Speaking points Louis Meuleman at the panel session on "[Teaching Silos to Dance - Sustainability & Public Administration](#)" on Tuesday, 29. September 2020, 14:15 - 15:15, at the "Creative Bureaucracy Festival" Remote 2020.

1. Thanks for inviting me to say a few things about something that everybody seems to dislike: silos. Silos seem the opposite of what we need when we try to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, because the Goals are inherently linked.

2. And silos are responsible for the bad image of public administration, for its being fat, slow, inefficient and untransparent.

3. The Covid-19 pandemic has to some extent revitalised the image of the public sector: we now realise that public administration is still able to take drastic measures when needed – at least in many countries. It can still be strong, agile, and effective. But I am not sure whether this positive image will last very long.

4. Over the last decades, the New Public Management (NPM) movement has weakened public administration in many countries in Europe and across the globe. According to the economist Maria Mazzucato it has resulted in a general undervaluing the public sector and its ability to create public value.

5. NPM has many mantras which have infiltrated our brains, although we know that they are at least partially dangerous nonsense. "Less is more" and "best practices" are examples, but one of the most powerful mantras is "break down the silos".

6. Breaking down the silos suggests that governments function better when they get rid of the borders between institutions, policy areas, or functional entities. It is a philosophy which is the opposite of Max Weber's idea that governments function best with breaking down problems into small pieces and establishing separate institutional entities to deal with them.

7. I am not defending Weber as a best practice – I don't believe in the theory of best practices. And I do see the need to work better across institutional silos. Lack of policy coherence, of policy integration, is one of the main causes of implementation gaps.

8. What we need, according to my experience and research at subnational, national, European and UN level, is contextualized approaches. We need pluralism. As the sociologist Ulrich Beck said: our world has become so complex that we cannot afford to say it is "either … or", but it should be "and… and". We cannot risk betting everything on the wrong horse.

9. In addition to the problem of dogmatism, breaking down the silos is also neglecting the virtues of silos. Silos ensure structure, legitimacy, responsibility, accountability, and predictability.

10. Of course I am aware of the problems caused by inefficient, siloed bureaucracy. When you have over 50 ministries and 400 government agencies as not long ago in Sri Lanka, it probably makes a lot of sense to break some silos and create larger entities. But if you have only 10 ministries, it's a different story.

11. To analyse what is happening, and what works where and why, I like to work with three basic governance styles and their combinations, because they are also culturally very meaningful.

12. Hierarchy – like in Germany, Austria – appreciates silos because they provide structure. Market governance – as in Anglo-Saxon countries but also in other European countries – likes breaking silos down. Network governance – favoured in the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries - preaches dialogue across sectors but is sometimes stuck in endless talks.

13. I think that a better approach is creating a situational and flexible combination of the three classical approaches. This situational and dynamic mixing is called metagovernance. In a metaphor, my co-writer Ingeborg Niestroy and I called this 'teaching silos to dance'. It refers back to the

2001 book Teaching the elephant to dance by James Belasco.

14. Teaching silos to dance implies keeping structures where needed, bringing dynamics and flexibility in where possible, and creating spaces for reflection and dialogue.

15. It is also a theory of change. I am convinced that taking this as a new way of thinking, we will gradually create better performing public administration and governance, with better policies which are better implemented.

16. I am currently developing this idea as a training course which will include a lot of co-creation, because we all have the solutions, we know them. It's not rocket science. But it may be difficult because of vested interests and of belief systems: of our own mind sets. And mind sets can be very stubborn.

17. For example, although there is sufficient science about the ineffectiveness of breaking down physical walls and creating large open work spaces, and we how it decreases motivation, effectiveness, concentration, there is still this efficiency movement which only thinks about saving money. We really know it doesn't work. But those in charge still do it.

18. I think it is worthwhile to keep or even bring back the values of old-school silos. They bring identification, social contacts, direct feedback and other things that account for a learning environment. So let's invest in finding out what really bothers us about silos and how to overcome this.

19. Let's also distinguish between political institutional and mental silos. Mental silos are maybe the most important – and these we have to break, not by destroying them, but by making them dance.

20. I said earlier that besides combining approaches, making them fit in their context is very important. There are no one size fits all solutions for the SDGs. This also means that silos may need to learn to dance in different ways in different countries. Maybe in Austria it is the Walz, in Spain the Paso Doble or the Flamenco and in Poland the Polonaise.

21. In Brussels, at the European Commission, I have organized since 2015 a series of panel discussions with a live band and sometimes a real dancing after-party. The events are close enough to the Commission's internal culture to be acceptable, but different enough to energize both panelists and participants to co-create something new.

22. These events bring together people from very different sectors who normally never meet. This is important because in every organisation, innovative solutions will exist you have never heard of. You need to meet these people, invite them to come and tell their stories, or organize in internal study visit, and ask them: why and how did you make your silos dance?

23. Finally, your boss, our bosses may ask: why is this now important? Can't we wait until next year? Why is this now an urgent thing? The answer is that bridging silos is about implementing SDG target 17.14.1 on policy coherence for sustainable development. Since this year there is a composite UN indicator for this, with a methodology agreed by the UN member states.

24. The UN plans to ask all countries to do a self-assessment based on the indicator, this autumn. In addition, the OECD has adopted detailed guidance on policy coherence for sustainable development. So I would say, yes it is urgent. Policy coherence is a key enabler for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

25. I am ending with a positive note. Teaching silos to dance is possible. But it needs focus, willingness and courage. We should learn from good examples – and they exist in every organisation. Can we replicate the successes? Can we maybe create communities which give people the encouragement and support to try new ways of collaboration? My last words are affirmative: yes, we can!

See also:

https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/teaching-silos-to-dance-a-condition-to-implement-the-sdgs/

www.ps4sd.eu