**Discursive institutionalism for reconciling change and stability in digital innovation public sector projects for development**

# Abstract

A good deal of research and practice on digital innovation public sector projects takes for granted a stability-change dichotomy which positions these two phenomena as opposite and difficult to conciliate aspects. In this area here is a shortage of studies focusing on how projects as the main vehicles for digital innovation could mediate between change and stability in the public sector. To address this gap this paper proposes Discursive Institutionalism (DI) to better understand the dynamics of this type of projects. A case study of a multi-actor project is developed in the Albanian context extends the scope of the analysis to the transitional institutional environment in which the project unfolded. Findings suggest that large-scale multi-actor digital innovation public sector projects can not only be seen as temporary endeavors but also as strategic points of interaction for multifaceted stakeholders whose ideas and discourses could converge at levels of policies, programs and philosophies in order to keep required stability in the face of change. Using DI, a number of propositions are formulated and empirically validated to draw insights and implications for future project policy formulation, research and practice.

**Keywords:** institutional theory; discursive institutionalism (DI); electronic government; digital innovation, public sector, stability; change; Albania.

# Introduction and research question

Facing increasingly pressures, many public sector organisations have to work through local and global networks of state and non-state actors in order to adequately adopt and sustain change in the face of uncertainty and complexity (Janowski, Pardo, & Davies, 2012). Information and communication technologies are conceived as essential elements to build and maintain such networks (ibid.) and promote transparent and accountable collaboration between public and private organisations. Yet, our understanding of collaborative public management and how digital innovations could impact its realization remains fragmented in conceiving of change as a single-sided, homogenous and inevitable process (O'Leary & Vij, 2012). This is more the case, given that digital innovations in the public sector rely heavily on the success of projects as temporary efforts to close perceived gaps between existing and intended ways of working (Heeks, 2005, 2006) without further consideration of long-term project impacts.

Established research approaches investigating the dynamics and effects of digital innovation projects in the public sector have often relied on institutional theory (C. Avgerou & Walsham, 2000; Brown & Thompson, 2011; Ciborra & Navarra, 2005; Cordella & Iannacci, 2010; Criado, 2009; Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2011; Luna-Reyes et al., 2005; Luna-Reyes, Zhang, Gil-García, & Cresswell, 2005). The main idea behind these studies is identifying practices, values, norms and other elements of institutional context where digital innovations are adopted which could hinder or facilitate collaborative change. To date many of these efforts stem from Fountain (2001)’s seminal work in exploring the adoption of digital innovations in the US public sector. Fountain’s institutional approach, according to Yang (2003) and Schmidt (2008), can be considered just one of several theoretical institutional possibilities. An inherited limitation of Fountain’s work according to Yang (2003) is an emphasis on digitally-enabled collaboration as ‘stable’ manifestation of intended and achieved isomorphism. This leaves little room for considering other aspects (i.e. agency) in promoting both wider change as well as stability. For developing countries, adopting foreign collaboration and technology driven models could result in focusing on knowledge and technology transfer at the expense of context-sensitive life improvement transformations amidst the global socio-economic order (Avgerou, 2008). This suggests that change (driven by digital project innovation) and stability (driven by organisational inertia and/or social accommodation) need to be somehow managed simultaneously in these contexts to enable adequate and widely beneficial transitions. Hence, a key research question that needs to be addressed in the study of digital innovations in the public sector becomes: ***How can change and stability be reconciled in digital innovation projects?***

To address the above question this paper proposes Discursive Institutionalism (DI) as an alternative theoretical lens which could shed new light on such dynamics and on how innovations could be better conceived. Using DI as a critical interpretive lens (Walsham, 1995,a,b, 2005, 2006) a case study of a multi-actor project in the Albanian context is examined. The first contribution of this study is presenting a DI model and set of definitions that can be used in the context of digital innovation projects, adopting DI from the context of political sciences where the theory originates from. The second contribution is a theory-led methodology that captures discourse elements and ideas from both organizational and individual agents into a rigorous coding framework that can be easily replicated. Thirdly, three propositions inform the theory by positioning the change-stability dichotomy into the coordinative-communicative dimension of policies, programs and philosophies initially proposed by DI. Finally, we discuss practical implications for the management (project policy formulation, research, practice) of digital innovation public sector initiatives and the reforms they intend to implement as well as implications for research and policy formulation in developing countries.

# Discursive institutionalism (DI)

Discursive institutionalism or DI is a theoretical approach initially developed in the domain of political sciences (Schmidt, 2008, 2011; 2012). Its main aim is to reconcile, as well as extend, the potential of institutional theories to study stability and change as proposed by Schmidt in a number of papers (2006; 2008; 2010; 2011; 2012). The main argument of DI is that existing theories (rational institutionalism, historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism) provide little in the way of explaining the dynamics of politically-oriented change, and constrain the role of diverse agents, political and non-politically oriented, in the process. Such theories and their approaches become too simplistic because they subordinate agents’ interests or motivations to dominant goals of achieving political isomorphism, institutional conformity or historical stability. In other words, Schmidt argues that existing institutional theories assume fixed preferences, locations and interest orientations of agents. This assumption is reflected in how processes of change in digitally driven innovations in the public sector are often conceived as ‘freezing’ (discarding existing stability), changing (introducing or transferring knowledge and technology) and re-freezing (institutionalizing its use) (Tan and Pan, 2006).

According to Schmidt (2008), traditional institutional theories conceive institutions as external entities to agents, policies, structures, processes, values, norms, rituals or meaning systems. Common to all these, is that they can all be considered ideas in people’s minds. For Schmidt (2008) ideas can act as roadmaps that funnel interests and subsequent actions down specific directions. Different types of institutions then become different types of carriers of ideas or collective memories. They can become taken for granted but also, they can be changed by actors, individually or collectively (Schmidt, 2010: 10-11). In this twofold role of ideas, Schmidt (2008) follows Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus and Searle’s (1995) notion of speech act to argue that through discourse people create and then take for granted ideas as if they exist in the ‘background’. Through discourse and also following Habermas’ ideas on communicative action (Habermas, 1989; Habermas & Rehg, 1996) as well as ideas on discursive democracy (Dryzek, 1994, 2000). Schmidt also argues that people are able to convey ideas and take some distance from them in order to reflect, discuss, debate, adopt, reject or change them. This would mean that in a general sense, stability and change are the media as well as the outcome of ideas in discourse, with both stability informing change as well as vice-versa.

The following definitions stemming from DI can then be formulated:

**Definition 1 (Def 1):** Institutions are internal entities to agents in the form of *ideas* they represent.

In terms of their level of generality Schmidt (2008, p.306) provides a classification of ideas that considers how they define what is to be done as well as how and why:

**Definition 2 (Def 2):** Policies are ideas to specific policy solutions for perceived societal problems.

**Definition 3 (Def 3):** Programs provide overall rationality, problem spaces, issues to be tackled within such spaces, tools, methods and ideals to guide the implementation of policies. Programs act as intermediaries between policies and philosophies.

**Definition 4 (Def 4):** Philosophies are ideas that express public sentiment, values, worldviews (Weltanschauung) and underlying assumptions that provide background or justify the need to define and tackle societal problems.

These policies, programs and philosophies tend to contain two types of ideas (Ibid):

**Definition 5 (Def 5):** Cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests and define what is and what to do.

**Definition 6 (Def 6):** Normative ideas are those which appeal to human values and define what is good or bad about what is in the light of what one ought to do.

However, an excessive emphasis on these two dimensions could lead to an underestimation of institutional forces to which these frames are subject to (Surel, 2000). Given that sometimes ‘good ideas fail and bad ideas succeed” (Schmidt, 2008: 307), a key issue in DI becomes how some ideas become accepted and adopted whilst others get rejected by people. To address this issue Schmidt introduces a second element in DI to cover its dynamic aspects related to change and stability: that of discourse. For Schmidt, discourse involves ideas *as well as the interactive processes* by which they are conveyed, adopted or rejected. Discourse “is not only what you say, however; it includes to whom you say it, how, why, and where in the process of policy construction and political communication...” (Schmidt, 2008: 310). Therefore discourse not only includes the ‘text’ of ideas but also their context.

Using the above definitions as well as the discussion on interactive discourse we now intend to formulate some theory-led propositions which will help as interpretive lenses to consider the dynamics of change and stability in digital innovation public sector projects. This follows the interpretive tradition of information systems research (Walsham, 1995a,b). Within this tradition theory could be used to guide the selection of topics and the approach of empirical work as well as being part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis leading to review initial theoretical assumptions or to formulate new theory (Walsham, 1995b). The following theory-led propositions will guide this study and will revisited later:

**Proposition 1 (P1):** Coordinative discourse occurs between networks or coalitions of groups (i.e. policy actors) and involves the creation, elaboration, justification and conveyance of policies to solve specific problems.

**Proposition 2 (P2):** Communicative discourse happens between political actors and the public and includes the presentation, deliberation and legitimation of policies.

These propositions show a clear distinction between the spheres of public policy and politics. Their scope is not purely to validate DI, but to guide and advance our understanding of the theory in the chosen context. Schmidt (2008) explains how coordinative and communicative discourses could be related to different types of polities or groups of individuals which vary in their composition and complexity. According to her, some instances of discourse can be found in simple polities whereas others could be found in more complex ones depending on the number and role of actors involved. This generic distinction leads to formulate two further propositions stemming from DI as follows:

**Proposition 3 (P3):** Simple polities could have a strongly elaborate communicative discourse and complex multi-actor arrangements a strongly elaborate coordinative discourse.

**Proposition 4:** Institutional ideas move from cognitive change to normative stability as the level of specification for practice is augmented by moving from philosophies to implemented programs and envisaged policies.

The above propositions introduce a generic logic of institutional change and stability that could be applied to analyse different digital innovation public sector contexts. Both these phenomena are guided by agents’ discussions of cognitive and normative ideas involving policies, programmes or philosophies. Thislogic could shed light in better understanding how ideas as words become deeds or fail to do so (Schmidt, 2008). For our study context, we intend to do so by exploring coordinative discourses, communicative discourses and complexity through our propositions.

Following the work of Schmidt, Discursive Institutionalism (DI) has been applied in a limited number of studies including her own account of policy adoptions in the European Union, European Countries and the US (Schmidt, 2005), situations of interactions between political parties with the public (van Gorp, 2015), policy formulation (Wueest & Fossati, 2015), or conflict resolution (Raitio, 2013). This paper aims to extend the use of DI in a new area and to learn from such use in order to inform future research, practice and policy making of Digital project innovations in the public sector. Considering the nature of developing countries contexts like Albania, a derived aim of the research is to better understand limitations and possibilities derived from discourses and interactions involved in this type of innovations and with a view to potentially generate theoretical contributions to the use of DI in developed settings (Avgerou, 2008). In the next section of the paper the methodology to meet these aimsaim is provided.

# Methodology

The use of Case studies (Yin, 2013) for theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) have become increasingly more accepted as a valid form of interpretive research of technology related phenomena (Janssen & Cresswell, 2005; Walsham, 1995b; 2006). As a theory, Discursive Institutionalism (DI) provides guidance as well as structure in the carrying out of case studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case chosen follows a representative case selection logic (Sarker & Sarker, 2009) of multi-actor (agent) contexts in public reform transition. Albania qualifies as one of them. From the case analysis and interpretation, it is expected to generate theory, concepts, specific implications or rich insights inform future research and practice (Walsham, 1995b).

The two research methods to build the case study were interviews and documentary review. Interviews are a common research method in qualitative research to gain in-depth and personalized information through a personal encounter, accounting also for any associated bias (King & Horrocks, 2010). Interviewees were chosen on the basis of a) Their participation in the project under study and b) Responsibility with the maintenance, use or update of the system that was implemented. In total, thirteen (13) semi-structured interviews with representatives from different organizations took place in the period 2010 – 2015 in Albania. The interview topics were used to gauge participants’ perceptions about change and stability in relation to the project under study. Based on the above first definition from DI that institutions are internal entities to agents in the form of ideas they represent (Def 1), it was assumed that interviewees (agents) could be categorized on the level of ideas that they held (philosophy, program, policy as stated by Def 2, Def 3 and Def 4). This could lead to a framework for understanding coordinative discourse (P1), communicative discourse (P2), polity complexity (P3) and institutional change (P4).. The table below relates interview questions topics to levels of ideas to be identified in

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Semi-structured interview topics** | | |
| **Topic** | **Unit of analysis based on DI definitions** | **Proposition perspective** |
| Initial project conception and the perceived role of the new information system. | Philosophies  Programs  Policies | P1 and P2 |
| Project activities involving organizational and individual actors (including interviewee) in the project implementation process. | Policies  Programms | P3 |
| Change management, Project communication, monitoring, accountability and dissemination. | Policies  Programs | P3 and P4 |
| Stability of changes implemented and new change possibilitiesSustainability of changes | Programms  Philosophies | P4 |

**Table 1: Interview topics relationship to DI**

Documentary review was used in a similar way to other studies looking at the dynamics of information technology in government organizations (Hardy & Williams, 2008; Reinwald & Kraemmergaard, 2012). The review of reports, news stories, legal and other materials related to the project served also to validate and extend the information collected through the semi-structured interviews. Documents represented different types of ideas (cognitive – Def 5, normative – Def 6) expressed at different idea levels (policies – Def 2, programs – Def 3, philosophies – Def 4) and through discourse types (coordinative and communicative). In total forty six (46) documents published during the 2010 – 2013 period were reviewed. Table 2 below contains a list of interviewees and documents that were used in this study.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Organization** | **Role and proposition** | **Interviewee** | **Type of Document** | **Discourse position** |
| Governmental, local: General Directorate of Civil Status (GDCS) | P*roject management, leading change; dissemination - P1, P2, P3, P4* | Director | Strategic 1  Manual 1 | Programs – Normative |
| IS manager 1st |  | Policies – Cognitive |
| IS manager 2nd |  | Policies– Cognitive |
| IS manager 3rd |  | Policies– Cognitive |
| Specialist |  | Policies– Cognitive |
| Political, international: Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) | *Project formulation, advisory role, supervision, international relations - P1, P2, P3, P4* | Project manager | Manual 1  Report 1  News 9 | Programs - Normative |
| Government, local: Directorate of Public Administration (DPA) | *Monitoring, mediation – P2, P3* | Director |  | Policies - Normative |
| Consulting, local; Trenkwalder (TW) | *Consultation – P2, P4* | Director |  | Policies - Normative |
| Governmental, local: Council of Ministers (CoM) / | *Project formulation, monitoring, bringing about change, mediation – P1, P2, P3, P4* | Coordinator | Strategic 1  Legal 6  News 1 | Philosophies – Cognitive and Normative |
| Governmental, central: Ministry of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and Innovation (MoICTI) | *Project formulation, activities, monitoring – P1, P2, P3* | Specialist 1st  Specialist 2nd | Strategic 1 | Programs - Cognitive and Normative |
| Governmental, local; National Agency of Information Society (NAIS) | *Project formulation, project activities, monitoring, mediation – P2, P3, P4* | Coordinator | Strategic 3 | Philosophies - Cognitive and Normative |
| Governmental, local; Civil Society Municipal Unit (CSMU) | *Project lamentationion – P2* | Director |  | Philosophies - Cognitive |
|  | 3 Operators |  | Programs |
| Legislative, central: Parliament (PA) / | *Legitimation, monitoring – P2, P4.* |  | Legal 2 | Programs - Normative |
| Governmental, central: Ministry of Interior (MoI) /*.* | *Project formulation; project activities; monitoring, bringing about change – P1, P2, P3, P4* |  | Legal 4 | Policies - Cognitive |
| Political, international: European Union Commission (EUCom) | *Monitoring, consultation – P3* |  | Report 1 | Programs - Cognitive and Normative |
| Political, local: Ombudsman (OM) | *Monitoring – P2* | N/A | Report 1 | Programs - Cognitive |
| Media, news: Local Media (LM) | *Monitoring, dissemination – P2, P4* | N/A | News 10 | Policies - Cognitive |
| Consulting, international; Statistics Norway (SN) | *Consultation – P1* | N/A | Report 2 | Policies - Normative |
| Education, local: University of Tirana (UoT) / | *Monitoring, consultation – P4* | N/A | Report 1 | Policies - Cognitive |

**Table 2: Data sources (Interviews and Documents)**

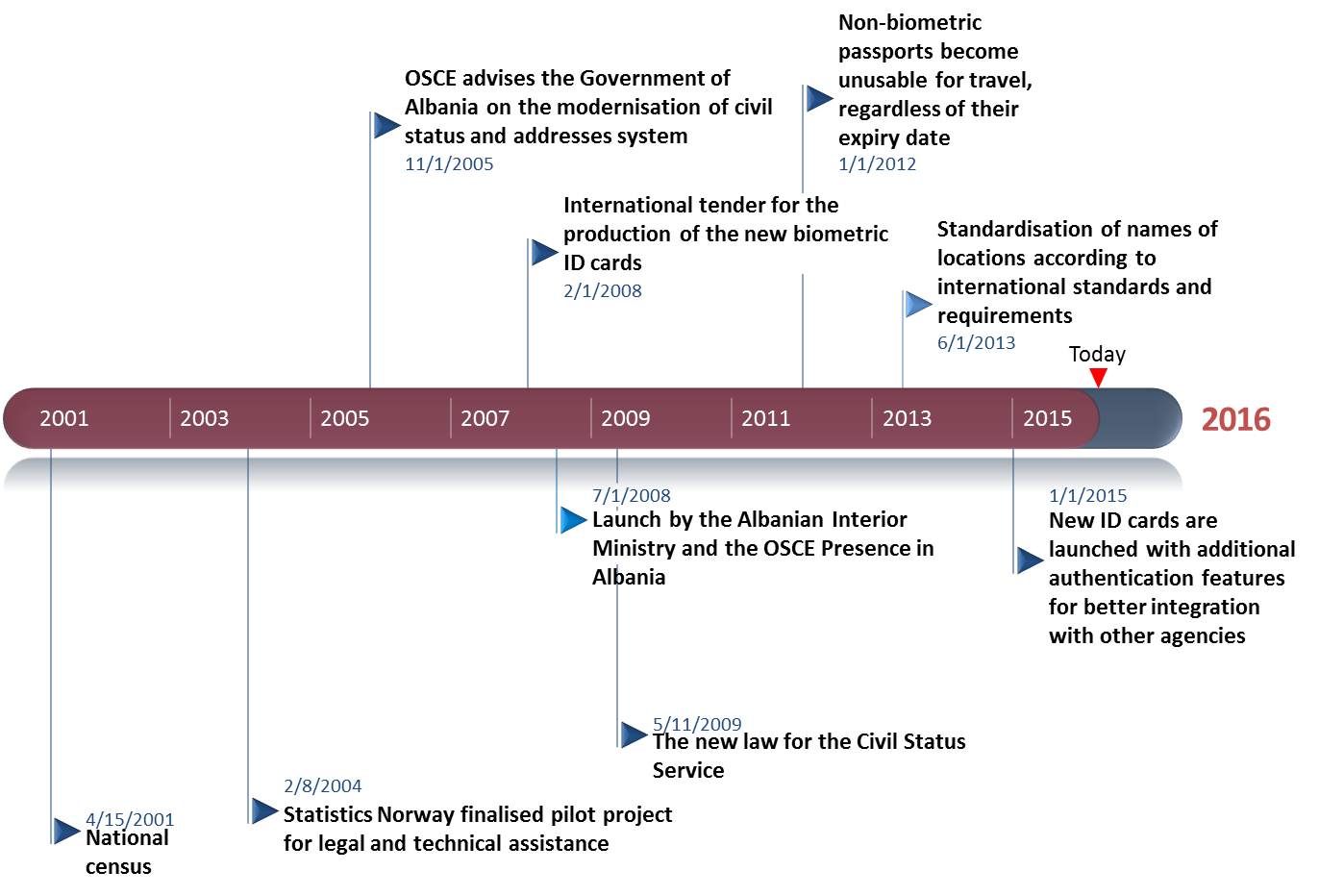
To conduct the analysis of the data gathered, coding and conceptual mapping was carried out (Maxwell, 2012:54). A first stage of analysis loosely informed by DI was carried out to identify and validate generic types of discourse exhibited by interviewees (policies, programs, philosophies) and recorded in documents which were deemed relevant to address the research question of this study. The second stage deepened into the analysis by adding new codes, regrouping them to explore the four research propositions. The organizational involvement role was used to categorize documents and research evidence in Table 2 for addressing the four research propositions of this study.

Coding started with the three areas of discourse summarized in Def 2 on policies, Def 3 on programs and Def 4 philosophies. The more general Def 1 on institutions helped maintain focus. Def 5 on cognitive ideas and Def 6 on normative ideas on the other hand, due to the formal nature of the interviews and documents could be used only for the interpretation of the findings. 39 codes were identified in this process, 10 for policies with 55 quotes from interviews, 18 for programs with 176 quotes from interviews, and 11 for philosophies with 102 quotes from interviews as presented and discussed from tables 3, 4 and 5 later in the analysis section. The codes, quotes and their classification were checked and refined by the authors of this study in two rounds of iterations using their critical reasoning as interpretive lenses (Walsham, 1995b; Walsham, 2005; Walsham, 2006), following four propositions of this study and their initial association with the data in Tables 1 and 2. . For the qualitative interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 62; Richards & Richards, 1994) conceptual maps and reports were prepared and discussed for each proposition, supported by codes deriving from the theoretical definitions. To aid the coding and analysis, ATLAS.ti (Friese, 2014) was used as a code-and-retrieve software tool. When saturation points were reached in the coding process, researchers proceeded to redefine the initial propositions and derive avenues for future research thatcould inform future studies and practice. The next section of the paper details the findings and analyses.

# Research findings

## Project background and preliminary interplay between philosophies, programs and policies

The purpose of the new electronic national register of civil status in Albania is to keep citizen records in an electronic format, transferring them from the old hand-written book, so a new electronic database was developed from 2008 when the project started. The system was integrated also with the system of biometric identification documents managed by Aleat, a joint venture was between the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund (AEEF) and Sagem Sécurité (now named Morpho), member of the French Safran Group (AAEF, 2011). Such intended goals were in line with the EU integration requirements for democratic governance and controlled emigration (Geddes, Lees, & Taylor, 2013) that require a modern civil status system to manage voting lists and identification documents. The following figure provides a context and background, highlighting some important project milestones.

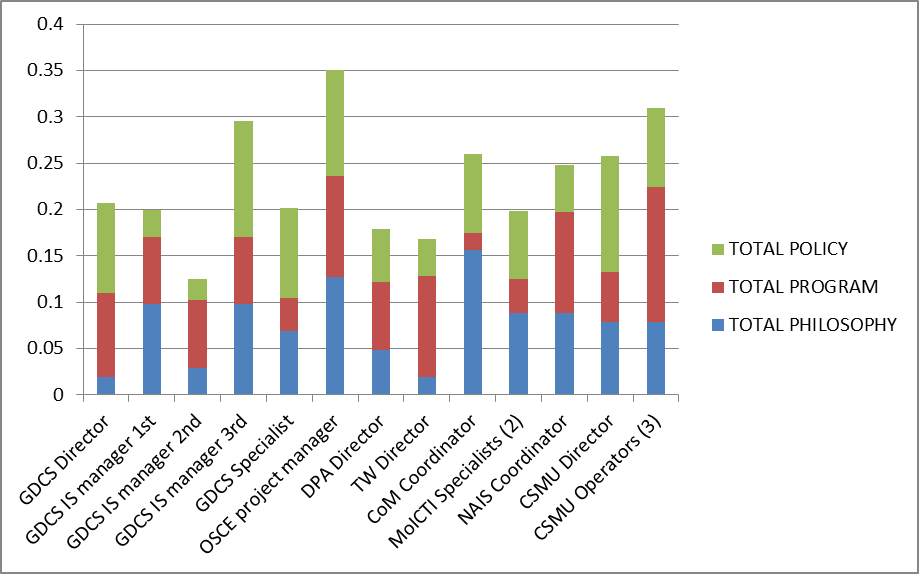


**Figure 2: Timeline of the civil status modernization reform in Albania**

The agency responsible for implementing the project since its inception was the General Directorate of the Civil Status (GDCS), within the Albanian Ministry of Interior (MoI). Some international e-government assistance was given for the National Register of Civil Status from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Austrian Government and Statistics Norway.

Despite the project being advocated at the highest Albanian government level in order to respond to European Community policies, its implementation and maintenance has required its different stakeholders to continuously manage (creating or recreating in discourse) a diversity of ideas involving philosophies, programs as well as policies. In the figure below some initial perceptions are confirmed in relation to how roles and hierarchical positions influence the type of discourse that is managed by agents. The indicators of the figure below refer to the number of quotes coded for each respondent on the level of policies, programs and philosophies, divided by the total number of quotes coded, 55, 176, and 102 respectively, explained also in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

However it is interesting to notice that 1) every stakeholder interviewed embeds to a certain degree all three levels of ideas; 2) Those responsible for managing the project (i.e. OSCE project manager) as well as securing its implementation from a technical perspective (i.e. GDCS manager 3rd), having a good level of experience, exhibit a fair balance of ideas between policies, programs and philosophies; and 3) there is a focus by stakeholders towards (re) creating policies and programs in discourse, suggesting that project activities focus on establishing and implementing ways to address perceived as well as emerging project problems.



**Figure 3: Individual engagement and levels of ideas for discourse**

The figure also suggests that the electronic register status project served and still serves a dual role: On the one hand, it is a vehicle to enable change to happen and be accepted; and on the other, it becomes a ‘hub’ or ‘meeting place’ where different project actors (agents) continuously (re) create project and non-project related philosophies, programs and policies. These initial findings and detail of different levels of discourse and their interaction with each other is presented and discussed in the next sections of the paper.

## Policy discourses for innovation implementation

What follows is an interpretation of the idea codes and their (re) creation in project-related discourses. In the table 3 below the themes that appear to emerge the most from the interviews and documents in the context of **policy ideas and discourses.** Project activities related to policy are partnerships, outsourcing, reporting and some form of evaluation. How these are manifested indicate an emphasis on co-coordinative discourse with co-ordination as a core policy (or set of policies) to be implemented. Table 3 below presents the idea codes identified for each respondent, related to the policies level of ideas according to DI.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3: Interviewees, codes and references for the policies level of ideas** | | | |
| **Nr.** | **Interviewee** | **Codes and number of references** | **Total = 55** |
|  | GDCS Director | evaluation by users 1, outsourcing 1, partnerships 3 | 5 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 1st | outsourcing 4 | 4 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 2nd | division of responsibilities 1, evaluation adaptation 1, public private partnership 1, reporting 1 | 4 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 3rd | decentralization process 3, outsourcing 1 | 4 |
|  | GDCS Specialist | partnerships 1, reporting 1 | 2 |
|  | OSCE project manager | evaluation by users 1, partnerships 4, reporting 1 | 6 |
|  | DPA Director | partnerships 2, reporting 2 | 4 |
|  | TW Director | lobbying 4, partnerships 2 | 6 |
|  | CoM Coordinator | partnerships 1 | 1 |
|  | MoICTI Specialists (2) | outsourcing 1, reporting 1 | 2 |
|  | NAIS Coordinator | evaluation adaptation 3, evaluation by users 1, it as enabler of change 2 | 6 |
|  | CSMU Director | evaluation by users 2, public private partnership 1 | 3 |
|  | CSMU Operators (3) | division of responsibilities 2, evaluation by users 2, it as enabler of change 2, public private partnership 1, reporting 1 | 8 |

Starting with *partnerships and outsourcing*, the project involved multiple organisations and actors and it was made possible thanks to the generous contribution from the European Union, OSCE and USA, as explained in a news release from the Council of Ministers:

*The project was supported by a 2.5 million euro fund allocated by the European Union, the OSCE and the USA and it had the technical assistance of Austria, Norway and the Council of Europe.*

This suggests an emphasis on co-ordination in order to establish ideas at the levels of (European) policy and local policy and programs to justify and implement them. According to the information published on the website of the General Directorate of Civil Status, the intended change was completed with the secure connection between the National Register of Civil Status and the system of identification documents managed by Aleat, a private consortium. The register’s IT system, was offered by the Government of Austria, but it was adapted to local needs in Albania, a process that still continues as a representative from the Development Division of the National Register in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains. At the time of the first interview (2010), this representative said that in the future of the system can be fully-managed locally. In a follow up interview with the same government official in 2015 however he revealed that the number of IT specialists working for the General Directorate of Civil Status has decreased. This implies that outsourcing is a method that reinforces coordinative discourse. Its maintenance and further development could be aligned with an emphasis on co-ordination for European policy formulation together as well as little presence or absence of communicative discourse with the public for policy validation or change (Schmidt, 2008).

*Reporting* in the interviews and documents often refers to activities carried out between partner organizations in the project or between project officers, their superiors and policy-makers on a more personal level. This suggests that co-ordination is the preferred form of discourse with a limited form of communicative discourse as bottom-up dialogue with no explicit or intended desire to debate or change policy or project ideas. The reform was enforced by law (which can be regarded as having limited communicative discourse once it is issued), and the coordination and organisational involvement of many agencies and actors was essential to abide by law. A strong political will and commitment expected actors to follow rather than challenge policy. Despite an apparent absence of communicative discourse, the change is being perceived as positive as the electronic register not only is still in place but also continues to be integrated with other systems for broader program reforms without much resistance. The following conversation excerpt from an interview with one of the project IT managers taken in 2015 testifies this:

*Interviewer: Did you have any discussion?*

*Interviewee: Not really, a decision was taken directly. It is related to politics. If the law changes up there, down here we have to change the system, there is not much discourse, or, at least, the discussion doesn’t happen at our level.*

*Interviewer: Has there been any resistance?*

*Interviewee: No, not really. Not that I can think of.*

Regarding *evaluation*, users are considered important from the interviews now that the system has been implemented in order to ensure continuous improvement and satisfaction. Users’ opinions during planning and implementation were not consulted and the system was taken for granted. Evaluation seems to be related to the actual use and aligned to co-ordination between actors rather than open debate with the system users. This appears be a good thing as this statement from a Civil Status Municipal Unit officer shows:

*When people come and see that we are now working with computers rather than with the old books, they perceive that the quality of the service has increased and so has the authority of the office. This is clear because with the new system is better, it allows fewer mistakes, it is more precise and it saves time.*

Speaking, the new electronic National Register of Civil Status was implemented with relative ease thanks to the continuous funding and technical support from international partners. As will be discussed later, a reconciliation point for policy-makers, project managers and end-users is the post-implementation and institutionalized idea at the philosophy level that the *benefits of the new system (via centralization and leading change from the top) are beneficial to all*. What is more interesting from this case is that a top-down enforcement of the system that manages to stand up to their value proposition contributes to generate trust and learning among actors. This in turn facilitates integration, minimizes conflicting inter-organizational discourse and ultimately enables intended as well as further change.

## Program ideas and discourses for integration with the environment

The codes that appear frequently in the interviews regarding program-level ideas and discourses are related to the *integration of systems, division of powers, strategic coordination, and problems related to communication limitation, technology acceptance, transition and local engagement*. Codes also reflect what was written in the strategic documents reviewed in this study. At these program level(s) the systems implementation policy is supported by discourses on addressing its underlying implementation problems rather than the problems that originated policy.

Both data sources confirm an emphasis on coordinative discourse as stated earlier. The leading position of most interviewees working on a program-level of ideas is in line with high number of codes (174) for this level of ideas. Codes are summarized in Table 4 below.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 4: Interviewees, codes and references for the programs level of ideas** | | | |
| **Nr.** | **Interviewee** | **Codes and number of references** | **Total = 176** |
|  | GDCS Director | division of powers 2, innovation 1, integration of systems 9, political control 1, strategic coordination 1, technical transition 3 | 17 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 1st | evaluation criteria 3, integration of systems 1 technical transition 1 | 5 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 2nd | division of powers 2, evaluation criteria 1, problem handling 1 | 4 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 3rd | change implementation 1, change resistance 1, communication limitation 4, infrastructure development 6, innovation1, integration of systems 3, limited local engagement 2, system maintenance 3, technology acceptance 1 | 22 |
|  | GDCS Specialist | change implementation 1, division of powers 2, empowerment 3, evaluation criteria 1, group decision issues 4, integration of systems 2, strategic coordination 1, technical transition 3 | 17 |
|  | OSCE project manager | change implementation 1, communication limitation 4, empowerment 1, evaluation criteria 5, innovation 1, integration of systems 2, problem handling 1 strategic coordination 4, system maintenance 1 | 20 |
|  | DPA Director | change implementation 1, division of powers 1, innovation 1, integration of systems 2, strategic coordination 1, system maintenance 2, technical transition 2 | 10 |
|  | TW Director | change implementation 1, communication limitation 1, group decision issues 1, innovation 1, integration of systems 1, limited local engagement 2 | 7 |
|  | CoM Coordinator | communication limitation 4, division of powers 2, evaluation criteria 2, strategic coordination 7 | 15 |
|  | MoICTI Specialists (2) | change resistance 2, communication limitation 1, evaluation criteria 2, integration of systems 1, problem handling 1, strategic coordination 4, technical transition 1, technology acceptance 1 | 13 |
|  | NAIS Coordinator | communication limitation 1, division of powers 1, empowerment 1, evaluation criteria 2, integration of systems 2, strategic coordination 2 | 9 |
|  | CSMU Director | change implementation 1, communication limitation 3, integration of systems 4, political control 2, problem handling 8, problems with transition 2, system maintenance 1, technology acceptance 1 | 22 |
|  | CSMU Operators (3) | change implementation 2, communication limitation 2, division of powers 3, empowerment 1, integration of systems 2, problem handling 3, problems with transition 1, technology acceptance 1 | 15 |

In the case of programs, coordinative discourse is also used to *address problems generated by the absence of communicative discourse* by policy and political actors in most countries of the European Union (Schmidt, 2008) and Albania seems to be no exception. The Albanian National Register of Civil Status was part of a broader program to improve the way citizen records are maintained and used locally and internationally. This required a direct operational connection with the production of identification documents and access to citizen records by other public sector agencies. Project and system problems still emerge (d) when top-down communication was (and still is) enforced and discussion or debate was (still is) pushed back or minimized. As the director from a Civil Status Municipal unit explains when asked how they deal with persons with duplicated IDs:

*We have continuously asked from the company Aleat, or even from the General Directorate of Civil Status to give us an information on who has applied and who hasn't, but this information, politically is not given. So there is a, let's say, political block, for me it is political.*

Moreover, this can be seen in how international involvement and support contributed to bring different agents together with the aims of achieving and legitimizing intended reform beyond local politics and facilitating integration regardless of the lack of open discussion and debate. The collegial process of a round table for coordination among key stakeholders undertaken by one organization (GDCS) is described as follows in an interview with its director**:**

*In that table there we had meetings every day where there were present the technical assistance of OSCE, Statistics Norway and the General Directorate of Civil Status, Ministry of Interior. Statistics Norway was also part of the steering committee of the project.*

Through the above program-based coordinative discourses the project managed to establish itself and in 2015 the electronic register was already connected to 10+ other agencies online, a change welcomed by many actors. This was considered as a positive step ahead of similar ones in neighboring countries according to the following statement from an IT public servant interviewed:

*It is a good thing that nobody has been against. Not even about the protection of personal data where some resistance could have been imagined, not really. […] We are connected to about ten (10) institutions now, the public notaries, driving licenses, National Licensing Center, National Registration Center, social insurance. […]There is not much else we can do. We are even ahead of other Balkan countries.*

As a program of ideas, the project implemented a previously formulated local policy. The National ICT Strategy of Albania states that:

*A National Electronic Civil Register will gradually contain data to be used by government and private users, making possible the direct distribution of information for those institutions that use this information as a key source in statistical, social insurance, education, public order, justice and other fields.*

Regarding international integration, the new system managed to deliver on its value proposition, and citizens could travel freely to European Union for tourism without a visa with the new biometric passports produced with information from the new electronic register. Voters’ registers were also improved, so the electronic register of civil status contributed to improve electoral activity and rule of law via better control and management of citizen records.

## Guiding philosophies justifying and controlling change

The above post-implementation benefits achieved through coordinative discourses involving policies and programs led way to identify (post-implementation) some of the underlying philosophies that —in an unintended or indirect manner — served to institutionalize the changes brought about by the project. *Centralization* *philosophy* related to power and control over project activities expressed and justified in the interviews and documents by the idea of catching up with development through the new system. In this regard it is important to highlight that centralization philosophy has both normative and cognitive features. Taking ownership as a way to catch up with development emerges as a very desirable outcome, becoming almost an imperative. However, responsibility that comes with taking one’s own decisions seems not so desirable at a cognitive idea level, as interviewees prefer consultations and disseminations before making decisions in order to carry out data and system operational changes. Furthermore, a desire to advance together in the face of uncertainty was expressed by interviewees by highlighting a continuous *induced learning*philosophy from best (abroad) or local practice (to be explained later).

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| **Table 5: Interviewees, codes and references for the philosophies level of ideas** | | | |
| **Nr.** | **Interviewee** | **Codes and number of references** | **Total = 102** |
|  | GDCS Director | centralization 1, taking ownership 1 | 2 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 1st | catching up with development 2, centralization 1, learning from abroad 1, taking ownership 6 | 10 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 2nd | centralization 1, dissemination of experiences 2 | 3 |
|  | GDCS IS manager 3rd | catching up with development 2, centralization 1, limited resistance 5, power acceptance 2 | 10 |
|  | GDCS Specialist | consultation meetings 2, learning from abroad 4, taking ownership 1 | 7 |
|  | OSCE project manager | catching up with development 2, centralization 1, consultation meetings 7, dissemination of experiences 1, learning from local practice 1, taking ownership 1 | 13 |
|  | DPA Director | change management 1, consultation meetings 1, taking ownership 3 | 5 |
|  | TW Director | change management 1, dissemination of experiences 1 | 2 |
|  | CoM Coordinator | centralization 4, consultation meetings 5, dissemination of experiences 3, learning from abroad 3, taking ownership 1 | 16 |
|  | MoICTI Specialists (2) | catching up with development 2, centralization 2, consultation meetings 2, learning from abroad 2, learning from local practice 1 | 9 |
|  | NAIS Coordinator | consultation meetings 3, learning from abroad 2, learning from local practice 3, taking ownership 1 | 9 |
|  | CSMU Director | centralization 1, change management 1, improvement need 5, power acceptance 1 | 8 |
|  | CSMU Operators (3) | centralization 1, change management 3, consultation meetings 1, dissemination of experiences 1, learning from local practice 2 | 8 |

As seen in table 5 above, the introduction of the electronic system of civil status required a conceptual shift in Albania. It was perceived that on the whole, Albanian citizens wanted EU integration and free movement. However relating the project to achieve this goal was not easy. As mentioned before, Albanian authorities believed in a top-down enforcement of the project (via coordinative discourse) without much open consultation or deliberation (communicative discourse). Partially contributing to reinforce this philosophy key ideas were introduced by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). System development was to be developed centrally but adapted locally by government departments. A specialist in the Ministry of ICT and Innovation working with the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination near the Council of Ministers explains a related philosophy of *driving change from above* that in principle —and despite resonating with the country’s communist past— couples well with that a philosophy of *induced learning* as follows:

*You need to push it. People have started to realize only now, after 1 year or 6 months. Like, for example, the case of biometric passports. In the beginning, they asked why they would spend the money. Now that they see the benefits, they use it. Also with the ID card, now that they see the facilities it offers, they use it. But it is a process.*

Furthermore, detachment from the communist past bears a historic meaning in Albania, creating and maintaining a welcoming atmosphere for innovations where the ‘*old’ (state of affairs) had to go and be replaced by the ‘new’* (associated with international integration) was essential. The picture given by the director of a civil status municipal unit highlights the difference between the old and the new system:

*It was a major change from the 36-year-old handwritten registers, where everything was manual and was prone to many mistakes. Simply the fact that the data were entered by handwriting, sometimes legible and sometimes illegible due to ripped pages, spills, bad writing etc. created many problems which the new system does not have.*

These guiding philosophies seemed to be ‘native’ and reinforced throughout project discourses and ideas whereas others remain to be fully institutionalized. The electronic system offered by the international partners was deemed by interviewees not only a technical solution but also a tool for *governance*, welcomed by the political parties as a mean of control and by government officials as a sign of a leaner public administration. This type of normative philosophy together with citizens’ perceptions about the government being more efficient could make the system sustainable in the long term. A representative of OSCE had the following opinion about its future prospects after the project. It is clear that despite this being considered a guiding philosophy in international (developed) countries contexts (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006), the meaning of *governance* in the local context refers to information-related cognitive policy or a program to implement it:

*“Yes, this [system] is sustainable, even more, it can expand. And the use of it can be broadened so that every governmental agency has access to the database and used the personal data of the citizens only from the database and not develop other databases.”*

This apparent mismatch of philosophies would also mean that despite not being explicitly stated some deeply embedded Albanian philosophy institutions need to be identified and addressed when bringing about change in order to enable systems to continue their integration. What is more, such institutions go beyond ideas (re) created through coordinative and communicative project discourses. A representative of OSCE is aware of their relevance when making the following statement:

*Cultural aspects [norms, values] are not always but very often important. Maybe on a subliminal level, but it matters. Plus on personal things, how people work together.*

At this point it can be argued that the logic proposed by DI and its definitions could account for the (re) creation of cultural norms and values as Schmidt (2008) suggests that through discourse these elements become real even without having a material manifestation. In the project under study, these elements were partially acknowledged by stakeholders. Under the dominant philosophies (centralization, leading from above, inducing learning, welcoming the new) other philosophies stayed in the background. In order to continue reconciling stability and change in digital innovations in the public sector, there is an opportunity to explore how these ‘unspoken’ philosophies are (re) constructed and how project discourses play a role in influencing as well as being influenced by them. The last section of the paper formulates a number of propositions and discusses their implications for research and practice.

# Discussion and conclusions

## Theoretical propositions

Information systems and technology interpretive case studies have the potential to generate insights for action in the form of propositions which can then inform future research and practice (Walsham, 1995a, 1995b). The DI framework proposed and applied in this study for digital innovation projects in the Albanian public sector suggests that the integration of systems and organizational elements calls into question the logic of externally normed and planned institutional change. The case studied shows that after a top-down series of decisions at higher government levels are formulated, change is continuously negotiated and institutionalized using existing or new types of discourse, meaning that both change and stability coexist in discourse. In this case, bringing derived changes to reality in the short term would depend on the use of coordinative discourse by agents at both policy and program (project) levels. This means that efforts need to be put into establishing and fostering actors’ alliances or networks to help define policy solutions and ensure their implementation; at different organisational levels, these alliances could be either existing or new.

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| The Albanian case is representative of a context in policy and political transition where dominant philosophies of centralization and change from above were possible. These philosophies were used by decision-makers to align coordinative discourses of policy making to ICT project implementation discourses via project practices like outsourcing, reporting, evaluation and international involvement. This set of discourses might not be fully conducive to develop countries capabilities of digital self-governance (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006) or positive transformation of life conditions (Avgerou, 2008). However, and despite sacrificing or undermining communication with the public or open project discussion these practices enabled efficient delivery of functional capabilities which then promoted people’s acceptance and willingness to continue with further changes as guided by more local philosophies (induced learning, welcoming the new). This yields the following expanded propositions: **Initial DI propositions** | **Expanded DI propositions in the context of digital innovation project for development** |
| **P1):** Coordinative discourse occurs between networks or coalitions of groups (i.e. policy actors) and involves the creation, elaboration, justification and conveyance of policies to solve specific problems. | **P1\*:** In transitional contexts coordinative discourses dominate through transformational projects that offer a platform for interaction between actors to discuss, implement and institutionalize innovations. |
| **P2:** Communicative discourse happens between political actors and the public and includes the presentation, deliberation and legitimation of policies. | **P2\*:** Communicative discourses are of value *before*, to validate or amend policy and programs, *in conjunction with*, to enable project learning, and *after,* for stable institutionalization, in project reforms for change. |
| **P3:** Simple polities have a strongly elaborate communicative discourse and complex multi-actor arrangements a strongly elaborate coordinative discourse. | **P3\*:** The degree of participation and learning, and hence the presence or absence of communicative discourse is influenced by the power position (either via hierarchy, expertise or both) of actors in coordinative discourses. |
| **P4:** Institutional ideas move from cognitive change to normative stability as the level of specification for practice is augmented by moving from philosophies to implemented programs and envisaged policies. | **P4\*:** Leadership philosophies of centralization, decentralization, top-down or bottom-up management, once institutionalized, can use cognitive or normative value-led discourses to justify desirable programs and policies as tools for institutional change in one specific direction. |

These propositions contrast somehow with the ideas that public policy could be expertly formulated to be publicly debated and updated (Schmidt, 2008) and that for developing countries emancipation goals need to be attached to digital innovation efforts from the start (C. Avgerou, 2008). Instead, the insights of the case confirm that political expectations might not negatively affect or be affected digital innovation benefits in the public sector (Gil-Garcia, Chengalur-Smith, & Duchessi, 2007). Considering the mediating role that the project played in aligning policy and program (project) ideas, it can be said that project discourses can pave the way for some long-term goals (i.e. life conditions improvement) that some policy or political actors might have (Misuraca & Viscusi, 2010). Therefore another proposition can be formulated as follows:

Despite the above propositions suggesting a prevalence of coordinative discourse as enabler of alignment between project policy and implementation and thus of change, the insights of the case also put into question the value of *collaboration* in enabling long-term sustainability of digital innovations in the public sector. Underlying philosophies of centralization, driving change from above and induced learning that influenced project implementation and change adoption revealed a need to consider their long-term impact. Except for a learning philosophy, nurturing these philosophies to justify policy and program ideas for government change might not be fully conducive to generate their collective or decentralized ownership, in other words what is termed internationally as governance philosophy from a normative perspective (Ochara, 2010). What is more, these philosophies still support the need to have *stable* presence of international and/or donor organisations and leave local actors playing a secondary role when it comes to (re) create discourse. For the Albanian case, a related issue is that many organisational actors from the public, private and civil society domains were often engaged on both levels of communicative and coordinative types of discourses in the project. In order for different actors to shift their dominant engagement from one of these types of discourse, it would be necessary to detach their identities from their (project and organisational) roles.

Although Schmidt (2008) does not necessarily advocate a balance between coordinative and communicative discourse because of the need to consider the particular dynamics of institutional contexts, for developing contexts like the Albanian one it would be important to reconsider the value of communicative discourse and how to promote ideas at different levels (policy, programs, philosophy) and in both cognitive and normative terms. DI’s notion of ideas and discourse suggests that agents or actors are able to think outside institutions whilst being inside them, and are able to persuade others about the value of new ideas (Ibid). In this regard and with the aim of promoting a greater affection for philosophies of taking ownership and valuing consultation in contexts like Albania, the following propositions can be formulated to advance the use of DI in digital innovation public sector projects:

**Proposition 3:** Depending on what is being institutionalized in a particular context, communicative digital innovation project discourses could be of value *before* (to validate or amend policy and programs) in conjunction with (to enable project learning) and *after* project discourses in order to positively contribute to change, stability and future change.

## Implications for present and future research and practice

The above propositions could enable further investigation into the dynamics of digital innovations in the public sector. Based on Albania as a case study, findings from this study are particularly relevant for relatively small (post-totalitarian) developing countries going through stages of intensive public sector modernization, international integration and structural socio-economic changes. For researchers in government, public sector and information technology fields, the revised DI propositions can encourage them to overcome the dichotomy and distance between stability and change and find ways that are sensitive to the realities of different contexts. They highlight the need to nurture stability through context-sensitive discourses in order to support learning, collective ownership and future change.

For digital innovation government project managers and policy makers, this paper conveys the importance of discourse interaction in shaping policy and project outcomes as well as government institutions. Government officers need to be aware of the types of discourses and ideas that they inherit through policy formulation and the types they want to promote in their interactions with others. Policy makers need to be aware of the level of ideas that they convey. The study shows that policies need to be supported by programs and philosophies in order to increase their possibility to be implemented. In terms of philosophies, simply adopting ‘foreign’ ideas (i.e. governance) without appropriate translation into cognitive ideas, local values and norms could result in short term gains at the expense of their potentially long-term collective ownership. In other words, change might be accepted but not fully adopted by just importing or implementing ideas through co-ordination of policies, programs or cognitive ideas.

Future research should consider the role of digital innovation projects in promoting and stabilizing change and learning in government organizations. In this regard DI offers a complementary approach to the study of institutions and this paper provides an approach to operationalize its use. Considering the possibility of combining DI with other types of institutional theories (Schmidt, 2008), a more detailed analysis of how ideas and their features (normative, cognitive) cross and interact through different government levels, actors, project and non-project related discourses and polities (simple or contexts) is needed. The dominant discourses and ideas identified in this case might be considered as a baseline to be further validated with other contexts’ experiences and with other institutional theories or approaches informing analysis. It might be that in other contexts the dominance of coordinative policy and project discourse does not bode well with history, social norms and values that are being institutionalized to address policies and problems. Further analysis could explore into how DI definitions related to types of discourse and the polities where they emerge could apply to developing and developed countries via digital innovation project empirical. Research in this case can shed further light on DI’s value, potential and limitations to explain stability and change.

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