Innovation in Government Around the World: Challenges and Perspectives

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Mexico City, Mexico, 3-7 November 2003
In the last half of the twentieth century, and more even so at the beginning of the new millennium, Governments have been under pressure to respond to the demands from their citizens and to the increasing complexity and change in their global environments. The response to these demands has taken the form of programmes of administrative transformation, administrative reform or administrative development. Within a framework of extreme diversity in local conditions and situations leading to administrative change, it is possible to identify four major trends worldwide.

1) Construction or re-construction of a State that operates according to the rule of law. There are a number of countries across the world which are undergoing a process of State construction or re-construction. Within this trend, we may distinguish two different movements. The first one that characterizes countries that need to build from scratch or re-build their government institutions, as is the case of some countries, which have experienced war and internal conflict resulting in State collapse. The second one relates to countries that have embarked in a process of political and economic change. This is, for example, the case of the countries of Eastern Europe who had to cope with a difficult transition from centrally planned economies to market economies. The challenge in this case is to dismantle old State institutions (or de-institutionalize) and to rebuild them and bring them in line with new values of openness, participation, and transparency.

2) Modernization of the State. This is a challenge that affects all countries and is related to the adaptation and improvement of administrative structures, managerial capacities, financial management and technological adequacy to new needs and demands emerging from societies which are much more complex and heterogeneous than a few decades ago. In other words, it is a process of re-adjustment of State institutions and public administration to the need for greater cost-effectiveness, quality, simplicity and participation in government. The need to enhance efficiency in the public sector and to cut public costs, which is at the heart of the New Public Management school of thought, has resulted in a series of measures, including privatization, deregulation, and the introduction of market-like mechanisms in the public
sector. In a number of countries, debureaucratization and decentralization have been increasingly coupled with new approaches to management, exemplifying openness, adaptability, participation, flexibility, diversity and responsiveness.

3) Reconfiguration of the role of the State

With the spread of globalization and the changes occurring at both the domestic and international levels, the functions and role of the State have been transformed substantially. The concurrent trends of globalization and demand for citizen participation have compelled Governments to debate “the role of the State”, to explore various partnerships with private sector and civil society organizations and to consider re-engineering government systems, retraining of public officials and rethinking of public policies. Given the rapid changes in technology and the global economy, Governments have also been motivated to learn to continuously re-evaluate government performance in relation to citizen demands and global pressures.

The general configuration of State responsibilities has changed and this has introduced important modifications both in the policy arena and in the State’s requirements for high-level skills, qualitatively and quantitatively. Overall, the course of change points to a shift of focus away from hands-on management and the direct production of services and goods towards strategic planning with a view to the establishment and maintenance, refinement and reform of an enabling framework for private enterprise and individual initiative. A parallel shift has moved the State’s centre of gravity and with it the locus of power. Decentralization, debureaucratization and deregulation are adding to the importance not only of local government, but also of non-state actors on whom significant functions are devolved or outsourced. At the same time, a range of tasks and policy decisions, traditionally handled by national bureaucracies in their respective capitals, is being increasingly transposed to an inter-governmental or supranational level as a result of increased flows between countries of goods, capital, labour and information. More and more, the State is called upon to act as "linking pin" of processes of planning, consultation, negotiation and decision-making involving diverse actors, State and non-state, at different levels of governance. The State is the hub of activities connecting multiple partners and
stakeholders from very varied fields, regions, cultures, occupations, professions and interests.

4) Revitalization of democracy

A fourth trend, which has emerged in the past years, is related to a growing demand to make democracy more meaningful and to allow for more opportunities of participation in policy-making. In many advanced democracies citizens and civil society organizations are showing increasing dissatisfaction towards how democracies are functioning. For example, the growing influence of money in the electoral process and the strong influence of special interests on public policy decision-making are being viewed in many democratic nations as undermining full citizens’ participation. As a result, citizens are asking that government be reformed in order to enhance public participation, to expand political opportunities, and to improve its operations as well as the quality of services provided. In Latin America, the difficulty of governments to deliver adequate services, especially in the social sphere, and promote better living conditions for all has also resulted in a widespread disappointment among the population for the current forms of governance. At the same time, the potential of ICT to enhance participation has not yet been full realized, as the United Nations World Public Sector Report on the theme of e-government clearly points out.

In the context of these four movements to which I made reference before, we see all over the world, innovation and experimentation sprouting in central government, local government and individual agencies, particularly in the area of service delivery. As the United Nations Public Service Awards has shown, there is great capacity in all corners of the globe to reinvent Government and to implement innovative measures in various fields of the public sector.

However, while some countries are experimenting with new sophisticated institutional and managerial methods, others are still grappling with the establishment of a basic public sector infrastructure. Unfortunately, we are witnessing the development of an institutional and managerial divide between countries. Is this a situation which has no remedy? And if not, how can the institutional and managerial divide between countries be bridged?
One way to leapfrog this divide is to provide countries, which are building or re-building their public sector, with the necessary support to establish their basic infrastructure while at the same introducing innovative methods. For example, while devising the basic structures of Parliament, it would be advantageous also to introduce at the same time a basic IT infrastructure. Another example is that of local governance systems, i.e. countries can benefit from introducing more advanced decentralization systems without having to start from more elementary systems. In the area of Public Administration Reform, we could follow the same course as in the case of telecom. Countries which do not have the necessary infrastructure to connect all remote areas of a given territory through regular telephone service, can address this problem through the use of cellular phones, without having to build costly telephone lines already obsolete. In other words, less developed countries can greatly benefit from the lessons learned in other countries and from the innovations that are being introduced, and therefore leapfrog stages of development without having to go through a number of long, and costly steps.

As you all know, knowledge acquisition and transfer is very important in the era of Information Technology and rapid change. It is not sufficient any longer nor wise to rely on one’s own local expertise, but knowledge may be acquired through exchange of information on successful practices, or even failures, and experiences in general that may facilitate reform in other countries. Therefore, sharing best practices is relevant not so much in the sense that countries can adapt a successful model into their own administrative system, but rather that this can serve as an incentive to jump start a process of innovation by which the administration itself is encouraged to modernize and change.

The exchange of information on innovation in public administration may therefore be a powerful tool to inspire governments in their reform process, and may help bridge, in some respects, the institutional and managerial divide. The exchange and sharing of these innovative experiences can therefore create a body of “new knowledge” which can be accessed by public administrations all over the world.
It should be highlighted that sharing experiences and adaptation of successful practices does not imply that there is one solution for all problems. Public administration reform and management innovation are relative terms whose practical manifestations should reflect the nature of the problems they are meant to solve and the governance and societal circumstances in which they are to be applied. Reform or innovation that involves fashionable management ideas and international best practice should only be applied where these conditions are satisfied, and not as a matter of course, which can amount to cultural and/or ideological hegemony. In many development settings, problems and circumstances will demand simple and relatively straightforward solutions that, nevertheless, may be innovative or revolutionary in these settings. Thus, each country should choose among the panoply of existing best practices those which are most suited to their own needs and to their endogenous capacity to adapt a specific innovation.

There is a difference between home-grown innovations, which are conceptualized, implemented and managed domestically, and the absorption of successful innovative practices from other countries. In the latter case, there are three fundamental pre-requisites that should be met if adaptation of best practices is to be successful. In order to assess whether a country can benefit from the innovative experiences of other countries, it is necessary to evaluate: a) whether that particular experience is indeed successful; b) whether it is suitable for transfer to another country; and finally c) whether the country on the receiving end has the institutional and managerial capacity to absorb and implement such practice. This entails developing appropriate tools and methodologies to identify criteria to evaluate whether a specific practice may be considered as a “best practice”; to assess the potential transferability of best practices and the absorption capacity of countries to successfully implement best practices.

But the most powerful ingredient in innovation is the ability to unleash the initiative and the creativity of the public organization and of the individual public officials. Empowering public administration and public service to deliver new, more effective, less costly and more participatory systems and methods, can set in motion a wave of change within the
administration that can change the corporate culture and make innovation and change a continuous process.

Being realistic, we all know that there are no quick fixes or ready-made solutions to complex development problems, but collaboration among countries in sharing experiences and jump-starting an internal process of innovation and change can get us on the right path to a better government for all.

Thank you.