

## **The trust deficit - concepts and causes of low public trust in governments**

This paper was prepared and revised by Committee member Meredith Edwards. The content of and the views expressed in the paper are those of the author, and do not imply any expression of opinion on the part of the United Nations.

*The Master said: 'Give them enough food, give them enough arms, and the common people will have trust in you'. If you have to give any up, give up the food and the arms...' when there is no trust the common people will have nothing to stand on.' (The Analects of Confucius)*

*The public discourse has underscored the call for the urgent need to recognize and address the trust deficit between governments, institutions and the people (UN 2014:15)*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is about the concept of public trust in government and it attempts to identify, if not disentangle, the many possible causes of low citizen trust in government. The paper has as a purpose to stimulate discussion in the context of countries moving from the millennium to the sustainable development goals from 2016.

Low public trust in governments matters; a minimum level of trust is necessary for governments to carry out their basic functions. According to the OECD, relying on Fukuyama (1995):

*'Trust in government has been identified as one of the most important foundations upon which the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems are built. Trust is essential for social cohesion and well-being as it affects governments' ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion. Consequently, it is an efficient means of lowering transaction costs in any social, economic and political relationship' (2013:21)*

The next section explores definitions and dimensions of public trust that can be found in the relevant literature. Section 3 points to methodological and measurement issues which create a challenge to determine what has happened

to trust in governments over time or across countries at one point in time. After noting the ambiguity in the relevant literature on what causes low trust in governments, Section 4 deals first with causes that are external to governments - or over which they have little control - and then identifies possible causes which governments can influence. A key distinction made here is between *what* governments achieve, or are perceived to achieve, on the one hand, and, on the other, *how* they go about meeting citizen expectations. The concluding section provides some suggestions on how to build a 'trust culture', which will be necessary if governments are to have the confidence of their citizens so, together, they can seek to move from the millennium to the sustainable development goals. A theme of this paper is that the nature and causes of the trust deficit can be expected to vary to a significant degree with the country and cultural context.

## **2. What is 'Public Trust'?**

The concept of trust is: vague, slippery, subjective, mutual, multidimensional, multidisciplinary and complex. Its meaning and content can be different in different country and cultural contexts and can also change over time.

There are many definitions of trust but in the context of the trust of citizens in government, it is an assessment by them of a government's entitlement to enforce its decisions, laws and regulations as well as the probability that it will deliver on its obligations (World Bank 2010:52)

The CEPA paper on *Strengthening innovation, prioritization, informed decision-making and the integration of policy development processes for enhanced impact* (UN 2015a), defines public trust well, citing the example of what it means for public officials: 'Public trust is rooted in citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of government action, for example, in the ability of officials to manage public resources effectively and more generally to act in the public interest'. As it goes on to say, competence is a key but so is integrity, including keeping its promises so expectations are not out of line with what actually happens (UN 2015a:3).

In relation to trust in government, definitions variously draw attention to: the fostering of participatory relationships; perceptions of competence; meeting performance expectations; keeping promises; 'doing what is right'; and, maintaining a law-abiding society (e.g. Bannister and Connolly 2011:4; Cheema 2010:4; OECD 2013:21; Van de Walle et al 2003:337; World Bank 2010:51).

In the public sector context of engaging with citizens, trust is inferred to follow from inter-personal and inter-organisational behaviours where the expectations of each party are clear and confidence exists that what is committed to will be delivered. In this context, trusting relationships are both the lubricant and the glue - they facilitate the work of collaboration and then hold the collaboration together (Edwards 2012:161).

Several types or dimensions of trust have been put forward in the relevant literature so the question of trust in government is open to many possible

interpretations. Public trust can be an attitude towards an individual or group or towards an organization or institution. In terms of the individual, the focus is usually on trusting politicians and public servants. In terms of institutions, it can refer to different jurisdictional levels of government from national to local; to government in general or in terms of a specific agency; and to various arms of government such as the judiciary and police, parliament, political parties and the public service.

A distinction can be made between political and social trust. *Political trust* can refer to the macro or organisational level where citizens judge the system and its agents as responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny. Political trust can also be found at the micro level, where it is focused on individual political leaders. *Social trust* refers to citizens' confidence in each other as members of a community. Political and social trust are not mutually exclusive and there is debate about the causality of this relationship (or how they are interdependent) (Blind 2006: 3ff). Other forms of trust, not further explored here include: economic (focusing on efficiency); moral (emphasising ethics and morality); and technological (especially in relation to contributing to democratization) (Blind 2006:20-21; see also Cheema 2010:5).

### **3. Is public trust in government declining or is it just too low?**

Has there been an overall trend toward less trust by citizens in their governments? There is much literature in which it is assumed that this is the case, without necessarily providing any evidence. But what has actually happened to trust over time remains controversial. A major reason for this relates to definitional and measurement issues which make any results difficult to interpret and 'fraught with many challenges' (OECD 2013:22). The World Values Survey, the Eurobarometer, the World Gallup Poll, and the Edelman Trustbarometer all survey different countries as well as years, making comparisons difficult. The most recent Edelman Trustbarometer global survey data for 2014 identifies 'an evaporation of trust' in institutions and leaders worldwide and it finds trust at its lowest level since 2008. But this measure covers all institutions; what is more telling in this data base is the finding that national governments remain the least trusted sector globally behind business, NGOs and the media (2015:4).

There appears to be some uniformity across countries in the pattern of trust relationships in terms of the arms of government: political parties, parliaments, the armed forces and police, public service and the judiciary. On the whole political parties are the least trusted institutions with the army and police the most trusted and the judicial system, parliaments and the public service somewhere in between (World Bank 2010:208).

Measurement difficulties plague any surveys that might compare levels of trust at different jurisdictional levels within a country. However, there is some evidence, that the lower the level of government, the more it is trusted. Similarly the more contact citizens have with government officials, the higher the level of

trust (e.g. national politicians versus local health workers) (e.g. Zussman 2007; OECD 2013:34; World Bank 2010:208).

It seems fairly certain, at least in OECD countries, that there was a downward trend in trust in national governments over the last 3-4 decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - with one or two exceptions, notably Scandinavia (World Bank 2010:56). While some authors find more mixed results over time (e.g. Van de Walle et al 2008), it is fairly clear that between 2007-2012 confidence in OECD national governments declined.

After many caveats about survey methodologies, the OECD suggests that data for OECD countries, show levels of trust differ substantially across countries, with an average well below 50%: in 2012 less than half of citizens had confidence in their national government, ranging from 12% in Greece to almost 80% in Switzerland. Interestingly, Japan and Korea score below the OECD average while a lower income country, Turkey scores above (2013: 25).

For Latin America, The World Values Survey shows trust is lower overall than in the OECD and with a larger range of variation. On the other hand, using Gallup World Poll data, the OECD found that public confidence was higher in the BRIICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China and South Africa) in 2012 than in OECD countries with an average of 54% (OECD 2013:26). The data on Africa is scant; however, the Afrobarometer suggests low levels of trust in government, following a decline in trust in both parliaments and country leaders over the past decade for the countries it surveyed. The World Values Survey shows for Asian countries that there is much variation amongst them in the levels of trust in governments.; China and Vietnam appear to have higher levels of trust in government than is found in Japan and South Korea (Popovski 2010).

In sum, what can be said is that, regardless of the paucity of data and an ongoing debate about the trend in trust in government, the available evidence points strongly to a less than desirable proportion of the population expressing trust in governments. Everything considered, it is plausible to talk about a concerning 'trust deficit' in relation to government. The fact that across countries, even within one region, there can be relatively large variations in terms of public trust, sparks a a real policy interest in the causes of those differences.

'Whether or not trust in government is in long term decline as some believe, or merely fluctuates, as others have argued, the desire to increase trust in government remains a continuing feature of the political landscape' (Bannister and Connolly 2011:9).

#### **4. What are the possible causes of the 'public trust deficit'?**

There is much uncertainty in the relevant literature about what causes low levels of trust in governments. Theoretical explanations abound but, as noted, methodological and measurement difficulties make the collection of empirical evidence problematic. Even when plausible causes of low levels of trust are identified, there remains the problem of determining the relative strength or

importance of the different factors in different contexts; how they might inter-relate and, indeed, whether they are causal or simply correlative with lack of trust in government.

A useful distinction can be made between, on the one hand, factors that are external to governments and beyond their control and, on the other, factors more under government influence. A related distinction is between external events that affect levels of public trust in the shorter versus the longer term. For example, the global financial crisis, the recent Malaysian air tragedies, the Ebola epidemic are external shocks which have had an adverse impact on public trust in the shorter term. The election of a new government can have an initial favourable effect, e.g. following the 2014 election in India trust rose by 30 percentage points (Edelman 2015:4).

Longer term trends that might affect public trust, again external to government actions, include cultural changes such as declines in deference to authority or in social capital (Van de Walle et al (2008: 8-9). Some authors see the longer term impact of globalization and related technological, political and economic changes as causing a change in state-society relations, including a rise in individualism which makes it harder for governments to meet each citizen's needs (Sullivan 2015; Heintzman 2007:2). Nonetheless, it is how governments respond to these changes that drives levels of trust, including a need for governments to reassess their functions and roles (Blind 2007:14).

Turning to the drivers that governments can more directly influence, the literature makes a policy-relevant distinction between factors that relate to a government's performance (or *what* it achieves) on the one hand, and those that relate more to *how* it goes about meeting citizens' needs on the other (Bannister and Connolly 2011:9; Cheema 2010; OECD 2013; World Bank 2010;).

For example, the World Bank makes the distinction between what a government does and how it does it by identifying two public management levers affecting public trust: *performance* and *accountability* (2010:203). The World Bank, like others, warns that isolating causal relationships must be undertaken with caution but suggests, that by 'adding up the empirics' the following story can be told (2010:203):

- (a) accountability matters more than performance for trust in OECD countries but in Latin America it is possible performance could have a bigger impact.
- (b) The contribution of performance to trust erodes over time (even if performance itself remains constant).
- (c) Improvement in performance in some services matters more than in others.
- (d) Performance expectations matter, with citizen expectations of performance tending to rise over time.
- (e) Trust benefits of both performance and accountability can be easily squandered.
- (f) Overstated rhetoric can discredit performance results (a cynical public will look skeptically at any improvements).

A difference in emphasis between *performance* drivers of low trust (the '*what*' government does question) and *accountability* (the '*how*' it does it) could depend on a country's development stage (as (a) above suggests). Cheema finds that in developing countries 'weak systems of processes of democratic governance, as well as inadequate access to services and economic opportunities, tend to erode trust in government' whereas 'in the developed countries.... citizens have greater access to information and higher levels of education and thus demand more transparency, (e.g. Zussman 2007; OECD 2013:34; World Bank 2010:208).

The OECD, in focusing on what governments can influence, says it is 'not only the *what* of public policies that matters, but also the *how*, the *for whom*, and the *with whom*.' Consequently, not only the final results, but the processes used to attain them are also important for both citizens and business' (2013:28). Zussman cites evidence to show that in Scandinavian countries where there has not been a decline in trust in government, this can be explained by 'mutual trust between citizens and their active participation in democracy and political and policy processes' (2007:24).

Related to this last point is the emphasis in the literature on the central role of *citizen expectations*: 'Citizen expectations are key to their trust in government' (OECD 2013:21) and their alignment with actual government performance (see (d) to (f) above). Citizen perceptions of government performance may have risen over time rather than the actual performance of governments declining, but as Van de Walle et al suggest, it is hard to get evidence of cause and effect here and hard to distinguish between 'perceptions of public sector performance' and 'trust in the public sector' (2008:6).

Several authors have explored the relationship between *trust and good governance*; these concepts are generally seen to be distinct but interrelated and complementary with trust being a pre-condition for as well as a central element and a result of good governance (Blind 2007; Cheema 2010; Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003). However there is a need to understand better the causal links between trust, good governance and the role of citizens – a relationship that is, as yet, not at all clear (Edwards 2012:162). It may well be that 'trust is at the heart of the relationship between citizens and government (Kelly et al 2005:17) but as Bourgon warns: 'Good governance and trust may be related but 'there is something else at play, something really fundamental that goes to the core of the issue of trust, and relationship of trust between citizens and government that we have not yet either fully understood or tackled adequately' (2007). Bourgon suggests it may have to do with changing citizen expectations and their involvement in policy processes.

Another related driver of trust is the *capacity of governments* to respond to citizen expectations. Cheema notes that many countries in Asia are showing signs of divergence between 'citizens' increased expectations for the role of the state and the functional capacities of governments' and that this divergence is directly responsible for the growing trust deficit or 'gap' (2010:3). Cheema argues that significant governance capacity development is needed alongside

reform processes to improve on accountability and transparency and to ensure the public sector is ready and able to be more collaborative with its governance partners (*ibid*).

Many other causes of low trust in governments can be found in the literature with varying degrees of emphasis. Rapid implementation of *new technologies* could be depressing trust and leading to ‘a profound’ concern about the pace of change’ (Edelman 2015). *Corruption* has also had its emphasis leading to the perception that it contributes to declining levels of trust (e.g. Blind 2007:11-12). The importance of *public sector reform* is also highlighted (e.g. Cheema 2010; Heintzman 2007; World Bank 2010). Other authors stress the rate of *economic growth* and/or *economic inequality*. Yet others emphasise the *quality of leadership* in the political and public service arenas (Blind 2007; OECD 2013; Popovski 2010): survey results show ‘the utmost importance of leadership in public governance and the need for a well-functioning political-administrative interface that supports the government’s vision, performance and integrity’ (OECD 2013:30).

There are, therefore, many different views about the relative importance of drivers of low trust in governments; views which inevitably reflect which countries and over what time period are in focus. To give but two examples: in Indonesia, moves to decentralization, democratization and public sector reform as well as anti-corruption measures all appear to have contributed to recent increases in public trust; in the Republic of Korea, tax reform was a government instrument that lead to a more general increase in trust in government (Popovski 2010). However, despite specific country or cultural factors, an increasing realisation by many governments is the importance for their credibility of not just performing well on policy but also on actively involving citizens in public policy decision processes if they are to foster trust. It is to this challenge we now turn.

## **5. How to foster a ‘trust culture’- what will it take?**

*Humankind has always been, and will always be in need of trust. Trust in each other. And trust in our leaders and the institutions of State – to do right by the publics they serve. But trust is not easy. It implies commitment. It rests on relationships’* (Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary General, 2009:5)

A trust culture ‘is where citizens feel that they have a more or less equal and potential chance of making a difference in the political decision-making’; one where ‘good governance comes in as the indispensable corollary of the trust culture.’ (Blind 2007:15-16).

We do know that there is a close relationship between citizen trust and good governance. And there seems to be a consensus that governments need to work on, not just *what* they do, or their performance, but also on *how* they do it if they are to be judged competent by their citizens. In that case then, a refocus by governments - in reality as well as in rhetoric - on attempting to achieve the

many well known components of good governance could be a worthwhile starting point: a focus on accountability, transparency, integrity, openness, efficiency, effectiveness and equity, as well as effective citizen participation.

What this paper has pointed out is that citizen trust is lower than governments would like and that there is, therefore, a need for them to confront their trust deficit and attempt to build up a trust culture with their citizens. Our organization, CEPA, over the last decade, has put considerable emphasis in its advice to the Economic and Social Council, on the way in which trust in government by citizens can be increased: through citizen engagement in decision making processes, improvement in public services, citizen centric approaches, stronger local government, public sector integrity, anti-corruption measures, a professional civil service, open government, accountability mechanisms and information for decision making. In all these areas there is a vital role for public administration and governance more broadly where increasingly governments need to interact with other actors in society to gain trust and gain results.

However, at this point in time, as this paper has shown, there is a frustrating lack of good methodology for measuring trust and trust deficits within and between nations. Equally frustrating is the lack of a sound analytical framework by which governments might guide themselves towards the actions that will best assist them to ameliorate their trust deficit problems.

What follows are some suggested actions for the next steps that the United Nations and member countries could take toward fostering a culture of trust in their governments.

(a) Confronting the measurement issues

There is an obvious need for countries to commit to measuring the trust of citizens in their government institutions and to generate their own data to help policy makers understand the attitudes and expectations of citizens. Yet, interestingly, at least in OECD countries, none of their national statistical offices were involved in measuring trust in their government (OECD 2013: 36). There is a potentially important role here for the United Nations, through the facilitation role of the Division for Public Administration and Management Development, (DPADM) to advise its member countries on what methodology and data methods could be used to cost-effectively measure citizen trust in government over time.

In terms of improving measurement across countries, the UN Economic and Social Council, Statistical Commission in its 46<sup>th</sup> session *Report of Cabo Verde on Governance, Peace and Security Statistics* proposes a Praia Group on Governance Statistics to address 'the conceptualization, methodology and instruments for producing such statistics with the aim to support the establishment of international recommendations on governance statistics' (2015b:10). It mentions as one of the dimensions of governance for measurement as 'citizen trust in government institutions' (*ibid*). The DPADM could establish a collaborative arrangement with such a group with a specific focus on what is



needed to make cross-country comparison of data on trust in governments meaningful.

#### (a) A Better Understanding of Citizen Expectations

There is need for governments to go beyond measurement, as essential as that is, to dialogue with their citizens to better understand citizen expectations. Despite the lack of an agreed analytical framework to explain the causes of the trust deficit in a particular country context, one factor stands out on which governments can act to start to build a culture of trust: to keep as close as possible to citizens in designing, developing and implementing policies and programs that affect them. This will be particularly important in attempts to achieve progress on the SDGs.

Fostering a culture of trust will require governments to consider their programs and policies, not just in terms of the results they might produce, but more directly as a means by which to build quality relationships with citizens. This would commonly entail a transformative change in government relationships: 'A government which is organized around relationships, and acting with others rather than just doing things to or for them, starts to take on a very different character' (Mulgan 2010:2). The general idea here is that of a '*relational state*' and, hence, the concept of '*relational trust*.' (Muir and Parker 2014; Mulgan 2012; Blind 2007:14). It would mean giving more feedback, co-designing services, experimenting and innovating in the context of collaboration (Mulgan 2012). A role for the UN here, through the DPADM, could be to create a knowledge exchange platform and to broker contacts among governments, institutions and expert networks - including peer learning mechanisms - across member governments.

Finally, what does fostering a trust culture mean for public servants? It will require public service leaders to emphasise quite different skills to those normally considered necessary for management and delivery tasks. If quality relationships with citizens are the focus, this will mean more attention to qualities such as: empathy, an ability to see things from the point of view of others, strong communication and listening skills, and skills in being able to organize coalitions for change. It will mean public servants who pay at least as much attention to managing and being accountable for their relationships with citizens as to their accountability for performance results.

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