

**56th session of the United Nations General Assembly
Second Committee**

Panel on “Challenges and Changes in Public Administration”

On 1 November 2001, the United Nations and the International Institute of Administrative Sciences organized a panel discussion on “Challenges and Changes in Public Administration” during a session of the Second Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. The panel was one of two panels organized to mark the fifth anniversary of the landmark resolution 50/225 on Public Administration and Development, which was taken by the United Nations General Assembly at its resumed 50th session. The following are notes on the presentations and discussions.

H.E. Mr. Francisco Seixas da Costa, Permanent Representative of Portugal to the United Nations and President of the Second Committee, chaired the panel. Mr. Michael Duggett, Director-General of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, made an opening speech. The following panellists made presentations:

- H.E. Mr. Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza, guest research fellow, National Institute of Public Administration, Mexico, former President of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences and former Ambassador of Mexico (Spain and Netherlands);
- Mr. Jean-Marie Atangana Mebara, President of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences and Minister of Higher Education of Cameroon;
- Prof. Gerard Timsit, Director, Centre of Public Administration Studies and Research, University of Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne, France;
- Prof. Maria del Carmen Pardo, Professor-Researcher, Center for International Studies, Colegio de Mexico;
- Prof. O.P. Dwivedi, Professor of Comparative Public and Development Policy and Administration, Department of Political Studies, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada; and
- Prof. Andrew Massey, Professor of Government and Director of Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom.

H.E. Mr. Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza, the first panellist, reminded the participants that the International Institute of Administrative Science and the United Nations had done some research in 1969 on the status of public administration in the world, which had revealed, among many other things, that:

- Public administration in the world had progressed;
- Institutional reforms were being undertaken globally; and
- Countries were interested in carrying out public administration reforms for administrative efficiency.

The study had also illustrated that different countries involved in public administration reforms were at different stages of progress:

- First generation reforms involving reforms in state functions and in personnel;
- Second generation reforms involving reforms in public management; and
- Third generation reforms, which have centred on making citizens part of public administration and have included issues such as ethics, citizens' charters, respect for values etc.

Mr. Pichardo Pagaza said that the study had shown that in a majority of countries, the different generations of reforms were co-existing. The study had concluded that the focus of administrative reforms had changed from comprehensive to institutional reforms and emphasized that respect for values and culture must be at the core of administrative reforms. Mr. Pagaza concluded by saying that public administration reforms will not make progress unless they are tailored to specific circumstances of the societies concerned.

Mr. Jean-Marie Atangana Mébara brought a Sub-Saharan African perspective to the discussion by pointing out that there are four distinct periods concerned with administrative reforms on the African continent:

- The first few years after independence, when there was an African will to maintain the delivery of public services and sustain public administration as the colonialists had left it;
- The period from the mid-sixties to the end of the 1970s, when the African States expanded their public administration, especially through the creation of public enterprises in almost every sector and centrally controlled development projects in all fields;
- The period of structural adjustment, covering the 1980s, which was marked by reforms that were mostly imposed from the outside, including retrenchment, reduction of public expenditure, reduction of wage bills etc. Most of these reform measures were unpopular in Africa because they were not tailored to the specific circumstances and they had negative social impacts;
- The 1990s, which have been a period of governance programmes involving emphasis on the rule of law, participation of the citizen and civil society, transparency and accountability.

It was noted that while it is too early to make a judgement on the success of this period of governance programmes, the previous reforms had mostly met with failure because of the following:

- There was no emphasis on indigenization;
- Public administration remained a white man's affair;
- Public servants charged with managing public administration systems did not own it because they saw it as an affair of only higher authorities.

Mr. Atangana Mébara concluded that the challenge for Africa now is to integrate public administration into the environment and daily life of Africans or, in other words, to encourage Africans to claim the ownership of public administration in their countries.

Contextualizing public administration reforms in continental Europe, Prof. Gerard Timsit pointed out that reforms there are paradoxical in two ways. One paradox is that despite the diversity of situations (cultures, social situations and reform strategies), there is homogeneity in public administration change, involving rolling back the frontiers of the state, deregulation, decentralization, simplification, coordination, professionalization and accountability. The other paradox is that despite this homogeneity in public administration reforms, the different countries are at different phases of reform. The homogeneity masks the diversity in phases and dimensions of reforms.

The phases and dimensions of the reforms can be seen as:

- Reconstruction of the State, especially in transition countries or past communist countries;
- Modernization of the State, where the structures and processes of public administration are being adapted to the needs of the citizens; and
- Reconfiguration of the State, where efforts are towards constructing a new type of State to deal with issues of globalization, especially those aspects of globalization which are escaping the control of the State as it is structured currently.

In this respect, he said, reconfiguration will not succeed if we resort to the classical State. It would require going back to the State, but to a new type of State, which is a Solidarity State, emphasizing solidarity between individuals, among territories and among generations (dealing with issues of environment for example). This would require working within a three-tier logic of solidarity, subsidiarity and strategy. Prof. Timsit concluded that the biggest challenge in this respect is the restoration of internal unity and the construction of a new unity beyond that which has hitherto formed States.

Dr. María del Carmen Pardo focussed on public administration in the Americas and cautioned that the Americas should not be taken as a homogeneous entity, especially in terms of public administration. Discussing the relative autonomy of public administration and the process of its politization, she noted that public administration is a macro-organism made up of many organizations and agencies with different objectives, and explicit or implicit functions. Institutions are different, even when they appear similar, with dysfunctions resulting from bureaucratic inertia and elite groups that promote administrative reforms. She drew attention to the fact that in Latin America public administration became a privileged space for political negotiation and an effective vehicle for political intermediation between government and society.

The evolution of the administrative modernization concept was analysed to show four distinct phases of modernizing public administration:

- The normative phase, which basically emphasized the State's role of regulating social behaviour;
- The developmental phase, which conceived the State as the focal engine for socio-politico-economic development;
- The programming and planning phase, which saw the State take the role of centralized planning to solve problems confronting Latin America;
- The efficiency phase, which conceived modernization as the way to achieve efficiency in resource distribution; and
- The current modernization efforts focused on communication and information technology applications or e-government.

All these necessitate new structures, new competencies and interconnectivity. It was also observed that application of e-government may create imbalances and gaps in societies, and that one of the challenges of public administration today is how to bridge this gap.

Prof. Andrew Massey discussed the changes and challenges of public administration in the context of the English-speaking world, especially the Commonwealth and North America. The tradition of common law has influenced the development of public administration in the English-speaking world, where there has been a tension between democratic accountability and efficiency. The quest to reconcile that tension has been at the centre of a generation of administrative reforms and will prove to be the enduring challenge of the future. Prof. Massey noted that democracy and reform often do conflict, especially when the public officials desire to implement public policies efficiently and effectively and not to simply do as the politicians tell them. The conflicting tendencies are also observed between personal and civic responsibility and the professional responsibility of public officials.

Reforms have also involved importation of private sector practices into the public sector and the development of entrepreneurial officials. The extreme case of interaction between the private sector methods and the public sector was the privatization of public enterprises and increased marketization of public sector services. Public administration became increasingly public management with the tenets of the New Public Management approaches. However, the New Public Management is being criticized for, among many other things, universalism and a "one size fits all" approach.

Prof. Massey noted that the future challenges mainly concern globalization and governance, especially how to reform political and administrative institutions to engage in government through consent while allowing decisions to be taken and implemented within the context of globalization and participative governance where citizens are allowed to govern themselves.

Prof. O.P. Dwivedi offered some reflections on recent developments in public administration in Asia and emphasized that culture and governance style are what makes governments tick. He specifically cautioned that dictating reforms from the outside would not work to improve public administration. In the process of administrative reforms, the following need to be respected:

- Indigenous values must not be sidelined;
- Guard against backsliding;
- Find alternative reform measures for developing countries;
- Make administrative heads accountable;
- Do not divorce public administration from politics; and
- Listen to ideas coming from the south.

Mr. Guido Bertucci, Director of DPEPA/UNDESA, highlighted the perspective of the United Nations regarding public administration reforms. He emphasized the need to avoid prescribing the same measure for different problems and underscored the importance of reform approaches and measures that are customized to cultures, history and socio-political settings. He noted that the United Nations and its development partners could assist public administration reforms by:

- Advocacy highlighting policy options to countries,
- Building a common understanding of certain principles,
- Information-sharing and exchange of ideas;
- Capacity-building;
- Reinforcing core public service values; and
- Improving coordination of development aid.

During the open discussion, the following were emphasized:

- The need for each country to have the institutional capacity to review and coordinate public administration reforms and make them on-going; and
- The need for good leadership at the top, committed reformers in the middle and a degree of courage and patience to make reforms fruitful.

Finally, it was noted that the debate on the role of the State must remain open, especially given the recent events, which demand the State's effective response.