more on the similarities within groups than on differences between groups. In segmentation exercises it is the similarities that count [13]. It is thus this definition that will be used in this paper.

In this paper a distinction is made between four general forms of segmentation, which will be referred to as: geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavior segmentation. This division is based on Kotler’s [14].

The first form of segmentation, geographic segmentation, is the oldest and the easiest form of segmentation. The assumption is that people have different needs on the basis of where they live [13]. This means that people who live near each other appear to have the same characteristics [10].

The second oldest and most occurring form of segmentation is demographic segmentation [15], [16]. Demographic segmentation assumes that people who have the same demographic characteristics, e.g. age, gender and income, act the same [15]. It is an often used exercise, because it is relatively easy to use, cheap and gives a quick overview of the market [17], [12]. However, some studies have shown that demographic segmentation became unpractical to use, because there is too much variation within the segments [18], [19], [20].

The third, and newer, form of segmentation is psychographic segmentation. According to Cahill [13] psychographic segmentation starts with a distinction between activities (e.g. job and hobbies), interests (e.g. family and media-use) and opinions (e.g. about social issues, politics and products). He furthermore states that values should be added to this list, because of its relevance. All four variables combined together can be interpreted as lifestyle and sometimes reflect one’s personality. As Beane and Ennis [21] note, psychographic segmentation directs more to someone’s inner side than somebody’s external appearance.

The fourth and last form of segmentation is behavior segmentation. The goal of this kind of segmentation is to identify different types of behavior that could have implications for different (marketing) purposes [21].

Segmentation is a common practice used by private organizations. It is, however, unclear how much it is used by public organizations. There is also no empirical basis to decide which of these segmentation forms work for public organizations and which do not. Despite this, we try to investigate to what extent public organizations have adopted segmentation forms.

3 Methods

In this section we describe the research approach. We take a look at the research population first and then take a look at the method for data collection.

The research population concerns national and local public organizations in the Netherlands. All public organizations are identified as government organizations. The kind of public organizations that were approached during this study were: ministries (N=13), administrative bodies (N=9), provinces (N=12) and a stratified sample of municipalities (N=160). The municipalities were split up in three categories, namely: small, i.e. less than 20.000 inhabitants (n=60), medium, i.e. between 20.000 and 100.000 inhabitants (n=75), and large, i.e. over 100.000 inhabitants (n=25).

The respondents for this study needed to be involved in communication or service delivery processes, with a preference for respondents that were responsible for client-centeredness in their organization. This means that more than one e-mail address could be obtained for each public organization. The names and e-mail addresses of the respondents were gathered by means of looking for them on related websites or by calling directly to the specific organizations. It was rather difficult to find the right people, especially for the municipalities. This was mainly due to the difference in website and organizational structure and because of large differences in the naming of departments and job titles. Eventually, 400 e-mail addresses were gathered.

In order to answer the research question an electronic questionnaire was set up. The questionnaire was constructed around the five identified aspects (visions, goals, motives, conditions and design) of client-centeredness, i.e. our conceptual model. Before the questionnaire was sent out to the respondents it was qualitatively pre-tested by three people who belong to the population of interest. The questionnaire was furthermore personalized in order to receive a higher response rate.

4 Results

In this section the results of the electronic questionnaire are described. The questionnaire could be filled in from the beginning of December 2008 till the end of January in 2009. This period is relatively long, but was needed considering the holidays in that timeframe. On December 15th and January 15th a reminder was sent out to the respondents who had not filled in the questionnaire. At the end of January an effective response of 26.3% (N=105) was gathered. However, when taking the number of approached organizations into account (194) the response is 54.1%.

The administrative bodies, the medium and the large municipalities are represented the strongest by respectively 66.7, 68 and 60 percent. Besides that, representatives of one of thirteen ministries, one third of the provinces and 46.7% of the small-sized

municipalities filled in the questionnaire. Of the total response, 1% belongs to the ministries, 5.7% to administrative bodies, and 3.8% to the provinces. 26.7%, 48.6% and 14.3% belongs respectively to small, medium and large municipalities. From our perspective this response is adequate to give a global insight in the state of client-centeredness in the Netherlands.

4.1 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery: Visions

Respondents were asked what the vision of their organization is about service delivery. The respondents could only choose one of the presented levels. In our opinion level 1 to 3 indicate an organization-centered vision, whereas level 4 to 7 point toward a client-centered vision.

Table 1. Visions of client-centeredness (N=105)

Levels of centrality	Percentage
1 Organizational structure	1.0
2 Processes	6.7
3 Products/services	19.0
4 Average client	37.1
5 Segments	12.4
6 Individuals	11.4
7 Client-steering	4.8
8 Do not know	1.0
9 Other	6.7

As can be seen from table 1, more than a quarter of the respondents has adopted an organizational-centered vision. Over a third of the respondents take on a basic level of client-centeredness, i.e. the average client. Approximately 25% make use of differentiation, i.e. segments and individuals, as the point of departure for their service delivery. 5% of the approached organizations point out that the client steers the process of service delivery.

4.2 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery: Goals

Respondents that made clear that their organization has adopted a client-centered approach were asked for what goals they had in mind when adopting such an approach. They had the opportunity to select more than one goal. Therefore, the percentages do not add up to 100.

Almost 80% of the respondents mention improving service delivery to their target groups as the most important goal for client-centeredness. Between 40 and 50 percent of the respondents articulate that improving effectiveness of service delivery, improving efficiency of service delivery and improving the image of the organization are also important goals to adopt a client-centered approach.

Table 2. Goals for adopting a client-centered approach (n=70)

Goals	Percentage
Improving service delivery	77.1
Improving effectiveness	48.6
Improving image	44.3
Improving efficiency	42.9
Improving relationships	22.9
Reducing costs	10.0
Other	1.4
Do not know	0

The respondents who mentioned that their organization had not adopted a client-centered approach were asked for reasoning. They also had the opportunity to select more than one option.

Table 3. Reasons for not adopting a client-centered approach (n=30)

Reasons	Percentage
Other	40.0
Not ready	36.7
Too little knowledge	23.3
Current way is more effective	10.0
Privacy matters	10.0
Costs too much time	6.7
Obstructed by the organization	6.7
Do not know	3.3
Current way is more efficient	0
Costs too much money	0

The reasons that were mentioned the most in relation to not having adopted a client-centered approach are that they are just not ready for it and that there is too little knowledge in order to put a client-centered approach into action. Over a third of the respondents gave another reason for not having adopted a client-centered approach. About 50% of these respondents made clear that activities in their organization are organized in order to employ a client-centered approach, but that they are not realized yet. A third of these respondents made clear that it is rather difficult to adopt a client-centered approach, because of the way certain products, processes and regulations are designed.

The respondents (n=30) were also asked what the likelihood is that their organization will adopt a client-centered approach in the next five years. Almost 90% is positive that they will.

4.3 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery: Motives

Besides formulating goals it is also possible that public organizations are triggered by motives in order to adopt a client-centered approach. The motives defined within this

paper are: 1) influence from targets/goals, 2) influence of ICT developments, 3) influence from the own organization, 4) influence of regulation policies, 5) influence from the target group, and 6) influence from national politics. The respondents rated these propositions on a seven point Likert scale ranging from (1) not applicable at all to (7) fully applicable.

Table 4. Motives for adopting a client-centered approach (seven point Likert scale)

Proposition	Much (5-7)	Moderate (4)	Little (1-3)	n
1 Targets/goals	95.7%	1.4%	2.9%	70
2 ICT developments	62.9%	17.1%	20.0%	70
3 Own organization	52.8%	12.9%	34.3%	70
4 Regulation policies	38.5%	21.4%	37.1%	70
5 Target group	32.8%	28.6%	37.1%	70
6 National politics	18.8%	15.7%	65.7%	70

Table 4 shows that the biggest influence for adopting a client-centered approach is the internal targets or goals. National politics and the influence of the target group have little to do with the motives of public organizations to adopt a client-centered approach. The other three reasons are of small influence.

4.4 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery: Conditions

Not only the goals and motives are important for a client-centered organization. According to Thomassen [4] public organizations need to meet different conditions in order to become a client-centered organization. The conditions are translated into the following propositions: 1) my organization improves its service delivery to the target group continuously, 2) my organization knows who its target group is, 3) my organization coaches me and my colleagues to work in a client-centered way, 4) my organization knows what the target group wants, and 5) my organization delivers what the target group wants. In some cases the population is less than 105. This means that the respondents have filled in that they do not know the answer.

Table 5. Conditions for client-centeredness (seven point Likert scale)

Proposition	Much (5-7)	Moderate (4)	Little (1-3)	N
1 Continuous improvement	92.3%	2.9%	4.8%	105
2 Knowing the target group	91.4%	3.8%	4.8%	105
3 Coaching employees	82.6%	8.7%	8.7%	103
4 Knowing needs of target group	78.1%	13.3%	8.6%	105
5 Delivering needs of target group	63.8%	27.6%	8.6%	105

Table 5 illustrates that the propositions are all above the neutral level. This means that the public organizations continuously improve their services to their target groups and know who its target groups are. They also, but to a smaller extent, know and deliver what their target groups want. According to Thomassen [4] a client-centered organization starts with client-centered employees. Public organizations are coaching their employees in this. These results show that, on average, public organizations do a reasonable to good job qualifying the conditions to be or to become a client-centered organization.

4.5 Client-Centered Public Service Delivery: Design

An important part of this research is to identify the design or adopted forms of client-centeredness. The following six forms are identified: 1) segmentation of one, i.e. individuals get tailored products or services, 2) no segmentation, i.e. everyone gets the same products or services, 3) geographic segmentation, 4) demographic segmentation, 5) behavior segmentation, and 6) psychographic segmentation.

Table 6. Design of client-centered service delivery (seven point Likert scale)

Proposition	Much (5-7)	Moderate (4)	Little (1-3)	n
1 Segmentation of one	68.3%	19.2%	12.5%	104
2 No segmentation	50%	19.2%	30.8%	104
3 Geographic	20%	19%	61%	105
4 Demographic	18.1%	25.7%	56.2%	105
5 Behavior	10.7%	15.5%	73.9%	103
6 Psychographic	9.6%	13.5%	77%	104

As shown in table 6, public organizations in general make little use of geographic, demographic, behavior and psychographic segmentation forms. Public organizations are more occupied applying the same services to all, but are, conversely, also trying to deliver tailored services to their target groups.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This study began with the premise that little is known about the state of client-centered public service delivery in the Netherlands. Within this section the research question is briefly answered, a discussion about the study is outlined and directions for future research are given. Before answering the research question we first take a look to the five points for the state of client-centeredness.

5.1 Conclusion

Visions. The results lead us to the conclusion that more than a quarter of the public organizations do not organize their communication and service delivery in a client-centered way. This means that nearly two-thirds has adopted some level of client-centeredness. However, over a third of the public organizations base their service

delivery on the average client, i.e. a basic form of client-centeredness. Just 25% make use of differentiation. In about 5% of the cases the client steers the process of service delivery. This previous point is an important aspect for the central government in the Netherlands. According to their policy plan public organizations need to make a transfer to this way of service delivery.

Goals. The results suggest that the most important goal for adopting a client-centered approach is improving the service delivery to the target group. Other goals were: improving the effectiveness of service delivery, improving the efficiency of service delivery and improving the image of the organization. Organizations that have not adopted a client-centered approach explained that they are not ready for it (yet) and that they have too little knowledge in order to adopt a client-centered approach.

Motives. The most mentioned motive for becoming a client-centered organization is the influence of internal targets or goals, i.e. an inside-out perspective. The motives do not or barely come from an outside-in perspective. This is surprising considering the positive vision of public organizations about client-centeredness.

Conditions. Public organizations in the Netherlands know their target groups and continuously improve their services to them. The results furthermore show that, on average, public organizations do a reasonable to good job qualifying the conditions to be or to become a client-centered organization.

Design. Public organizations make little use of the general forms of segmentation. Instead, they try to deliver their services in a tailored way. The majority also delivers equal services for everyone, which seems to be a contradiction.

To draw conclusions and to answer the research question it can be summarized that according to the respondents the state of client-centeredness is acceptable.

5.2 Discussion

In this study some points of discussion can be addressed. Although we try to sketch the state of client-centered public service delivery in the Netherlands it needs to be taken into account that the results are mainly based on municipalities. The sample of the other public organizations is small. It could thus be that some results are skewed. Furthermore, the medium-sized municipalities were slightly over-represented while the small-sized municipalities were slightly underrepresented.

Also the method of data collection can be judged. An electronic questionnaire is an adequate tool, but it cannot be guaranteed that all respondents were the right ones to speak on behalf of their organization.

Furthermore, the visions of service delivery in section 4.1 could be difficult to fill in. Respondents may have answered this question for the whole organization or for a certain department or service. Some departments or services could be more client-centered than others.

Some might argue that the propositions in section 4.4 are too vague and that more specific propositions would improve the quality of the questionnaire. However, in order to limit the length of the questionnaire we needed to omit some in-depth questions.

In conclusion, according to our opinion the state of client-centeredness is not as far as we have hoped. Around two-thirds of the public organizations do not come further than taking the average client as the point for departure for the communication and service delivery. Moreover, only 25% makes use of differentiation.

5.3 Future Research

Because client-centeredness within public organizations is just in the early stage, more insights are desirable. Therefore, future research is needed. It is first of all essential to define the concepts used in this study more thoroughly in order to create a theoretical framework around client-centeredness. This is currently missing in scientific literature.

It is necessary to identify how public organizations implement a client-centered approach in their daily practices. It is furthermore important what a client-centered approach produces, i.e. what are the effects of adopting a client-centered approach, both for the organization and for the target groups?

Additionally, it is necessary to do more research on the differences and similarities between public and private organizations in the field of client-centeredness. Private organizations have, for example, more freedom in the way they deliver services and approach target groups. It is also valuable to identify if the target groups of public organizations really want to be treated in a client-centered way or in similar ways like private organizations treat them. Perhaps they do not have a need for this?

In order to interpret these results international studies should be executed. When benchmarking the results it will be possible to draw conclusions about how well public organizations in the Netherlands are really performing on client-centeredness.

To conclude, it is worthwhile to identify more specific forms of client-centered approaches. Examples of specific forms are disadvantaged groups (e.g. people with low income, people with low education and disabled people), risk groups, channel preferences and digital skills. Organizations that address themselves not to be a client-centered organization could meet these more specific forms. Does this make them a client-centered organization then?

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