QUALITY QUO VADIS?

TAKING STOCK - THE QUALITY JOURNEY FROM LISBON TO ROTTERDAM

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TAKING STOCK:
THE QUALITY JOURNEY FROM LISBON TO ROTTERDAM
AND BEYOND

INTRODUCTION

It is now four years since the first Lisbon conference, and two since 2QC in Copenhagen. During this time, how has the quality agenda for European public administrations developed?

Over these years, a number of key themes have evolved. In Lisbon (2000) "Sharing Best Practices" included a broad range of topics (including new technology, specific management issues and a pronounced citizen focus). Copenhagen (2002) focused on "Innovation, Change, and Partnership". This conference looks at "making opportunities work" which includes a responsive, efficient and cost-effective government, and also a government which is inspiring as a organization for its employees.

In this paper the three scientific rapporteurs for the 2004 3QC in Rotterdam point to some of the key dynamics - and the continuing challenges and dilemmas - of quality improvement. Further, we try to look ahead - to speculate on what may be rising to the top of the quality agenda for 4QC in Finland in 2006, and beyond.

Our observations are mainly based on the case study descriptions, slides, speeches and other documents prepared for the 3QC conferences. Obviously, the three of us could not attend all sessions during the Rotterdam conference. Moreover, it was not even possible to include all the documentation about the most interesting case studies into this paper. Consequently, our selection here is simply based on the examples which are particularly useful to underpin the general trends to which we are drawing attention in this paper.

What are the common threads if we look at these three conferences and beyond, including the workshops, agorae and master classes in Rotterdam? Of course, certain techniques - such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) - are widely used, but we believe that there are also commonalities visible at a deeper level. More specifically it seems that quality improvement in European public services has four key requirements: **C**ontinuity, **C**o-operation, **C**ontext, and **C**oherence. Real quality gains require attention to these four Cs.

QUALITY IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC SECTORS

Quality has a Past, Present and a Future. This implies that there is a need for **Continuity,** and a need to avoid discontinuity or disruption. Quality requires the

digestion of preceding experiences, even if there are sometimes drastic changes. Learning is impossible without memory.

Quality improvers must also take account of an expanded European Administrative Space. The European scope implies that there is a need to **Co-operate** across international, organizational and sectoral boundaries, to create synergies and to organize learning cycles. Mobile European citizens will be able to compare service quality across the boarders of countries, policy fields, levels of government, and the public sector itself. Quality requires an openness across these boarder lines, and a learning strategy.

Quality improvers should respect and learn from variations. The diversity of size, starting positions, institutional patterns, ethnicities and languages, demography, etc. implies that there is a need to take **Context** into account. Quality is often defined as 'fitness for purpose' and this means that it is essential to take diversity into account.

Finally, quality improvers must be able to integrate different and complementary points of view: internal and external, structural and cultural, administrative and political, managerial and legal. Thus there is a need to be **Coherent** in designing, implementing and evaluating quality policies.

In summary, quality policy covers a complex and dynamic matrix of change and improvement (table 1).

QUALITY AS	CONTINUITY	CO-OPERATION	CONTEXT	COHERENCE
Past				
Present				
Future				

Table 1: Quality: A matrix of 4C's.

In the following sections of our report we will organize our impressions of 3QC within this matrix.

THE PAST: OLD FRIENDS AND QUALITY

<u>Continuity with the past</u>

>*"Our new government is very creative. It has dumped all previous reforms".*

>*"Seven years is not a long time for this kind of project".*

>Vice president Al Gore

Some of the most important items on the current quality agenda have been there for a long time - they are old friends, or in some cases, foes. European debates about quality in public services go back well before 1QC in Lisbon at the turn of the millennium. We can date them back at least as far as the attempts to become more 'customer-oriented' and 'citizen-responsive', movements in which several European states were engaged from the early 1980s onwards. And some of the core issues of 2004 were there right back at the beginning. For example, we have now had more than two decades of debate and reform aimed at:

1. **Improving customer orientation/lightening bureaucracy** (e.g. through customer awareness training, citizens' charters, simplification of forms and procedures). We had many examples of this at 3QC – from the reception counters of the Polish police to the elimination of queues by the Irish immigration service.
2. **Achieving service integration**, so that citizens do not have to go to many different agencies in order to get the solution to what is, for them, a single problem (e.g. one window/one stop shops; attempts to integrate social care and health care; joined-up government). Again, 3QC afforded some good examples, such as the creation of one stop service centres in a German municipality and the Irish standardisation of the social welfare client referencing system.
3. **Focussing on performance and results** (e.g. through performance indicator systems, performance-linked budgets, performance contracting, performance auditing, etc). In 3QC, we heard about a Norwegian prison which measured how its reforms led to lower sickness absences among staff and much lower use of the security cells for inmates.
4. **Improving the quality of public service staff** (e.g. through development and training). Training featured in many 3QC cases. It is hardly possible to improve customer orientation, introduce new IT or implement systems such as CAF, ISO or EFQM, without significant investment in staff training.
5. **Adapting quality tools originally developed for use in the private sector so as to make them suitable for public sector contexts** (there have been several lines of evolution here, including the one that ran from TQM to EFQM to CAF and the Balanced Scorecard). The original inventors of the Balanced Scorecard probably did not have in mind its application to prisons– but that was one of the successful adaptations discussed at 3QC.

6. **Measuring the need for and impact of quality improvement** through various kinds of user survey systems. It was perhaps surprising how many of the cases at 3QC still did not feature this crucial step. Some, however, did. For example, the French Directorate General for Taxes (DGI) employs an independent polling organization to carry out annual surveys of taxpayer satisfaction.

If we ask why these issues are still with us, there seem to be several answers. One is simply that the aspiration of improving the experiences of citizens dealing with the government in its many guises remains an inspiration which is an important motivator for many public officials. A desire for sustainable public sectors and high public service orientation seems to remain a reality for many public sector staff in Europe. Contrary to some popular images of uncaring bureaucrats, many staff who work in public services are genuinely eager to find ways of improving their effectiveness. Doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, police and many others work within a professional ethic of helping and caring - and most of them want to do this better. This simple but fundamental point is forgotten in some quality texts.

A second reason for the longevity of certain items on the agenda is perhaps less noble, but readily understandable: it is to save money. The fiscal pressures on governments wax and wane at different periods in the economic cycle, but everywhere during the last 20 years these pressures have been more keenly felt than they seemed to be during the long boom that fostered welfare state expansions from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Governments are acutely conscious of the need to 'do more with less' - and lightening bureaucracy, intensifying performance management and improving the skills of public sector employees are all ways of achieving this.

A third reason is that some of the technical issues to do with quality improvement are intrinsically complex, and the frontier of possibilities constantly shifts. In 2004 we know much more than we did in 1980 about how and when to measure user satisfaction with particular services. But there are still difficult choices to be made and technical options to be assessed - including new information technologies which are developing all the time. There are still debates about how to approach complex services in which some impacts can be closely and reliably measured, others can only be measured indirectly and with expense and difficulty, and some may not be measurable at all - or at least not for a long time. Measurement is often tremendously useful. However, it can lead to harm as well as benefit. Approximate estimation of important dimensions is much more valuable than precise measurement of less important dimensions, and both are preferable to the kinds of badly-chosen measures which cause perverse effects (about which there is now quite an extensive literature).

A fourth reason is that, as the pioneers of TQM taught us, quality standards seldom stand still. 'Quality' is a multi-dimensional concept and, as and when one dimension has been achieved ('satisfaction attained'), another rises up the agenda (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1995). Users' expectations are constantly on the move: you give them friendlier service, they want faster service; you give them faster service, they want 24

hour service; you give them 24 hour service, they want integration of your service with two or three others in a 'one window' arrangement.

For all these reasons continuity is part of the quality agenda.

Co-operation in the past

"I'm doing quality and you are doing finance: why don't we work together?"

A conference participant

"Quality knows no borders" .

Minister de Graaf, Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands

"Old EU Member States may find it useful to look at the CEE countries for specific solutions for individual administrative problems".

Keynote Speech of Ms Tiina Randma-Liiv

In the past, co-operation was already an important part of the quality agenda.

We have already learned
- from other partners in governance (particularly private and voluntary sectors)
- from other levels of government
- from other policy fields
- from other management functions
- from other countries in the EU and beyond.

However, the boundaries of this co-operation have previously tended to be rather restrictive. The general assumption was that the private sector was performing better than the public sector and that therefore, public sector organisations should learn from private sector organisations. Even though some management methods and tools of the private sector could be successfully implemented in public sector organisations – after their adaption to the specific context of the public agency – there is also a long list of failed 'concept transplants', such as business process re-engineering. And within Europe communications between the northern countries and the Mediterranean countries has often been limited, while traffic between eastern European countries and the West has been mainly one way. In the future - and particularly since the EU enlargement of 2004 - an opportunity exists to dismantle these biases and barriers.

Context in the Past

> *"A Charter is not a Charter"*
>
> *"What a pity that we don't have a Vice President!"*
>
> *"How can we install the New Zealand Model?"*

<div align="right">Conference participants</div>

In the past, context was always part of the quality agenda. For example, to an external observer, it may have seemed that, in the early 1990s, the UK, Belgium, France and Italy were all pursuing the same strategy – after all, each country introduced a public service citizens' charter. Closer inspection showed, however, that the charters had very different assumptions, forms and mechanisms – each firmly belonged to its national context. We need to recognize the past and continuing relevance of contextual elements such as:

- majoritarian vs coalition political systems and the related decision making procedures;
- centralised vs decentralized systems;
- well-developed vs less developed civil societies and
- law- v. management-based systems.

Without contextual awareness, quality improvement attempts can easily fail because of a naive belief in the capacity to imitate innovations that come from very different systems.

Coherence in the Past

> *"How can we fire 20% of the staff and yet keep up the motivation of the rest of the staff? How can we cut costs and increase quality?"*

<div align="right">A conference participant</div>

In the past coherence was also an issue for quality improvers. There were examples of quality initiatives and strategies which fell well short of their aims because they were disconnected from each other, or from other management reforms, and were thus incoherent. For example, the introduction of quality management systems has usually been done separately from the personnel department. As a result, little attention has been paid to staff training. The lesson is that quality is not something separate from the rest of the management agenda – it needs to be a dimension of all reforms, even those which may appear unconnected, such as accounting regulations, recruitment procedures or ICT installations.

THE PRESENT: GOING BEYOND PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY

Continuity: New and old friends on the present quality agenda

"Quality management used to be seen as a new initiative – but when new initiatives come in, it often means just ensuring that the baby doesn't get thrown out with the bathwater."

A conference participant

Even though quality remains high on the reform agenda of EU Member countries, **the label 'quality' has changed both its meaning and its scope**. New challenges have reinforced the need for quality initiatives and often taken them in new directions.

The new pressures include:

1. Political pressure from **unresolved 'wicked problems'** such as crime, vandalism, and environmental pollution, which receive a lot of media attention not least as a result of the activities of Agenda 21 and other pressure groups.
2. **Social exclusion**, which has become a key concern to policy makers and public managers throughout Europe, together with related problems of racism, xenophobia, drugs, crime and anti-social behaviour.
3. The **lack of trust of citizens in politicians and political parties**, which is evident, for example, in decreasing electoral turnout and which challenges the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003).
4. **The increasing speed of technological developments in ICT** and other scientific advancements, which has become a challenge for the planning cycles of public agencies and the credibility of technical knowledge bases within public sector institutions (since citizens and community groups now also have access to similar knowledge bases).
5. **Demographic changes,** particularly in the form of the 'ageing society', which imply that the pool of qualified workers becomes smaller while, at the same time, the burden of payments for pensions, health and social care is becoming bigger and bigger.
6. The development of a **more differentiated civil society with new information and communication needs** and, in some limited (but very vocal) cases, the desire to engage in debates on policy issues (such as the environment and community safety). This has intensified the demand from the media and groups in civil society for more information on public policies and public services. At the same time, newsletters and other publications of public agencies are now in strong competition with outlets of NGOs, new websites, and private press, radio and television channels.
7. Last but not least, **migration** within the enlarged EU and outside the EU accentuates **diversity**, which means that policy-makers and public officials are

faced with voters and users with new demands in an increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

These new challenges imply that public agencies are having to take some new directions on their quality journey:

1. **While public service quality remains important, public agencies are now having to adopt a wider 'quality-of-life perspective'.** A 3QC example was the cooperation between different levels of government and organisations from the private and non-profit sectors in Sweden in order to improve road safety effectively.

2. **Public agencies now need to be not just modern service providers but also enablers of community action and encouragers of responsible citizens.** A 3QC example was a Czech programme for crime prevention ('Safe locality') which raised the interest and capacity of citizens in taking active steps to prevent crime in their areas.

3. **Leadership has to be nurtured – not just at the top of the organisation but at all levels within public agencies – and, even more challengingly, outside public agencies.** As the 'Leadership Talk Show' at 3QC showed, the momentum for change may not necessarily come from the top of the organisaton but from a determined and inspirational individual elsewhere (in this case, a community nurse with the responsibility of activating local people to take greater control over their own health outcomes).

4. In terms of policy-making, there is now a stronger awareness of the **need to integrate different policies and to overcome the 'silo' syndrome**, which results in different public agencies designing and implementing their own policies with little regard to the strategic knock-on effects of local decisions on other stakeholders and other areas. At 3QC, a representative of the French Economic and Social Planning Council emphasized the acute need for co-ordination between different types of public authority, and noted that this required a re-examination of traditional procedures.

5. Public service agencies have to reach out to achieve a **stronger engagement of all partners** in issues of strategy development, public service planning, delivery and evaluation; in particular taking pains to include hard-to-reach groups, such as marginalised ethnic groups, people with mental problems and other disadvantaged groups. The consultation and participation of all such groups of citizens are now seen as key to building trust in public agencies – and, where young people are concerned, key to the future credibility and legitimacy of the public sector as a whole. One dramatic example of what can be achieved by engagement of service users was illustrated at 3QC, where the views of prisoners were sought concerning the conditions and procedures under which they were kept – and this led to less use of security cells, more order in the prison and less sick leave being taken by prison officers – benefits to all parties simultaneously.

6. **Diversity management** needs to be embraced as a new imperative for public sector employment. In contrast to previous equality policies, many public agencies not only try to make sure that minorities are treated fairly when applying for a job or a promotion but also actively seek to ensure that their employment profile reflects more appropriately the society which the agency serves. Several cases discussed at the Rotterdam conference concerned public service recruitment and appointment, but it was clear that this aspect still tends to be underplayed in many contexts.

7. Public agencies must become **more competitive employers** in order to attract a qualified workforce and not to lose out to the private sector (as often happens in particular in the new EU Member States). Given that many public agencies will not be able to offer private sector salaries, there must be a strong focus on staff training and development to keep staff motivated. Many of the improvements presented at 3QC claimed to intensify the service orientation of staff and to lead to job enrichment.

8. Public agencies must embrace **the new ICTs** which offer radical new solutions to issues such as health management (tele-medicine) and prison management (electronic surveillance), as showcased by the case Portuguese National Probation Agency. However, there is an urgent need to make more investments in ICT and to develop the ICT skills of public sector staff. Along with this goes the need to develop coherent **knowledge management strategies**.

Not surprisingly, these new demands on public agencies also trigger the emergence of new analytical frameworks and tools. 3QC showed that there is increasing use of the Balanced Scorecard as a performance management tool which allows quality of service to be included directly in the performance reports of organisations. This technique originated in the USA in the early 1990s, mainly in relation to private sector firms (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). However, it has very quickly caught on as a valuable way of reporting performance in the multi-objective, multiple stakeholder context which faces most public sector organisations. It can easily be married with the more comprehensive EFQM or CAF frameworks. The approach tended to be taken up first by local authorities, which could decide for themselves how best to report their results, but it has quickly spread to health agencies (such as hospitals), executive agencies and is now even becoming common in parts of central government.

Finally, one new feature is that **the discourse about 'quality' has itself been overtaken and encompassed by a number of more recent, wider concepts**. We have had 're-invention', 'good governance' and 'debureaucratisation' (see, e.g. Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, Fukuyama, 2004). All these include notions of quality, and in their practical realisations include quality efforts – as Vice President Gore made very clear during his description of the USA 're-invention' programme for which

he was responsible. In that sense the debate about 'good governance' (for example) is a 'friend' of quality. However, these newer debates may also lead to confusion. Is 'quality' now something of the past? Is it different from 'good governance', or part of it? We suggest that it is important not to get bogged down in purely terminological debates. After all, 'good governance' and 'debureaucratisation' are - like 'quality' itself - very broad, non-scientific labels. They are part and parcel of political and public debate, and are constantly re-interpreted and re-formulated in different contexts. What seems very clear is that, in practice, in most if not all European countries, what we have in the past defined as quality issues are still very much part of the agenda of reform. What we have collectively and individually learned about the conditions for success and the causes of failure in quality improvement remains vital knowledge for 'good governance' and 'debureaucratisation'.

New pressures for co-operation in the present

"Our users don't blame us for things that go wrong – they blame 'them'. But, unless we all own up to being part of 'them', there is no hope of making sure that all of our services are right for our users."

"Our service can only work if the services from other agencies work as well – but our evaluation procedures force us to find out what we in particular did that affected the overall outcomes for the service user – this way madness lies."

Two conference participants

Whereas in the past the focus has been on breaking down 'institutional silos' within organisations, there is now increasing awareness that **'wicked' social problems** such as anti-social behaviour, high levels of unemployment and environmental pollution **require 'joined-up' approaches between several public agencies, sometimes even including private and non-profit organisations**. Most of these problems are not really new – often it is only that their scale has increased or that we have simply become more aware of them. For example, there is now a change of attitude in many EU countries to treat domestic violence as a crime – previously, cases of domestic violence were often not even recorded by the police.

Of course, **e-government opens up new opportunities for partnership working and policy integration but the real challenge is a cultural one**. Developing joined-up approaches means working with people from different contexts, which can be quite a cultural shock for many staff. The project of the Amsterdam-Amstelland and Haaglanden police forces in tackling domestic violence shows that improving the quality of police action was not sufficient. Both forces signed convenants with a wide range of judicial agencies and social organisations. As one project leader said, it took seven years to make these new partnerships effective. In spite of this and other encouraging examples, at 3QC it was still true that a substantial proportion of all the

best practice cases involved only limited co-operation, or none at all. There is still a long way to go for civil servants to become genuinely 'organisation-blind'.

Present Contexts

"Listening to citizens is the key to quality improvements" .

Vice President Gore

"The still fragile democracies in CEE would probably benefit more from activating citizens rather than clients".

Ms Tiina Randma-Liiv

Civil society has changed: on the one hand, **there are more educated and outspoken citizens** who are also well-organised. Of course, on the other hand, **there is a clear lack of trust**.

3QC showed that genuine dialogue with users and the public at large is still an emerging trend throughout Europe but, of course, it is still a learning process for both citizens and public decision-makers. **Many public decision-makers do not really listen** – they think that they know best what is good for citizens. And even if they do listen, they often forget to demonstrate to citizens that they have listened. After all, many citizens are still very ambivalent about whether it is worth while becoming involved – they do like to be asked their opinions but they are sceptical about whether their voices will be heard. Therefore, demonstrating that you have listened and acted on that new understanding is crucial in building trust and making citizen engagement sustainable into the longer term.

Nevertheless, some 'best practice' cases demonstrated a more inclusive outlook towards citizens. Citizens are no longer just regarded as 'customers' who have needs and wishes. Increasingly they are recognised as partners who want to participate in planning processes, budgetary decisions and public service delivery. Citizens are often closer to a specific problem than civil servants, so that their contributions can help public sector organizations to find adequate responses which focus on improvements to citizens' holistic quality of life, rather than just improvements to the technical quality of one or two individual services.

The Present: The Quest for Coherence

"It is rare that public services are entirely produced by one public agency. In the majority of cases, they are the result of cooperation between several agencies, which may be at central or sub-national level. It is essential for the quality of public services that this cooperation is effective".

Mr. Yves Cannac, member of the French Economic and Social Council at a 3QC plenary

Obviously, the new disaggregated (or 'fragmented') public sector – with many services being delivered through partnerships, networks and contracting out - raises **new issues of how to control quality 'at a distance'**. How does one ensure that contractors, partners etc. meet the quality standards required by the state or by the EU? It is the challenge of quality management in a cross organizational context of complex value-adding chains. This is likely to be especially difficult in services where outputs or outcomes are hard to monitor (e.g. many caring services or advice services). It is easy to slip into heavy-handed inspection, regulation and audit but, equally, it is easy to underestimate the problem and think that because a contractor has ISO 9000 (or some other 'badge') everything will be alright.

E-government offers a particularly rich field for 'coordination' mechanisms. For example, the various social policy departments in the Irish government reported at 3QC that they are now working much more closely together now that they have agreed a single client identifier and protocols for sharing access to client records. While this has still not become universal through all central government departments in Ireland (never mind in sub national and local agencies), it has already allowed almost instantaneous recalculation of welfare benefits and other social service entitlements, each time one agency records that the circumstances of the client have changed.

It is in the nature of politics that total coherence will never be attained – and, indeed, the growth of more diverse societies makes it even harder to reach for. Nevertheless, its opposite – policy incoherence – is less and less acceptable. Both citizens and the mass media notice and criticize public authorities when they pursue contradictory policies. One important point here is that transparency - one of the most commonly mentioned ingredients of good governance – helps and promotes coherence. The more open our public authorities become, the easier it is for citizens to see contradictions and incoherencies, and to exert pressure to reduce them. So although this is a never-ending struggle, we may hope that the trend to greater transparency (aided by the far greater ease of data communication using modern ICTs) will itself strengthen the forces in favour of coherence.

THE FUTURE: QUALITY, QUO VADIS?

Obviously, 3QC provided a valuable framework to bring together people with different experiences and backgrounds and to give them opportunities to network. However, this conference was only the 'sine qua non' condition. The contacts made have to be nurtured and built on, which requires time, money and a lot of patience for results to pay off. However, we believe that the regular exchange of experiences and implicit knowledge – not information taken out of context – is likely to lead to a deeper

understanding of what works in which context and what does not. This is in contrast to what sometimes emerges from highly complex benchmarking exercises in which the involved parties do not examine carefully each other's context but rather focus on an abstract quality model.

<u>Co-operation in the Future</u>

"The European administrative space will gradually become a reality…This will require an exchange of information, experience and best practice".

<div align="right">Ms Randma-Liiv, at a 3QC plenary</div>

The government of virtually every European country says it is concerned to improve the quality of its public sector. Furthermore, many of the pressures on governments are almost universal - including the pressures to spend more but tax less, pressures arising from rapid technological change, from the growth of competitive international markets, from population shifts and from rising public expectations. Do these shared pressures, and to some extent a shared general rhetoric about quality, mean that all countries are, or should be, doing the same things?

As a matter of observable fact, **all governments are *not* doing the same thing and, what is more, we very much doubt whether they even *should* be**. In the early 1990s some enthusiasts recommended that the approach called the New Public Management (NPM) should be applied more or less everywhere. Nowadays not only academic analysts (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004) but also some of the international organizations which previously advocated NPM (OECD, 2003) recognise that diversity in policy-making and management practices is both inevitable and justified.

Different countries start from different places. The most pressing problem in one country may be far down the list of problems in another. We see this from the information on modernization programmes supplied to 3QC by European governments. In one country the aim is for '24/7 agencies' which citizens can access by a variety of means, according to choice. In another country fighting corruption and gaining basic financial control and transparency are top of the agenda. The trajectories of reform in these different countries is most unlikely to be the same.

Different countries also have different cultures of government - research indicates that some place a higher value on egalitarianism than others, some are more individualistic than others, and some are less comfortable with ambiguity than others (Mouritzen and Svara, 2002).

The very *capacity* of public organisations for reform may differ considerably from one country to another (Fukuyama, 2004). All these factors and more provide entirely legitimate reasons why both the prime targets for reform and the means of implementation may vary considerably from one place to another.

Does that mean, therefore, that we can say nothing in general about future quality improvement? That is not the conclusion we draw. **While there is no 'one best way' for quality, there are principles, concepts and techniques which have been shown to have value in certain contexts and on certain assumptions**. The task of the reformer, therefore, is to build a strategy and select the tools and instruments which best fit the particular problem in the particular context. Borrowing quality tools almost always involves some adaptation to fit the local context – and occasionally adaptation becomes actual transformation.

Three short examples (all taken from the real world) will help to illustrate this point:
- Introducing a quality system which requires a high degree of local operator autonomy and initiative will be much more difficult in a context which is highly hierarchical and centralised than in one which is relatively decentralized and relatively egalitarian in workplace relationships. Of course, that context can be changed, but probably only gradually, and meanwhile the approach to quality will need to reflect the realities of existing institutional arrangements.
- Concentrating on faster, friendlier service may be a mistaken priority if citizens see the main problem as being corruption. In these circumstances a more sensible quality strategy may be to address corruption head-on, and to enlist the aid of the public in doing so.
- Intensive training of staff in a particular quality technique may be largely wasted if the rate of staff turnover is very high. The turnover problem needs to be addressed before sophisticated quality systems can be expected to work.

Two major points emerge from this analysis. First, **the *sequence* of reform is often of crucial importance**. Second, **it is essential to perform a thorough prior *diagnosis* of what the problem really is**. Thus it is not only knowledge of quality techniques that matters, but also knowledge of local contexts. Experts in quality systems can easily make serious mistakes if they are not teamed with people who have a deep knowledge of local conditions and 'the way things work around here'. As one country put it in its 3QC documentation, there will be major problems if 'instead of basing solutions on analyzing problems and getting to their root, the policy makers jump at whatever solution first comes to mind'.

Does the diversity of local contexts mean that 'good practices' cannot and should not be transferred from one public agency to another or even to a different country? From the conference documentation, it is striking that all presenters of 'good practice' cases are convinced that their project can be transferred to other public agencies. Nevertheless, we know by now that 'what works in New Zealand does not necessarily work in Mongolia' (Schick, 1998). There is now also increasing awareness among Western European and American consultants that the context of public agencies in the new EU Member countries is often distinctive. For example, in Hungary more and more public agencies are currently becoming ISO-9000 certified. However, due to the high competition among certification agencies and consultants and the lack of a national certification agency monitoring

the certification process itself certification agencies are not very demanding, and it seems likely that, sooner or later, all public agencies which have applied for ISO certification, will receive it (Jenei and Gulácsi, 2004).

There is also a strong belief among many public officials, in particular lawyers that, given the different legal context in EU Member countries, it is impossible to transfer reforms from abroad to the domestic context. Ironically, in spite of a lot of rhetoric about the impact of globalization on the public sector, the syndrome of 'we are unique' or 'not made here' is still strong in public agencies in most EU countries. Of course, attitudes vary across countries - for example, it is striking that international public conferences experience low participation from German delegates, whereas, in general, they are very well attended by the Finnish.

In spite of this reluctance to learn from international experience – and some well-known unsuccessful attempts to import particular reforms – there are also **many cases where instruments such as citizen charters, codes of ethics, participative budgeting have been 'imported' from other countries, albeit with results which are as yet unclear**. Yet, in spite of a 'European Administrative Space', cross-cultural learning in the enlarged EU is still confined within quite narrow linguistic and cultural boundaries. The question is how can we widen these 'communities' and encourage more cross-cultural learning between EU Member countries?

The QC conferences are themselves evidence that **quality improvement is increasingly a matter of international co-operation**. But the term 'international' contains within itself many variants – inter-local, international-professional, inter-governmental etc. All these have been manifest at 3QC, and all are likely to increase even more in future. We can look forward with confidence to being received by our Finnish hosts at 4QC. We already know that they are exceptionally international in outlook, and unusually advanced in the arts and technologies of communication.

Naturally, much co-operation will continue to be intra-national. The movement towards joined-up governments, one window or one stop services and partnerships has until now been mainly a national phenomenon. At 3QC there have been a number of exemplary cases of useful sub-national co-operation and networking.

But in future joining-up may become increasingly international. Already we can vote, file tax returns and obtain licenses in countries other than the one where we happen to live and work. Customs and immigration officers are stationed abroad so as to deal with problems before travellers leave their countries of departure. National police forces exchange information about suspects and offenders, and share data bases. Health advice and education (right up to masters degree level) may be available on-line from public service providers in a variety of countries. National weather bureaux could not construct their forecasts without an elaborate system of international data collection and exchange. All this will surely go much further in the future.

Future Contexts

"Quality is never just about technology – it is about culture and values".

Vice president Al Gore

"Government is about serving communities".

Minister de Graaf, Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands

The context we face in future is one where rapid changes of technology are matched by **rapid changes in society**. Where the communities we serve are less and less homogenous and more and more diverse. Where public service providers must address much more ethnically diverse immigrant populations. Where a much larger fraction of the population in most countries will be elderly people with a variety of special needs.

We will also be living in a context where more advanced and enlightened health and social care makes us ever-more aware of the fact that a substantial proportion of the population has poor sight, poor hearing, severe allergies, mobility limitations of various kinds or other disabilities. We also live in increasingly multi-lingual communities (even if English continues to grow to be a world second language). **In the 21st century our public services are expected to help all people in all these diverse conditions and situations**. This has been an explicit theme in some of the workshops but a submerged and implicit theme in many more. It won't go away – how we deal with these issues will be one criterion of our claim to a distinctive European 'civilization'. Quality is for all, not just for the traditional, able-bodied, monolingual, monocultural sections of our populations of citizens.

Future Challenges to Coherence

"Once in a while we are even willing to stick our necks out for what we believe in. Because without guts, creativity, dedication and personal commitment, real change will never come."

Mr Rob Kuipers, Director General of Public Service Management,
at the 3QC closing plenary session

How can we retain a degree of coherence in this increasingly complex, diverse and rapidly-changing world? Some post-modernist theorists say the game is already lost – we can no longer draw a big picture – all is fragmented and ambiguous. But, philosophically speaking, without coherence we have no meaning, and without shared meanings we have no learning. In fact it is worse than that, because without meaning and communication we lose our very identities.

So what do we do? Well, we hand over this impossible job to politicians! As Vice President Gore said, we expect *them* to give us visions, clear goals and underpinning values. And the civil service has to help them with the formulation as well as the

implementation of these policies. These processes of forming coherent visions, values and goals are actually the very root of quality. Quality does not exist outside of these processes – our understandings of what quality means is formed *through* these processes. That is why it varies somewhat from time to time and place to place. **We would go so far as to claim that quality and democracy are intimately inter-related**. Without the rich communication and dialogue with citizens to which democracies are uniquely committed, we will never find out what they regard as quality. We may have progressive attitudes and we may possess high technology, but without those diverse voices we will be high tech reformers working in the dark. Meaning and coherence come from dialogue, and are always provisional and subject to reformulation – that is the future we face.

One final observation: **His Royal Highness Prince Constantine said at 3QC that what was most needed was the will to act**. This is what we ask from our politicians, *and* from our leading public servants. No dialogue is a recipe for disaster. But endless dialogue, without a will to act, is extremely frustrating. So we need a leadership - political and public service - that listens to diversity, that participates in debates, that forms and communicates its visions, and which then acts. This is not a search for some simplistic best practice or one best way. It is a messy, on-going struggle to construct coherence under pressure. It is making opportunities work. It is full of surprises. It requires a certain passion. It also requires cool analysis and precise measurement. We call it quality improvement.

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