Chapter 117
Virtual Neighborhoods and E-Government:
A Case Study Comparison

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the potential of GIS oriented neighborhood websites in the Netherlands will be researched. This new way of location based e-government will be analyzed by conducting four case studies in which neighborhood websites hold a central position. Relevant questions include to what degree these websites improve service delivery on the side of the government and to what degree the position of citizens is strengthened and whether they are pleased with the website and with the results. Attention will be paid to critical factors for success when designing the website but also while implementing the website and when the website is running. This will be done in terms of service delivery, closing of the gap between government and citizens and the strength of the position of citizens. Finally, we will answer the question on how GIS oriented neighborhood websites can be implemented so they have the highest potential by citizen satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The gap between citizens and government has been a subject of discussion in many countries as well as in the Netherlands for a while. The Dutch government feels it has to do something about this (perceived) gap, its legitimacy is at stake. Ways to diminish the gap between government and citizens and to regain trust from citizens are the improvement of electronic service delivery and an increase in citizen participation. Here we deal with an improved personalization towards location instead of towards citizens. Two devel-

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opments have come together. First we see the neighborhood becomes an increasingly important frame of reference for the government. This can be demonstrated by more neighborhood based initiatives from local governments and from the plan 'krachtige wijken' (powerful neighborhoods) by Dutch government. Second Geographical Information Systems (GIS) play an increasingly important role. This is demonstrated for example by the emergence of Google Earth. Therefore it is not surprising that on neighborhood level experiments with GIS-oriented websites become more and more common. The potential of these initiatives can mostly be found in stimulating location based ways of service delivery and participation. Put differently, we are dealing with an improvement of service delivery by the government to citizens and an increase in participation by citizens in their neighborhood with the possibilities offered by modern information and communication technology (ICT). According to the report from the commission of municipal service delivery (Commissie Jorritsma) and the action plan 'Andere Overheid' (Different Government) the Dutch government should deliver its services to citizens more efficiently and effectively.

The goal of this chapter is to describe and analyze the degree in which these GIS oriented neighborhood websites improve service delivery by governments to citizens and whether they indeed strengthen participation. An electronic government becomes visible which we will term location based e-government'. It must be noted that the field of virtual neighborhoods and e-government is far larger as will be discussed here. For the sake of briefness only those issues will be covered which allow us to compare case studies in a way an answer to the main question can be given.

The central question in the chapter then will be: "To which degree do GIS oriented neighborhood websites improve service delivery by the government and strengthen participation by citizens?" In section 2 we will deal with the reason the neighborhood is an important frame of reference for the government. After that we will discuss the potential of GIS. In the fourth section the theoretical framework will be the central point of focus, which we will use to analyze the case studies. These case studies will be elaborated on in section 5. Finally we will draw some conclusions.

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The neighborhood is becoming an increasingly important frame of reference for Dutch government policy. (WRR, 2005) First the neighborhood is the place where societal problems and challenges become visible. The plan 'krachtige wijken' demonstrates a renewed focus on the neighborhood within the broad frame of the larger cities. Also local governments increasingly make policy based on neighborhoods.

Second the neighborhood is the living environment of citizens. Social en physical qualities of a neighborhood are of influence on the involvement of citizens and the degree of integration in society and their attitude towards the government. Therefore the importance of the neighborhood is mostly termed by social cohesion. (WRR, 2005) A diminishing social cohesion would contribute to an increase in anonymity, displacements, insecurity, well-being and trust from citizens towards the government. A possible answer to these problems could be found in a strengthening of small-scale connections in which people interact daily and in which their interaction with the government regarding day-to-day politics is given meaning. Citizens are able to be actively involved in these matters but often lack the motivation to do so.