

22nd session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration

Written statement by the International Institute of Administrative Sciences

Agenda item 7: Reinventing public sector workforce training and institutional learning towards changing mindsets in the public sector

As we navigate through an ever-changing world, it's becoming increasingly clear that we need a fresh perspective and a new generation of professionals with diverse competencies and skills. The emergence of digital sciences, along with previously untapped disciplines such as anthropology and behavioural science, presents an exciting opportunity for innovation and progress in public administration. It's time to tap into the potential of young people and these new fields to shape the future of public service.

The International Institute of Administrative Sciences statement is based on the discussions held during our conferences in 2022 and 2023, which involved our network of public governance scholars and practitioners. In this statement, we will focus on three specific topics that are critical to public sector workforce matters: capacity-building, human resources management, and citizen-state interactions. We believe that these topics are essential to building effective public institutions that can deliver services to citizens and meet the complex challenges facing governments around the world.

Capacity building is a critical element for ensuring that public administrators and managers are equipped with the necessary skills to address the complex challenges that exist in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) and poly-crisis world. In this context, new skills such as decision-making and digital skills have become crucial. However, it is equally important to ensure that these skills reach local managers who can localize SDGs to meet the specific needs of their communities.

Public employees are central to modern society's greatest achievements. They enable innovation and economic prosperity, ensure access and quality of essential public services, and protect citizens from a range of threats.

We would like to underline that wave after wave of societal crises at the start of the decade put pressure on the resources and means of action of governments, front-line administrators and public service operators. Constraints are increasing as: budgetary of course, but also on the skills, natural resources and energy, and on the physical and moral endurance of the public sectors agents.

The perception of danger and the urgency of preservation apply, in particular, to "vital", "essential", "frontline" services, the critical context in which these services are ensured is also crucial. Civil servants are critical in maintaining public services delivery in turbulent times, in disaster contexts and/or in conflict-affected countries.

We also state that the nature of work in the public sector is changing rapidly, and the capabilities of public servants and those who lead them are constantly required to adjust.

The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has brought about a radical change in decision-making, and it is essential to train public officials in the necessary skills to take full advantage of the new opportunities. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are vital for preparing public officials to play a responsible role in rapidly changing public organizations in this new context.

At the same time, digitalization is potentially an integral part of this process of implementing the SDGs, in that e-Government can act as enabler to sustainability, equity and social inclusion, and because it represents a cross-cutting objective across several SDGs, at both sectoral and horizontal levels. The focus of the SDGs on core values, such as efficiency, equity, transparency, privacy, security and trust, are all themes embedded in digital government policies and practices.

It is also important to acknowledge the vital role that local governments play in driving inclusive sustainable development through the involvement of local stakeholders and resources. To effectively implement the SDGs, it is crucial to train local managers in these new skills and motivate them to strategically consider sustainability. This means enhancing the capacity of regional and local governments in promoting sustainable development by providing training in local sustainability project management that includes digital and decision-making skills.

However, with the increasing importance of the digital world, which more and more relies on big data and artificial intelligence for delivering public goods and services, it is crucial to recognize the potential implicit biases that may arise from the use of emerging technologies. Therefore, classical public administration education and training, obsessed with efficiency, economy and effectiveness, should give attention to adequately prepare public servants to recognize and address the implicit biases often associated with the use of emerging technologies.

We also need to ensure that no one, no place will be left behind. This involves not only a set of new skills or a new mindset. It will require a shift in how we approach human resources management and public sector attractiveness, with a particular emphasis on regionalization policies and the equitable distribution of civil servants across the territory. Such policies must guarantee that every part of the territory is adequately covered, including rural areas.

Likewise, it is important to have a balanced approach to human resources management (HRM) and public service performance, which includes attention to differences in employee outcomes between various categories of employees. Policies aimed at developing professional competencies may have different effects on high-skilled and low-skilled employees or those in permanent or precarious contracts. By considering such differences, we can design improved personnel policies that benefit both employee well-being and organizational efficiency.

Therefore, it is evident that context matters. Whether at the organizational or societal level, context impacts on public organizations' capacity to align their public personnel policies with the meaningful public services they want to provide. Many economic, ecological and demographic challenges affect countries and confront public organizations with the need to change, which raises the very question again about the importance of leadership and management of change at all levels of public organizations.

However, a much less explored area in the context of public service provision is the role that communication plays in citizen-state interactions in the process of delivering public services.

Analysing and managing the citizen-state interactions that occur in the provision of public services can be helpful for understanding and, ultimately, improving outcomes such as citizen satisfaction, trust, and legitimacy. Public communication serves an equity function by promoting best practices that adjust strategies for communicating information to be appropriate and relevant for the group(s) that the information is intended for.

In conclusion, our statement stresses that the public sector is facing unprecedented and multiple challenges in an ever-changing world. We need to equip its workforce with a new mindset and a new generation of professionals with diverse competencies and skills are needed. It's time to tap into the potential of young people and these new fields to shape the future of public service. To effectively implement the SDGs, we need to enhance the capacity of regional and local governments in promoting sustainable development by providing training in local sustainability project management and ensure that no one, no place will be left behind. Finally, the importance of communication in citizen-state interactions cannot be overstated, as it plays a critical role in promoting equity, trust, and legitimacy in the provision of public services. By recognizing these challenges and opportunities, we can work towards building effective public institutions that deliver services to citizens and meet the complex challenges facing governments around the world.