

THE TRUST DEFICIT – concepts and causes of low public trust in governments

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 The Road to Dignity 2014:15)

1. Introduction

Today I will cover the concept of public trust in government and possible causes of low citizen trust.

A key theme is the importance of distinguishing between *what* governments achieve, and, *how* they go about meeting citizen expectations.

2. What is ‘Public Trust’?

The concept of trust is: vague, slippery, multidimensional and complex.

In the context of the trust of citizens in government, essentially 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). 61).

Several types of public trust can be identified. It can be an attitude towards an individual, where the focus is usually on politicians and public servants. Or it can be in terms of institutions where it can refer to different levels of government from national to local; to government in general, or in terms of a specific agency; and to various arms of government. As Paul has indicated, we can distinguish between political, social and economic trust.

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

Many authors assume but mostly without evidence, that there has been an overall trend toward less trust by citizens in their governments. What has actually happened to trust over time is somewhat uncertain mainly because of methodological issues - which makes any results difficult to interpret.

What we do know is summarized in my paper. Essentially, what can be said is that, regardless of the lack of good data, there is a less than desirable proportion of the population expressing trust in most world 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 real policy interest in the causes of those differences.

4. What are the possible causes of the ‘public trust deficit’?

Unfortunately for policy makers, there is much uncertainty about what causes low levels of public trust. There are many theoretical explanations but, even if methodological difficulties are overcome, analysis is difficult because of the problems of determining the relative importance of different factors in different contexts and how they might inter-relate.

A useful distinction can be made between factors beyond a government's control and those more under their influence. For example, the global financial crisis and the recent Malaysian air tragedies are short term external shocks which may have had an adverse impact on public trust.

Longer term external factors might also affect public trust such as declines in deference to authority or the impact of globalization.

Two public trust levers that the government can influence are levels of performance and accountability to citizens. We can therefore make 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.

The World Bank suggests, that 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.

Several authors give a central role to citizen expectations and their alignment with actual government performance, as does the World Bank. (see (d) to (f) above). Citizen perceptions of government performance may have changed over time rather than the actual performance of governments declining.

Several authors have also 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 in and a result of good governance.

Another related driver of trust is the actual capacity of governments to respond to citizen expectations.

Many other causes of low trust in governments can be found in the literature with varying degrees of emphasis. Rapid implementation of *new technologies* can lead to ‘a profound’ concern about the pace of change’. *Corruption* has also had its emphasis on declining levels of public trust. The importance of *public sector reform* is also highlighted. Other authors emphasise the rate of *economic growth* and/or *income inequality*. Yet others the quality of *leadership* in the political and public service arenas.

There are, therefore, many different views about the relative importance of drivers of low trust in governments; views which reflect which countries are in focus and over what time period. However, despite specific country or cultural factors, an increasing realisation by many governments of 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.

5. How to foster a ‘trust culture’– what will it take?

Despite uncertainties about the extent of the trust deficit and its main causes, some next steps or actions can be suggested for the United Nations and member countries towards confronting their trust deficit and attempting to build up a trust culture with their citizens.

An obvious first step is for country leaders to commit to measuring the trust of citizens in their government and to generate their own data to help policy makers understand attitudes and expectations of citizens. There is a potentially important role here for the UN through the facilitation of the DPADM, to advise members on methodology and data methods to cost-effectively measure citizen trust in government over time. e.g. through collaborating with the Praia Group on Governance Statistics.

At the same time, there is need for governments to dialogue with their citizens more effectively to better understand citizen expectations: 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 build quality relationships with citizens. As Geoff Mulgan of the UK puts it, there is a need for a ‘*relational state*’ to bring about ‘*relational trust*.’ A role for the UN here, through DPADM, could be to create a knowledge exchange platform and to broker contacts among governments, institutions and expert networks - including peer learning mechanisms – on how governments could best relate to citizens and to build up a culture of public trust.

I end with a statement from the Secretary-general:

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)