IRIS’s conception, birth and early childhood
a junior founding father’s view

3d IRIS summer school
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my pre-IRIS| era at the social law dept.

- 2009: Belgian social criminal law project
- 2010: ICENUW
  - field research: interviews etc with various stakeholders
    - social security institutions
    - social inspections services (social security, labour law, OHS, …)
    - dedicated law enforcement task forces (vat, social fraud, …)
    - Crossroads Bank for Social Security
    - …
  - cross-border cooperation and information exchange problematic (or non-existent)
  - ample opportunities for cross-border social fraud
  - little to no overview of the landscape
  - rather little to no academic interest for this specific subject
my pre-IRIS era at the social law dept.

- de lege lata/de lege ferenda
- late 2010
  - ICENUW project a success?
    - yes: with regard to the identification of the problems
    - no: with regard to the suggested solutions
about needs and opportunities

- **cross border social fraud:**
  - many problems but at the core
    - EU: very little to no sense of urgency at political level nor at EC level
    - national level inadequate
    - sense or urgency?
      - incentives for cooperation?
      - competence?
      - goodwill?
    - lack of knowledge of both problems and possible solutions
      - lack of knowledge situated with the main stakeholders
      - also lack of knowledge situated at academic level

- **so I**
  - started to look at the Benelux
  - suggested we found a research institute
installing IRIS

- took a little convincing but finally we went for it
- installation of a research institute at UGent is pretty straightforward:
  - ZAP member must be director
  - 1 page formality
  - 1 Faculty Board approval
- at the same time: the then State Secretary for the Coordination of the fight against fraud
  - was looking for and was very interested in finding solutions for different forms of cross-border social fraud
  - had also been thinking about ‘downscaling’ to Benelux Union level
installing IRIS

- mutual interest academia and politics: Benelux Union level
  - benefit: political goodwill to push solutions at Benelux Union level
    - side note: academia is not politics
    - but sometimes academia suggests solutions that need political goodwill

- long story short: the installation of IRIS was the de facto start of the Benelux Union’s activities with regard to fighting cross-border social fraud
  - (more on that tomorrow)
IRIS|’s raison d’être

- but why create (just) a(nother) research institute?
  ➢ the need for IRIS| was a conclusion of the previous research
    – knowledge present at academic level showed significant lacks
      • e.g. about what exactly were the most important problems!
    – stakeholder’s knowledge showed significant lacks
      • e.g. about which practices were legally questionable (or even unsound) and why
    – stakeholders were dying for solutions but many seemed at a loss
    – academics where often focussing on problems that proved rather minor to stakeholders with regard to cross-border social fraud

- both theory (academia) and practice (stakeholders) were faced
  ➢ with needs/demands
  ➢ but also had something to offer
IRIS’s raison d’être

- offer and demand in my view were compatible provided
  - IRIS would not be just another research institute ‘but a place where’
    - theory and practice would meet
    - theory and practice would be regarded as different but equally valuable
      - hence the terms academic and field experts
  - IRIS would become both a centre of knowledge and a network
    - more specifically an international research institute where academics and stakeholders from different countries would share knowledge and join forces with regard to research, best practices, lessons learned, pending questions, etc
  - we all hold pieces of the puzzle which each solution is: why not put all our pieces together
    - together we will finish the puzzle faster
    - it will be more complete
maintenance and diagnostics

- first pitfall and threat:
  - trust!
    - between academics: sharing ideas gives people the opportunity to steal your idea/usurp the credit for the idea
      - problem: in academia ideas are currency!
      - colleagues are competitors
      - dog eat dog
      - ...
    - between stakeholders: for various reasons
      - cf “war of the police forces”
      - budgets and numbers in times of austerity
      - ideological rivalry
      - dog eat dog (e.g. reform of social inspection services)
      - ...
maintenance and diagnostics

- first pitfall and threat:
  - trust! (continued)
    - between academic institutions (both national and international)
      - reputation
      - funding
      - ...
    - between stakeholders of different countries
      - incentives: political/economical
      - cultural
      - reputation
      - ...
    - between academia and stakeholders
maintenance and diagnostics

- first pitfall and threat:
  ➢ trust! (continued)
  
  - last but not least: ego (both at individual and institutional level both in academia and with stakeholders)
    - who takes the lead
    - who does the work
    - feeling superior
    - fear of the complexity of problems/fear of feeling inadequate
    - fear of perceived incompetence
      - "is this your solution?"
      - "you don’t work on this problem?"
      - in many reports: we do not have these kinds of problems
  
  • ...
maintenance and diagnostics

- first pitfall and threat:
  - trust!  (continued)
    - solutions
      - circles of trust
      - building trust
    - did we succeed?
      - yes and no
      - yes
        - at individual level
        - at institutional level to some extent
      - no
        - sharing of information remains problematic: no ‘free flow’
        - cooperation between stakeholders and academia remains problematic
maintenance and diagnostics

- challenge: IRIS cannot function properly without stakeholders’ support and input
- IRIS is conceived to be more than the IRIS core team members
  - IRIS core team members can be the hub but: no wheel without spokes, rim, tire etc… (cf IRIS = knowledge centre and a network)
  - not only IRIS core team members allowed in the hub, on the contrary
    (but remember often trust remains an issue as is ego)
maintenance and diagnostics

- second pitfall and threat:
  - resources!
    - manpower
    - network
    - knowledge
      - practical
      - theoretical
      - up to date
      - which issues? etc
    - (unfortunately last but not least) funding!
    - ...

IRIS international research institute on social fraud
maintenance and diagnostics

- some minor practical examples:
  - translation of the Belgian Social Criminal Code
    - very labour intensive!
      - translation: Marlies
      - revisions: Dirk
      - overall supervision: Yves
      - total manhours invested: insane!
      - return on investment?
  - website
    - very labour intensive
      - resources to build
      - resources for content
maintenance and diagnostics

- strengths
  - IRIS| has been very active but mostly ‘behind the scenes’
    - little to no media coverage
    - only the incrowd knows about IRIS|’s value
  - IRIS| has given many initiatives a boost
    - but again mostly ‘behind the scenes’
    - best example: Benelux Union (maybe here and over time a little less behind the scenes)
maintenance and diagnostics

- **strengths** (continued)
  - there is no other IRIS in the EU (or even the world)
    - even the platform UDW or the Fraud & Error network are in no means comparable (but do have their own strengths)
  - IRIS has many dedicated fans
    - they ‘get’ what IRIS is about and believe in IRIS’s mission
    - unfortunately vast majority is Belgian (even Flemish)
    - partly institutionalised (cooperation agreements) but not consolidated at higher levels
  - proof of concept=ok!
maintenance and diagnostics

- opportunities
  - offer and demand remain
  - IRIS| still has lots to offer and needs remain high
  - IRIS| has build unique experience
  - IRIS| = a unique gathering of knowledge and experience
  - IRIS| = a network
maintenance and diagnostics

- weaknesses
  - IRIS| core team has grown but more is needed
  - finding the right people for the job proves hard
    - knowledge
    - motivation
    - trust
  - IRIS| core team members have invested a lot
    - financially
    - personally
    - professionally (e.g. career opportunities etc)
  - value on investment high but ROI in terms of resources too low
  - IRIS| core team members set the first step now time for a big leap
  - IRIS| is not a purely academic research institute: pure academic output is low in comparison to other institutes but societal impact is (much) higher!
on the road again?

- some of the big questions at hand:
  - how to overcome threats: trust and resources?
  - which direction to go?
  - time to shed skin?
  - ...

IRIS | international research institute on social fraud
on the road again?
looking forward to your
input, ideas, feedback, criticism, etc

“Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming “Wow! What a Ride!””