



The Flemish Innovation Projects, promoting innovation through encouraging the use and re-use of government datasets

Abstract

This case study highlights how the Flemish government are encouraging Flemish administrations and local authorities to open up data and build applications through financing or co-financing worthwhile innovative open data initiatives. Twenty-four proposals were received of which ten were selected. The case studies and presentation describes the approach and expected results of this initiative.

The Open Data initiative in Flanders

The Digital Agenda for Europe, one of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, defines the role that ICT will have to play if Europe wants to succeed in its ambitions for 2020. The Digital Agenda includes Open Data as an important objective. An increasing number of governments in Europe have thus committed to open up data, realising that the opening of public sector information has great potential for added economic and social value.

Open Data and Shared Services have also been at the center of the eGovernment strategy in Flanders since 2011. The Flemish Region and the Flemish Cities have since then been at the forefront in quite a number of innovative eGovernment projects. The Open Data Program, one of those initiatives, was set up that realising that in a well-functioning, transparent and democratic society, citizens and business must be able to access government data and information and to share and re-use that information, freely and with minimal restrictions. Amongst other things, Agoria, the federation of the technology industry in Belgium, estimates the economic value of re-use of public sector information in Belgium in between 875 to 900 million euros. The Flemish government in Belgium has therefore agreed on an Open Data Strategy that goes for the principle of Open Data by default.

The Flemish Innovation Projects

The government decided on a top-down approach to implement the open data strategy. A concept note was drawn up and signed by all ministers. The concept note was followed by a 2012 and 2013 plan of action, detailing the necessary steps to move the program forward. However, the effective implementation of this action plan largely depended on awareness among the stakeholders on all levels of national, regional and local government.

In 2013, amongst a lot of other initiatives, a call for proposals was published asking administrations and local authorities in Flanders to submit proposals aiming to put Open Data on their agenda by developing and implementing open data in their organisation and/or local constituencies. Out of the twenty-four proposals, ten projects have been selected and will be supported effectively with a budget of almost half a Million Euro's.

Some examples:

The city of Antwerp is realizing an application with the aim of improving the existing local geographical data of the city. The application allows the city to draw up an inventory of new geodata and facilitate the collection of geodata from interested citizens. Data generated by this application will be released as open data on their website, therefore crowd sourcing open data in the real sense of the word.

The Flemish department of Science and Innovation is developing a linked open data store. This data store will harvest, map, link and integrate the available research data in Flanders. A set of interfaces will open up and visualize this valuable information to all interested parties.

"Museums and Heritage Antwerp vzw (MNE)", a group of municipal museums and heritage institutions, wants to facilitate the exchange of information within these organisations as well as between the different sectors of the national cultural heritage sector. This linked open data initiative aims to define standards for connecting content between different collections through meaningful links. To create machine readable context and allow accurate meaningful searching, the city would like to present the data as linked open data in accordance with RDF standards, amongst other things by defining data through a <http://URI> and allowing combinations of RDF triples. The ultimate aim of the city is to establish maximum online accessibility of their data, through as many platforms and applications as possible, and therefore facilitating maximum re-use of their collections.

The city of Ghent has implemented a new traffic control system, a central system operated by the Transportation Department of the City of Ghent. The system is currently able to show the actual occupancy rates of car parks in real-time through an xml and json response. The City does not want to continue to invest in developing their own applications, but want to go much further in offering dynamic real-time open data. In collaboration with the e-Strategy department of the city of Ghent, a pilot study has been set up which will allow developers to create innovative services to citizens and businesses.



Conclusion

Open data is often defined as public owned data allowing people, companies and organizations to launch new ventures, analyse trends, make data-driven decisions, and solve complex problems. The implications for government, business, consumer advocacy and others are far reaching.

The government of Flanders wants to encourage Flemish administrations and local authorities to make their data and information widely available, thereby encouraging creativity and innovation. The regional government is doing this, amongst other things, through financing or co-financing worthwhile innovative open data initiatives.

The status of these projects, together with the challenges, risks and results of these initiatives will be presented as use-cases at the first Share PSI workshop in Samos.



About the author

Noël Van Herreweghe is at present program manager Open Data at the Government of Flanders, managing a team of internal and external consultants.

With an increased emphasis on transparency, participatory governance, releasing social and commercial value and integration between the different Flemish Government entities, Noël reorganised the open data landscape along internationally recognised principles. Also in this context, he has led the team in establishing the strategic, legal and technical framework to enable and facilitate all open data efforts and initiatives in Flanders and Belgium. This framework is now being used by other administrations and organisations. Noël has set up a knowledge platform to enable, streamline and integrate cross-functional open data activities and is involved in many open data local and Europe wide initiatives. He is also an honorary fellow at the University of Leuven.

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