

## Simplex Program in the age of Open Government

The Portuguese Program for Administrative and Legislative Simplification – Simplex – joins e-government and cutting red tape initiatives from different public services.

The program and most of its initiatives are the result of cross-department and even multi-level collaboration.

The first Simplex Program was launched in 2006. However, to meet more effectively Simplex goals, Municipalities have start-up, in 2008, a joint simplification program in partnership with the Central Government, which is called “Simplex Autárquico” (Simplification Program for Municipalities).

### Co-production initiatives within Simplex Programs

Each year, different public services from different levels of government present initiatives to reduce administrative burdens to citizens and businesses, to deliver of faster, simpler and more inclusive services and to improve government’s efficiency.

For this purpose - but also to facilitate the implementation of transversal measures and to guarantee the overall control of the Simplex programs – it was crucial to establishing a network of focal points in all ministries (known as the Simplex agents’ network).



However, **listening to public departments’ priorities was not enough**. Thus, aiming to actively involve both public services and their direct users in the modernization process, several co-production initiatives started to be promoted, enabling people to participate in the decision and planning of the Simplex Programs.

From 2007 on, **public consultation** on the proposals planed by each public department was made available, in a web based format, making it possible to leave comments.

In 2008, for the first time, **business owners or their representatives were invited to participate** in SMEs forums, still as a pilot experience. This process aims to identify the specific need of this target group and ameliorate their relation with public services and the reduction of administrative burdens.

Also **to send new ideas, rather than comments on department proposals was, finally, a possibility** this year. Public participation has played an important role in the designing of the Program; the number of proposals has more than doubled and many have been included in the program.

For the public consultation process of the 2008 Simplex program, it was made available **a blog format, allowing open discussion**.

In 2009 Simplex, **for the first time, public servants were challenged to give ideas** to cut red tape and deliver better public services, with the “**Simplex Idea Award**”. This award is another co-production initiative within this same process. A “simplified procedure to get exemption from health services fees” – that eliminates the need of moving around from public service to public service, carrying papers, to make proof of their right of exemption – was the idea awarded with the first prize. This idea was

integrated in the 2009 Simplex Program as the 1# initiative, and was put into practice during this same year. Once more, a web-based format was used to enable participation.



All suggestions and comments are analysed and the ones that seem to have significant impact on the simplification of a process or reveal a particular irritation burden are forwarded to the public services responsible for the implementation of corrective measures.

Citizens or service users are involved in these initiatives in **both the stages of co-decision and co-planning.**

For instance the decision to go on, this year, with the development of a 'simplified procedure to get exemption from health services fees' came from a suggestion made by three public servants that work in a health centre.

On the other hand, the planning of a project to 'harmonize web presence of all the public services' in terms of a common image and identification url was planned both with public departments and citizens; its scope evolved gathering different new ideas beyond those initially planned by the public departments implicated in the coordination of this process.

But examples of other co-production stages related with the Simplex Program initiatives were already experienced.

Inspired on the concept of the British Project "Fix my Street", the initiative "A Minha Rua" (My Street) is a tool that enables citizens to work with the local authorities in the resolution problems such as potholes in the roads, street light out, abandoned vehicles, graffiti, etc.

"A Minha Rua" helps people to report to local authorities or to view local problems they've found, by simply locating them on a map or by sending a picture.

This is a Central Government project developed in cooperation with the Local Government. It allows citizens to have a single point of contact to communicate with already more than 30 Portuguese municipalities that choose to be involved in this project.

This co-planning initiative, aimed to improve the effectiveness of the local services, to increase the involvement of citizens in their local environment and to strength the cooperation between central and local Government, but not only. Also it represents an example of a co-evaluation since it allows the complaining citizens and others to monitor their protests.

### **The main reasons and deliveries of co-production**

The mains reasons for co-producing are the willingness to develop public services that really answer to users' needs and truly become less burdensome to business; The awareness that citizens and business "know what they want" and "wish to be part of the solutions" that are being designed; The

believe that those who work closely to public services end-users are also in a privileged position to identify weaknesses in service delivery and to understand users needs from their suggestions;

One of the main deliveries of these co-production initiatives is the **recognition of the Simplex Program as a brand associated to an initiative that really addresses the needs** of those that contact with public services. This somehow reveals the increasing trust and satisfaction with the new services that are developed.

The co-production schemes used have lead to some changes in the internal procedures for designing the Simplex Program. For example, the need to interact with the Simplex Agents Network, in order to assess the impact and feasibility of the proposals suggested under public participation, strongly increased.

### **Constraints faced and lessons to be learned**

Two risks were identified in carrying out this initiative:

1. **Not to really reach “the ones that feel the pain”** and to create too high expectations on procedures changing, due to participation.

We may be interested to hear from citizens or business; we may be prepared to discuss their ideas and adopt some of them, but frequently we may not be paying attention to the “ones that feel the pain”.

Since 2008 we have organised, as mentioned, SMEs forums and meetings with business associations to reach more effectively the needs of this group. In order to enhance targeting even more, in 2010 we have planned 3 focus groups with a selection of enterprises (20 enterprises from the biggest, 20 enterprises from a selection of SMEs and 20 others that are micro enterprises) rather than just meeting with their representatives;

Also with this goal, in 2009 we developed a blog format, that enables to collect the users' suggestions on the government proposals for the Program, but not only: it also promotes discussion among the participants, which is important to test the suggestions given by other users: if they make sense or not; if they are impacting a relevant number of users or not.

2. Moreover, and in what concerns the second risk, we must point out that by developing so many initiatives to stimulate participation **we must have an increasing effort to adopt** them.

In the first year of the participation process, we faced a reasonably shy experience. In fact, little control was made upon suggestions that were forward to public departments, for evaluation.

In the following years, we started to progressively involve the network agents in the management of this public participation process, namely we asked their help to assess the user's suggestions and their impacts.

Furthermore, we encouraged them to communicate the concrete measures they have adopted in response to public consultation – in order to create the awareness that public participation is worthwhile, as well as to boost the level of agreements with the departments involved.

One of the success factors is, in fact, **the network of simplification agents** that help to analyse, prioritize and select the initiatives that were put forward.

Another is the **empowerment of the Simplification Program itself** – which is supported directly by the Prime Minister – that enables the coordination team to strongly suggest the adoption of the simplifications ideas, which come from public services users, to the ones that are operationally responsible for their implementation.



**One of the major challenges** we have identified is the limited capacity to analyse and treat all the new ideas received through the consultations processes.

We are, more and more, looking for new ways of stimulating participation and searching for innovative tools, so that we

won't lose any important contribution. But this option **increases the task** of selecting the most valuable ideas and also our capacity of reaction, **both to give feed-back to public participation and to take actions.**

As mentioned before, since the beginning of Simplex we have always made an effort to include some of the suggestions that came from public consultation in the Program. In the first years the coordination team was the only responsible to select the suggestions that should be integrated; but, from the second year on, we decided that the Simplex Agents Network should help us, since they are better positioned to assess which are feasible and which have greater impact on their users.

And the results are at our sight: if on the one hand participation has increased, on the other hand a larger number of initiatives have been progressively adopted and integrated in the Programs.

To previously build a team specifically dedicated to this task, namely to analyse the suggestions, to assess their impact and feasibility, and to coordinate their implementation, is an advice for those who wish to try something similar.

### **An initiative here to stay**

The co-deciding and co-planning of the Simplex Program is to be mainstreamed. But also other stages of co-production process are being studied.

It has been developed for four years, consecutively. Each year new co-production initiatives are developed and the participation process is widely spread. This helps to build a momentum when citizens expect to be heard.

Moreover, the dissemination of the results of this participation process – namely which of the initiatives are going to be accepted, and even the names and faces of the ones that suggested them – is something we believe, helps to reinforce this new culture that is here to stay.

As a result of the input obtained from this public participation processes, an increasing number of new suggestions are adopted; twenty one (21) in 2009, which represents 10% of the Programme; thirty (30) in 2010, corresponding to 23% of the Programme.