



Public sector workforce matters*

Summary

Resilient and agile public sector institutions are required that can be activated in times of crisis, while accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. A disconnect between people and government can be noted, for example, due to partisan polarization, authoritarian populism, and the propagation of false or misleading information which is endangering the legitimacy of institutions. Building responsive and resilient institutions calls for more creative, flexible, and integrated ways of working, focused on the needs of people, as well as an adequate stock of competencies and resources. To this end, governments should further promote professionalization of the public sector workforce, invest in digital skills, update competency frameworks for implementation of the SDGs, and address inequalities within the public sector workforce as well as social inequities in the design and delivery of public services at both national and subnational levels.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Council encourages Governments to further promote professionalization of the public sector workforce, invest in digital skills, update competency frameworks for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, address inequalities that exist within the public sector workforce, and take steps to address social

inequities in the design and delivery of public services. (Paragraph 12)

► See: [ECOSOC resolution 2022/9](#)

* Excerpt from Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Report on the twenty-first session. See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2022, Supplement No. 24 ([E/2022/44-E/C.16/2022/9](#))

Discussion

Capacity and legitimacy of public sector workforces

The Committee recalls that the General Assembly, in its resolution 74/236, emphasized that human resources development, with health and education at its core, lays at the heart of sustainable development. Short-, medium- and long-term strategies are required for a healthy, educated, skilled, capable, motivated, productive, and adaptable public sector workforce.

Public sector capacities in the form of skills, capabilities and resources are necessary, paired with public sector legitimacy through societal trust in government and public institutions. That is particularly relevant due to an apparent disconnect between people and public institutions, often reinforced in times of crisis.

Crisis management and resilience

There is a need to build forward better by, among other things, integrating resilience into public institutions. An integrated public sector capacity and legitimacy approach makes it possible to build resilient and agile public sector institutions that can be activated in times of crisis, while accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. New mindsets and behaviours in public institutions, paired with expertise and tools for strategic anticipation and risk management, are recommended in order to be better prepared for complexity and uncertainties.

Governments in both developed and developing countries, including local governments, could consider building a stock of competencies, capabilities and resources for crisis management that might become building blocks for resilience strategies. The importance of additional capacities

Going forward, an entrepreneurial approach to human resources management will be important. There is also a need to standardize the recruitment of local public sector workforces to depoliticize the recruitment process and make it merit based and to promote diversity. Public administration schools could support the strengthening of the public workforce, including through innovations to be scaled up and widely applied.

Developing countries with smaller populations and public sector capacity are at a disadvantage as they are expected to deliver the same international commitments as countries with larger populations and greater resources. The right size of public sector workforce should be defined and adaptable to needs in times of crisis.

for crisis management demands a new orientation for capacity-building, particularly given new public management reforms with a focus on efficiency.

The pandemic has placed emphasis on the importance of front-line workers, but the recent decline of interest in working in that field needs to be addressed, together with other impacts of the crisis, such as human resources loss due to displacement and questions of telecommuting and its application to different civil servant groups.

Lessons learned from managing the pandemic can be used to make the public sector workforce more effective and resilient and serve as case studies for other crises. Networks of transnational collaboration are important to account for the borderless nature of potential complex future crises, such as another pandemic.

Governance robustness

Governance robustness emerges as a dynamic resilience approach for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and demands a flexible and agile public sector workforce able to transform and adapt in turbulent times. In that context, organizational barriers, such as archaic systems, reluctance to share information, lack of planning, collaboration and trust, and inefficient workplace processes and technologies need to be eliminated.

Low- and middle-income countries have skillfully adopted robust governance strategies by engaging wider society in crisis management, including through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches; scalability to flexibly mobilize and demobilize resources; and multi-actor collaboration and partnerships involving the private sector and civil society, which is particularly relevant when overall State capacity was low.

Quality of government

A focus on public sector workforce professionalization, expertise and motivation is recommended in order to improve the quality of government. The kind of public servants required must be clearly defined.

Proponents of the quality-of-government approach argue that merit-based, professional public sector workforces, recruited and promoted through meritbased recruitment processes and operating independently of the political sphere, tend to be more effective regarding public policies and curbing corruption. Merit-based, professional public sector workforces also help to improve responsiveness to crises, including by facilitating the sharing of resources to ensure the provision of essential services in a timely and efficient manner. That in

Less formal, compartmentalized and insulated bureaucratic hierarchies and closer relationships with citizens as co-creators and co-implementers of robust governance solutions are required. That could be achieved by changing the interaction between public officials and citizens, as well as the mindsets of civil servants, including by embedding new values and competences into their performance framework.

Public sector organizations are encouraged to think outside the box and adapt and implement transformation activities as part of a sustained process of improving service delivery to citizens, within the limitations of resources, which is particularly important in countries with smaller populations and more limited public sector capacity.

turn enhances social trust in institutions, which is key to ensuring social acceptance of unpopular government decisions often necessary in turbulent times. Another benefit is that bureaucratic professionalization could lead to a contagious and self-reinforcing process inside government.

Digitalization could promote more agile human resources and flexible bureaucratic procedures in support of the quality of government, including by improving the delivery of public services. On the other hand, digitalization might also create new inequalities in the public sector workforce, particularly for certain types of workers.

There is a need to institutionalize and better structure the dialogue between institutions at all levels and civil servants, employee representatives,

including trade unions, and other workers to avoid possible human resources conflicts, in particular in times of crisis, and to co-create decent working conditions. Quality of government also requires

strengthening the trust between political appointees or decision-makers and civil servants to enable innovation and effective service delivery.

Inequalities and social vulnerability

Deep inequalities that have led to developing countries and vulnerable communities being disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis need to be considered. Raising the awareness of the public sector regarding social inequalities will be key going forward.

An integrated approach involving different services should be applied to support inclusion, reduce

unnecessary administrative burdens, and prevent social stigmatization and discrimination. An equity driven approach also demands the addressing of inequalities within the public sector workforce itself, at all levels, which have been made more evident during the pandemic.

Technical guidance for government officials



[CEPA strategy guidance note on promotion of public sector workforce diversity](#) (draft)

Related expert papers on this topic (2016-present)



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See also:



UN/IASIA Initiative on Public Administration Education and Training for the Current and Next Generation of Government Leadership ([Aide-memoire](#))



Enhancing the Competence of Government Leadership: New Approaches to an Old Problem - A Report on the Joint "UN/IASIA Initiative on Public Administration Education and Training for the Current and Next Generation of Government Leadership" to the First Meeting of CEPA ([Report](#))