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The Focus of HLPF 2020, the How Question in Public Administration, and the ECOSOC Endorsed Principles of Effective Governance



As the High-level political forum of 2020 adopts its main theme of 'Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable

development', public sector reform takes the central stage in sustainable development praxis. A glaring example comes from the recent [African Regional Workshop: Effective Governance for Sustainable Development: Putting Principles into Practice](#), organized by the UN DESA in partnership with the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in Pretoria, South Africa.

In Pretoria, participating governments, UN agencies, civil society, academia and others seemed to have a decent grasp of *what* should be done to leave no one behind--they were rather clear on which policies and what models of sustainability to contemplate. Yet, what they seemed to crave for was a set of possible answers to the *how* question. How do we reform public administration and governance if we want to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030?

This is not a straightforward question. The tremendous governance challenges we are confronting today are largely the upshots of what has gone wrong in the first place. Myriad obstacles within public administrations in many countries, and this despite the hard work of public officials and civil servants, are at the root

of our developmental malaise. Einstein's famous words are telling here: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

Then again, how?

Promoting the SDG-related transformations in our public administration systems and processes requires readiness on many fronts in public institutions.

For starters, accepting and internalizing the fact that effective governance requires adaptation to its specific context could take us a long way. A broad definition of governance is the crux of the matter here. Governance is the way by which public administration organisations and other stakeholders develop solutions and opportunities for societal challenges, and this includes steering, incentivizing and collaboration mechanisms. Defining governance narrowly, for example as being only about stakeholder involvement while neglecting rule of law, is one cause of governance failures.

Second, contextuality is not detached from values and belief systems, including those associated with different public administration models. Are policy makers stimulated to think outside the box? Are career systems rewarding or punishing officials for innovative approaches? These questions are essential. They should be posed more often in broaching the *how* question.

Thirdly, speed of reform should be considered, as the latter often operates in correlation with the quality of reform. For instance, routine collaboration among levels of administration is slow and subpar. This is related to the trade-off between being reliable and predictable, but not solely. Speeding up decision making processes for implementation of the SDGs is necessary, but this should not take place at the expense of strategic foresight, back-casting or impact analysis.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves: How can we balance soundness with completeness? How can we weigh flexibility against stability and

predictability? And how can we accelerate urgent transformation through 'real-time' multi-level governance?

The *how* question entails contextually feasible ways to increase governmental capacity by partnering with all relevant stakeholders, including but not limited to civil society and business. It necessitates the bridging of the gap between the 'wicked' problems underlying our policy challenges and the preconditions for effective governance. It requires pitting competence against financing, and calibrating coordination and coherence. We will need to do so vertically and horizontally while subscribing to whole-of-society approaches.

We need to be fully cognizant that the width of the gap between the what and the how differs across countries and through time. Some countries have well-functioning and flexible public administration, but others are not yet there and work in silos. Still others have malfunctioning and/or fragile administrations. In addition, many countries may have a well-functioning public administration in, say, planning but not in other arenas, like implementation. Others that have transformed their public administration into lean and efficient operations may have caused conditions that chip away at their overall effectiveness.

All these trends were apparent in the African Regional Workshop. Its conclusions emphasized that there is no one perfect institutional schema of governing. Inter-institutional communication and collaboration, multisectoral partnerships, coherent and sound policy making are as important as are innovations and adaptability, SDG awareness raising, research and training, not to mention innovative financing for development and responsible leadership.

Clearly, there cannot be *one* answer to the "how" challenge. We should recognize the different starting points; distinct trajectories, multiple aspirations, and equally legitimate but significantly diverse endpoints pursued by public administrations across the world.

Nevertheless, some recommendations could apply to all public administrations: first, establishing sustainability transformation acceleration training for current public officials; second, integrating transformational capacity/capability in public administration schools' curricula; and third, implementing the [11 Principles of effective governance for sustainable development](#) formulated by the [Committee of experts on public administration \(CEPA\)](#) and endorsed by UN ECOSOC in 2018. These are golden guidelines for all countries to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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