Innovation readiness

How ready is the government of Armenia to innovate public services today?

FUTUREGOV

Contents

About this project

Over the last two years, the EU-funded Kolba Lab has initiated several events under the umbrella of #Inno4Dev - a project with the aim of getting the Armenian government "innovation-ready" by Autumn 2017.

In the beginning of 2015 FutureGov has supported Kolba Lab by conducting an innovation readiness assessment as a baseline evaluation to find out how innovative the government was back then. Now, at the end of the program we did the same evaluation to understand how things have developed. The results are presented in this document.

Additionally, we have provided the Kolba Lab team with some ideas for how to continue the good work with citizens and public service professionals and what possible next steps might look like.

THE UN INNOVATION AGENDA IN ARMENIA

From designing public services with citizens to holding pop-up innovation labs in governm ministries and building funding models based on the private sector, UNDP in Armenia is r the way that development organizations contribute to public good.

TEXT : ANI SMBATI / PHOTO : UNDP ARMENIA

What FutureGov did and where the data comes from

Getting an overview of what has happened over the last 22 months

During an internal kick-off workshop we learned about the different initiatives and evaluated what worked well and what can be even better.

Talking to civil servants to get an in depth understanding of what has changed

6 in depth interviews with a range of civil servants, including people from central government and municipality, known sceptics and innovation advocates.

Hosting a focus group to cross check first findings and get a more holistic view

A focus group with 8 government participants to reflect the findings of the initial innovation assessment and cross check early findings from previous interviews.

Introduction:

Kolba Lab's vision

The objectives of #Inno4Dev

Engaging citizens

Engaging civil servants

Strengthening relationships and exchange between citizens and government

Almost two years ago, Kolba Lab started collaborating with the EU on #Inno4Dev.

The objectives of the practical program was to introduce innovative thinking and elements of user-centred design to the Armenian government through public sector innovation challenges…

… so that the government is ready for delivering better and more efficient public services that respond to people's needs.
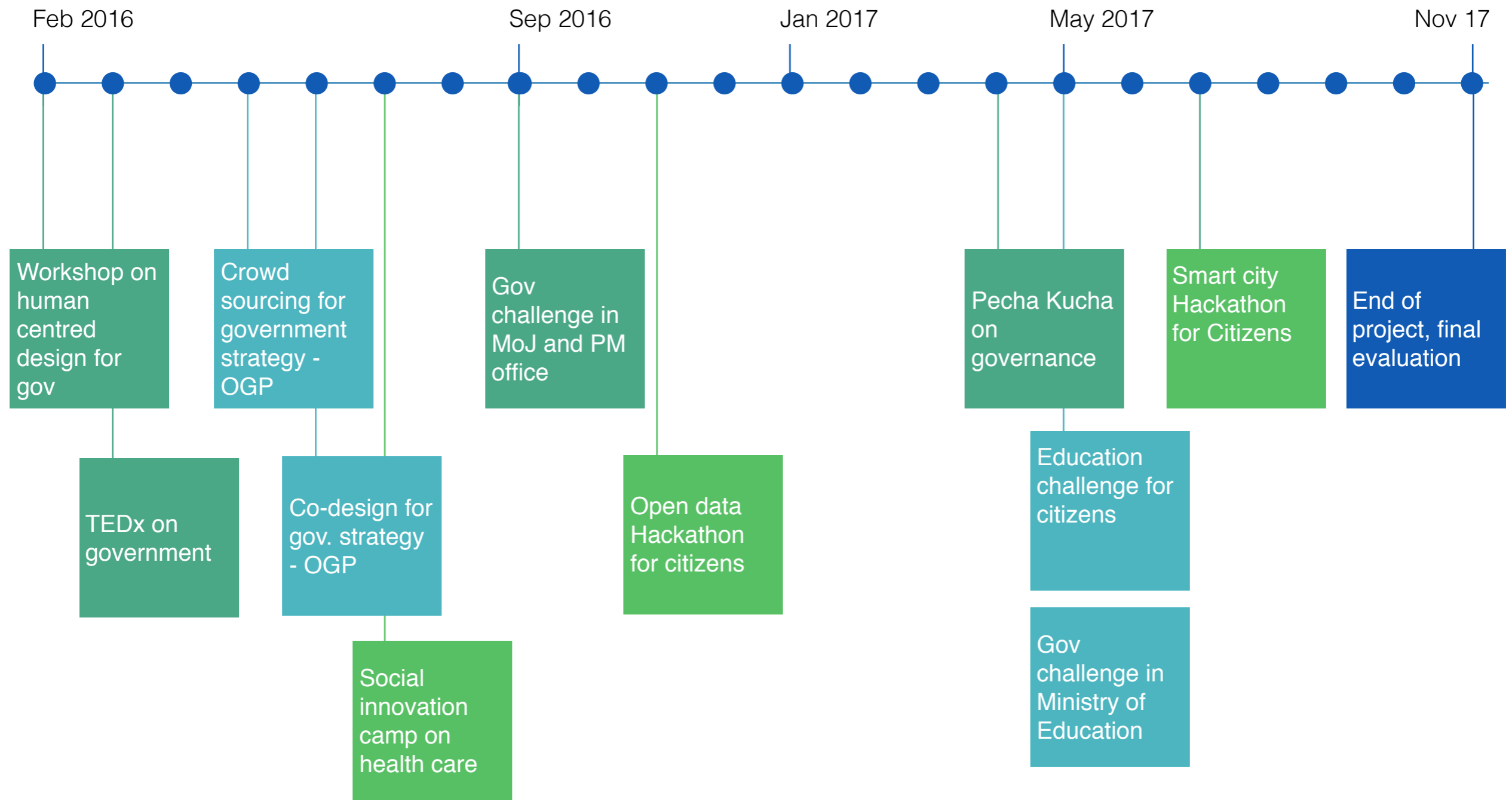
Kolba Lab's initiatives

KOLBA LAB PERIODICALLY ORGANIZES COMPETITIONS AROUND DIVERSE TOPICS, IDENTIFIED WITH UNDP'S SPECIALISTS. ANYONE CAN [...] REGARDLESS OF AGE OR SPECIALIZATION

What Kolba Lab initiated

Feb 2016   Sep 2016   Jan 2017   May 2017   Nov 17

- Workshop on human centred design for gov
- TEDx on government
- Crowd sourcing for government strategy - OGP
- Co-design for gov. strategy - OGP
- Social innovation camp on health care
- Gov challenge in MoJ and PM office
- Open data Hackathon for citizens
- Pecha Kucha on governance
- Education challenge for citizens
- Gov challenge in Ministry of Education
- Smart city Hackathon for Citizens
- End of project, final evaluation

Initiatives targeted at government professionals

Initiatives targeted at citizens

Initiatives targeted at both parties

What Kolba Lab has achieved with the initiatives

Engaging civil servants through open challenges and a stage to shine

The TEDx and Pecha Kucha events gave government officials a stage to voice their ideas, share best practise examples and be heard by a wider audience.

The open gov challenges with MoE, MoJ and the Prime Ministers Office helped to foster a culture of proactiveness and creativity. Participating civil servants are asking for these challenges to become part of their everyday work.

Engaging citizens through open challenges and Hackathons

Open Data Hackathons and a Social innovation camp on healthcare allowed citizens to bring in their expertise and ideas.

Open Data Hackathons made government think about how data can and should be provided so civil society can contribute to making most to if it.

### Strengthening relationships and exchange between citizens and government

An open challenge on education asked both citizens and government professionals to think about possible solutions in parallel.

The objective of bringing both parties together was to foster awareness that both citizens and government professionals are facing similar challenges. How they tackle these might be different in its approach, but inspiring.

Where government was two years ago and is today:

The FutureGov innovation maturity model

Two years ago: The government started its innovation journey
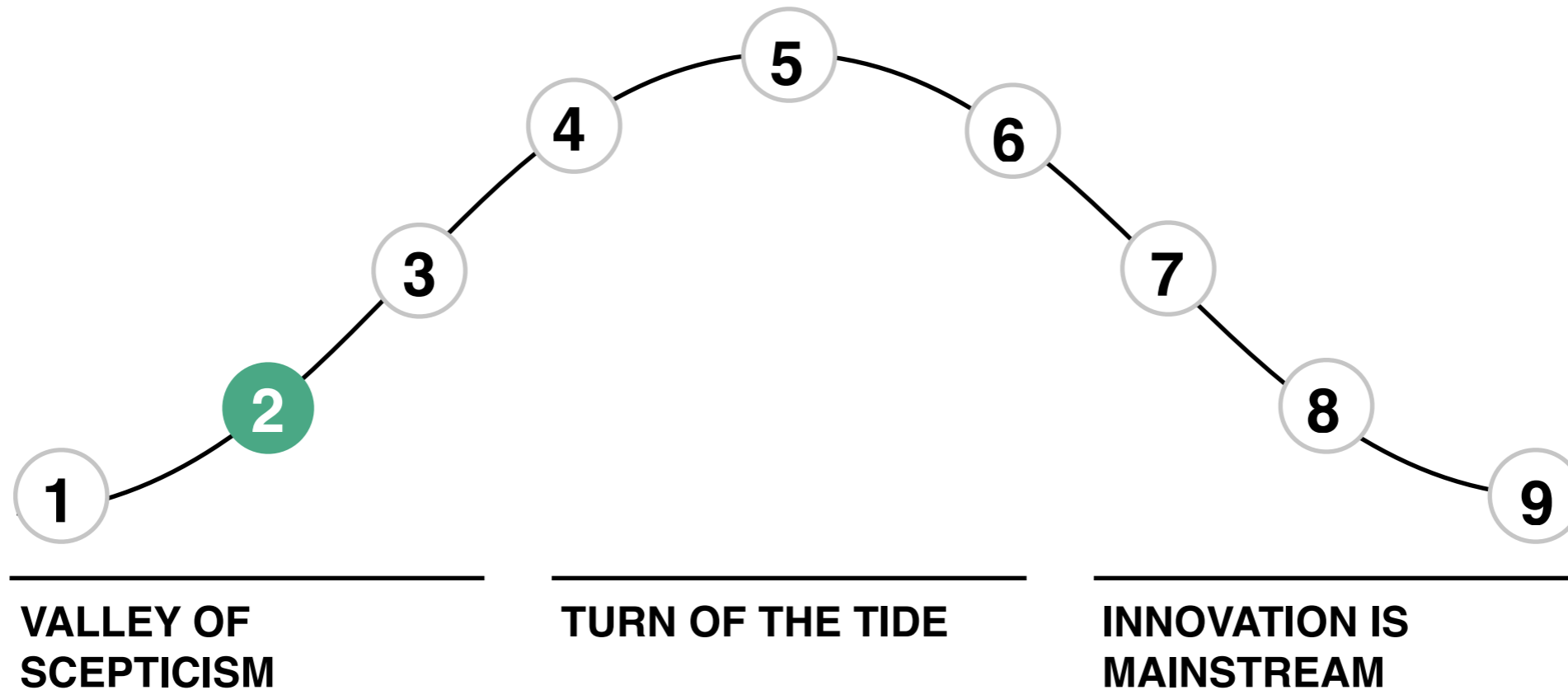
VALLEY OF SCEPTICISM

TURN OF THE TIDE

INNOVATION IS MAINSTREAM

1. Individuals, ideally the chief executive, start to think about innovation

2. External support & experiments with toolkits

3. Hacks & ideas harvesting

4. Training staff & setting up a part-time lab with champion middle managers, but no dedicated resources

5. A working full-time lab with new roles created

6. Successful delivery of several exemplar projects

7. Steady pipeline of projects moving through the innovation lab

8. New roles created and recruited throughout the organisation

9. Innovation is mainstream and embedded in the organisation. Closure of the innovation lab.

Two years ago: What we've learned then

During the last assessment, we witnessed first steps towards rethinking how government creates and delivers public services. To summarise the main findings:

There were positive things to build on…

The government has limited resources, which creates a strong argument for innovation: enabling governments to do more with less.

Staff are open to certain aspects of the human-centred design process, particularly prototyping.

Civil servants are inspired by international examples of innovation.

… And some significant blockers to combat (or workaround)

There is limited senior level buy-in for innovation and human-centred design.

Aspects of human centred design face scepticism, for example, user research (civil servants think they are already doing it).

There is a culture of "expert-ism" which is anathema to human-centred design (where we actively challenge our own assumptions).

Low salaries across government hamper efforts to attract and retain skilled staff.

Two years ago: The insights in short

Strategy & innovation

- Innovation equaled new technology

- There was no coherent innovation strategy within government

Culture & innovation

- People felt encouraged to try new things but didn't act

- The working environment was hostile to innovation

- The Soviet legacy make innovative thinking difficult and was used as an excuse why things move slowly

Process, skills & innovation

- Civil servants engaged citizens too late in the design process

- Piloting was slowly becoming mainstream, but prototyping was not practised

- There was a belief that some challenges are too big for human-centred design

- Projects were evaluated on inputs, not outcomes

And where government is today

Today: The government is close to reaching a tipping point
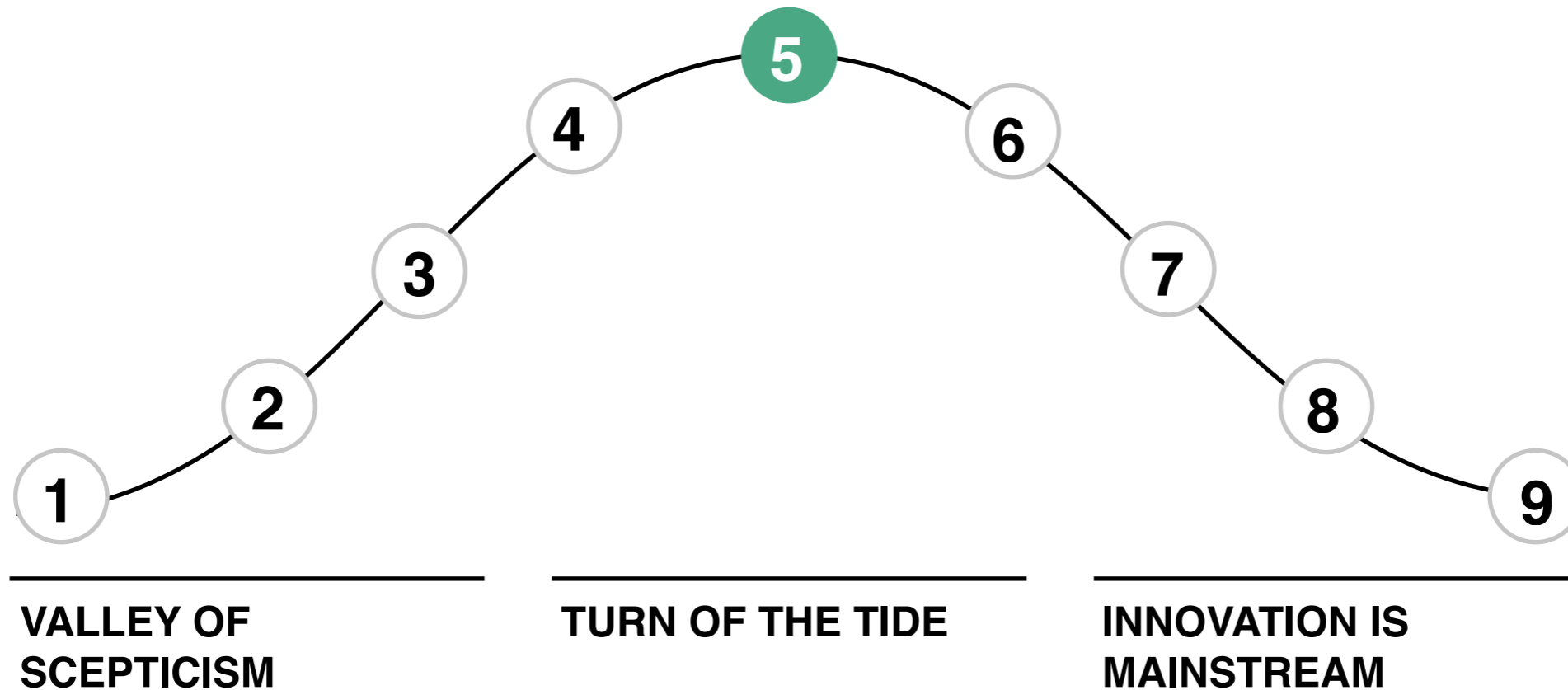
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Today: The government is close to reaching a tipping point (1/2)

Summary

Over the last two years, the Armenian government has continued its innovation journey and almost reached a tipping point before innovation is making its way into the mainstream.

However, there are two major risks to be aware of:

1. Citizens' are still not engaged enough and not considered as an essential player during the innovation process.

2. The creation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Lab and the Central Strategy Initiative (CSI) might lead to "innovation ghettos" – the perception that these two initiatives are responsible for innovations, so the rest of the government can continue doing things the old way.

Positive things to build on…

Since the new government was elected, innovation has moved up the agenda and attracted senior buy-in within the Armenian administration. There is a new appetite to explore what big data, collaboration with the private sector and behavioural change can do to advance the development of the country. SDG Lab and CSI are representatives for this new appetite.

The new role of innovation plays becomes also tangible in the importance of eGovernment. Everyone we spoke to referred to the digital side of public services and policy making. The digitalisation of services leads to new ways of doing things: Several people talked about their work as "running experiments" what can be seen as indicator for a newly developing mind-set: an agile one.

Challenges to combat and work around

We could not witness a change in the "expert-ism" attitude of public servants. So, it might not come as a surprise that citizens still play a minor role within the creation and improvement of services. Their role tends to be reduced to being allowed to comment remotely at the end of the process, when the majority of the work is done.

As CSI and SDG lab have started their work recently, it's difficult to predict how they will push and influence the role of innovation within government. A possible challenge to be aware of is the risk of isolating innovation and sending wrong signals to the rest of government. Even if there are dedicated teams, it does not mean that others don't have the mandate or responsibility to innovate. To avoid "innovation ghettos" - the two units will need to work open and transparently and invite civil servants to participate and contribute to their work.

Today: The insights in short

Strategy & innovation

- For many people innovation still means new technologies, yet there is a stronger focus on outcomes

Culture & innovation

- People feel encouraged to try new things but need official structures to act

- Even if the Soviet legacy is less present, people are hesitant with questioning the current working culture

- An agile mind-set is emerging

Process, skills & innovation

- Asking for feedback from stake-holders and citizen representatives is embedded in the process of creating new solutions. Citizens themselves still don't get engaged enough

- eGovernance requires new skills - are civil servants well equipped?

- While beacon projects set best practise examples, the opportunity to learn from less successful projects is not fully used

Insights

Where the government is today:

Strategy & innovation

For many people innovation still means new technologies, yet there is a stronger focus on outcomes.

The majority of the people we spoke to saw innovation through the lens of using new technologies such as artificial intelligence, access to open data, and digital services.

Two interviewees placed a stronger focus on the the problem solving aspect of innovation. As a concrete example for innovation, eGovernance has become important: delivering services digitally eliminates corruption, make services more efficient, reduce time spent in service centres.

The new government is perceived as advocate for innovation - yet an overarching strategy about how and why innovation is important is still missing.

Things to consider

How can we contribute to shifting the focus from technology to problem solving?

How can we widen the term Innovation to also include non-tech areas such as redesigning processes and organisations?

"This government is more innovation driven and innovation friendly."

"The challenges are the same, but we come up with new solutions that take less time, cost less money and are more effective."

Where the government is today:

Culture & innovation

People feel encouraged to try new things but need official structures to act

Everyone we spoke to perceived Kolba Lab's open challenges extremely positive. It gave government professionals the opportunity to think outside the box and to shine in front of their colleagues and superiors.

Even if there is the permission from the Head of Department to spot problems that require solutions, it's still not enough for people to act upon. We heard that time, resources and vision are missing in order to do so. Therefore Kolba Lab is often the first point of contact when it comes to thinking ideas through and developing them.

People want more than permission, they want formal structures and dedicated time to think how things can be improved.

Things to consider

Could Kolba support government in running their own open challenges through coaching and developing a toolkit?

Could open challenges become the start of new projects inside government?

"Right now there is no time to think of any other things than the routine."

"I don't think I could do the same inside government. We have no vision and resources for doing that [coming of with out of the box ideas]."

Even if the Soviet legacy is less present, people are hesitant with questioning the current working culture

During the previous interviews, many people mentioned the Soviet legacy - this time it was significantly different: only one person referred to it.

However, the hierarchical structure is still very present and acts as barrier when it comes to improving internal processes. People were extremely hesitant when it comes to thinking critically about current work practises and culture.

Things to consider
How could Kolba Lab support civil servants to reflect on their work culture by exposing them practises and organisational models from elsewhere?

"For example improving the workplace – if we organise a call for ideas for government staff – our workers are not honest to give true ideas – when Kolba lab organised this they get more open, real and useful ideas from our staff. There are some barriers – I think the workers are still not free to show how they would do things."

Where the government is today:

Process, skills & innovation

An agile mind-set is emerging

During conversations with government professionals, we could identify agile ways of working, especially when it comes to delivering services digitally. People start with small solutions to learn from it, before thinking about scale.

When it comes to missing skills, one member of staff saw the need for more rigorous analysis of the impact solutions have and the monitoring of services. If services were monitored, lessons learned could be used to iterate and improve services.

Other people refer to projects as "experiments". This can also be seen as hint, that new ways of doing things as learning opportunities.

Things to consider
How could Kolba support Government to learn more about agile project management and embed it in their practises more formally? What are other things apart from the open challenges, that Kolba can do to expose public service professionals to agile ways of doing things?

"We start small – what are the things that don't work? Then we are moving forward from this."

"We need monitoring skills. After implementing a program, we need to understand the impact."

Asking for feedback from stake-holders and citizen representatives is embedded in the process of creating new solutions. Citizens themselves still don't get engaged enough

Understanding the needs of citizens through user research is still not something that is embedded in current processes - neither at the beginning or the end of the design process. Kolba has facilitated conversations between citizens and government and provided methods for citizens to input for example on the OGP action plan. Even if civil servants find this useful, they haven't picked up the introduced methods to apply them themselves. Civil servants have not yet grasped what user research is and how their work can benefit from it.

Things to consider
How might Kolba Lab help public servants to understand the importance of user research though case studies and examples?

Which aspects of user research are most important for public servants?

"They consulted with different agencies and NGO's - the round of consultations was even before there was a prototype."

eGovernance requires new skills – are civil servants well equipped?

Delivering services digitally already plays an important role and everyone we spoke to agrees. In the future it will become even more important. Currently, the skill sets of government professionals are not yet reflecting these future tasks, e.g. one interview partner sees a need for new soft skills: being proactive and not afraid of failing. Others highlight the importance of skills to monitor, evaluate and iterate services. As eGovernment is mainly developed by external service providers, we wonder if public services need to gain a better basic understanding of software development e.g. the need for collecting user feedback to improve the user experience, the creation of content for online media and agile project management.

Things to consider
How can Kolba support civil servants to gain basic knowledge about software development e.g. though a series of events of best practice examples from elsewhere?

"The TOR and the research was done here from inside. The donor hired an agency who built the site – we work on this together."

"We need new soft skills – to be proactive, not being afraid of failing, being proactive. If you notice something, but don't do something about it – it will turn into a bigger problem."

Where the government is today:

Impact & innovation

While beacon projects set best practise examples, the opportunity to learn from less successful projects is not fully used

When it comes to successful, innovative projects - our interviewees named eDraft and DataLex as examples. These services set the benchmark, act as best practise examples and show others what good looks like.

Examples for less successful projects were eLicense, sms polling and the broadcasting from municipality meetings. The reasons why these projects are less successful have not been explored. One can only assume why these services work less well: maybe not a great user experience, or designed without the citizen's need in mind or just a lack of marketing? A great opportunity to learn from these experiences to avoid similar mistakes is wasted, if no evaluation with users takes place.

Things to consider

What if Kolba hosted a conference on "Sharing lessons learned" where government professionals are invited to share their work and critically reflect what could have been even better?

"It's not only important for citizen to connect with us, professors and judges, they use eDraft to present their view. Two or three years ago, they wouldn't have written down their ideas. This is the world now and in future."

"There is online broadcasting for citizens to watch community committee sessions - but they only have 5 or 6 viewers."

Recommendations

A few ideas for the future

Ideas for possible next steps

The following ideas evolved from our research with civil servants and Kolba Lab. Before implementation, these ideas need to be fleshed out in more detail and ideally prototyped and tested.

1. Widen Kolba's offer

Kolba is known for engaging citizens in public challenges and Hackathons. Based on these strengths and experiences, Kolba Lab can widen its offer and claim "citizen engagement" in a wider sense. The offer could include user research to inform government's assumptions about user needs, horizon scanning to identify future needs and user testing to evaluate improvement opportunities for services.

In a further step it might even become an option to become less dependent from public funding by turning into an agency that offers user research and testing and citizen engagement to private and public organisations.

2. Fostering collaboration between citizens and public servants

Building on previous work of hosting challenges for civil servants and citizens in parallel, Kolba can bring the two groups closer together and encourage them to work alongside and collaborate in mixed teams.

3. Support cicil servants with gaining the right skills for eGov

The Armenian Government has a strong focus on delivering services digitally. Kolba Lab can support public service professionals by providing an opportunity to learn more about agile delivery, user experience design and usability. Kolba Café sessions or even a study trip to Government Digital Service in the UK inspire how the digital transformation can be lead with citizens in mind.

Ideas for possible next steps

4. Change your strategy around user research

Over the last two years there was no significant change in public service professionals' attitude towards user research. It is still observed as something that is done already and can be replaced by expert knowledge.

If Kolba Lab tested rebranding the topic and talking about "gaining insights through qualitative and quantitative data", it might become more meaningful to public servants.

For public servants to recognise the value of user-led insights, they need to see results and examples.

Creating a case study in close collaboration with quantitative data and behavioural insight experts might change how public servants think about the usefulness of qualitative research.

5. Partner with SDG Lab to making it accessible to public service professionals

To avoid the risk of creating an innovation ghetto, Kolba Lab could support SDG Lab with developing an "open door strategy": How can SDG work transparently and invite interested and motivated civil servants to contribute, learn and make use of new approaches like behavioural nudging? What if there was the opportunity to relocate a government unit into the SDG lab to deliver a project?

Thank you!

FUTUREGOV

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