

14th session of CEPA: Contribution to the “Call for Inputs”

Contributor: AAPA

Subject: Building an Intelligent State: a 2015 Agenda for Public Administration and Public Service Reform

1. Introduction and Backdrop

A watershed of sorts, the year 2015 will mark a turning point. As Member States convene for the General Assembly, new Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will loom large on the global agenda. Nations approach this watershed with keen anticipation but also certain doubts arising from the outcomes of a less than stellar performance during the earlier years of this 21st century.

A world-wide group of scholars assembled under the aegis of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS) explored this complex issue in great detail. In a timely publication (Kim and Argyriades, 2015), the Group focused its attention on the advances and the outcomes of the global war on Poverty. It came to the conclusion that the results were mixed. To be precise, without the impressive gains in merely a handful of countries – preeminently China and India – no progress would have been recorded for the world as a whole. More importantly, however, some limited successes in poverty alleviation brought to surface and revealed the wider ramifications of this multi-faceted issue in ways that call into question the assumptions and the narratives that had prevailed thus far.

While there can be no doubt that an initial drive to limit *absolute poverty* has borne fruit overall, this drive has left untouched – or barely touched – vast swaths of the world’s population, in Africa more especially. In several other countries, it has accentuated or brought into sharp relief the presence of *relative poverty* and many of its derivatives which have been on the rise, unaffected by any progress on the “war on poverty” front.

2. Poverty and its Derivatives

The *derivatives* in question could be summed up as follows:

- Surge of a *counter-culture* disparaging the poor and programmes set in motion, on their behalf;
- The rise of *inequality*, with vast amounts of wealth in very limited segments – barely 10 per cent – of the population, morphing into concentrations of great political power, weighing on the political process and influencing its outcomes in ways adversely affecting our democratic governance, potentially undermining its very foundations;
- The rise and perpetuation of *privilege* and *exclusion*: power and wealth are fast becoming hereditary in nature, with privilege embedded into the social structure. With education limited to those that can afford it, access and opportunity are limited to a few – the rest are marginalized;
- *Marginalization* of large segments of the poor, frequently women and children, as well as minority groups and immigrant populations, who lead a precarious existence, either in urban slums or remote rural districts. Increasingly, they are subject to exploitation and are denied a voice in democratic processes;
- *Inequity*, *corruption* and the *abuse of power* have also been on the rise, very largely as a result of the distance and indifference of dominant power -- holders, whose principal concerns are mostly self-regarding.

3. The bogey of “Big Government” and its effects on Governance

The recent publication to which brief mention was made, explored these perilous trends, whose surge is not accidental. Although, in many cases, sharply accentuated by a lingering Recession, they are primarily traceable to a model of “good governance” – the market model of governance – which sought to minimize government regulation, direction and control. Insisting that the role of government be limited to defense, domestic security and the administration of justice, opponents of “big government” – von Hayek, Milton Friedman, von Mises et al. – forcefully advocated the “hollowing out” of the State. They thus sought to reverse two hundred years of progress towards a more

inclusive and equitable pattern of democratic governance. It is this very pattern which underpinned the growth of the Administrative State, Public Administration and public service professionalism, as well as a proactive democratic civil society, in several parts of the world.

The market model of governance and the New Public Management (NPM), which triumphed in the eighties and nineties of last century and still is strong in places, “hollowed out” administration and the broad public sector of key component elements, namely:

- The idea of *service*
- The concept of *solidarity*,
- The concept of *general interest*;
- The concept of the citizen as principal *stakeholder* in the processes of governance; and
- The concept of *public goods*.

In the market model of governance and the New Public Management, the citizen became a “customer” or “client”, empowered to make choices, where choices were available – not to the poor, of course – but totally bereft of economic rights or of needs-based entitlements. In spite of much lip service to legality, transparency and accountability, proponents of this model viewed “the rule of law more like an element of the traditional structures of governance that must be minimized as ... they might interfere with ... efficiency and effectiveness ... in economic terms” (IIAS 2002:33).

4. NPM and the Market Model of Governance

Public Administration was cut off from its moorings in law, political science, psychology, sociology and ethics. In fact, it was reduced to simply applied economics. Renamed (New) Public Management, it emphasized the quest of the 3Es (economy, efficiency and effectiveness). With even the notion of “public” hollowed out of practical meaning, NPM advocated the quest of the 3Es in private sector ways. Efficiency and effectiveness were assiduously pursued by means of:

- Privatization;
- Outsourcing and offloading;
- Devolution and downsizing.

While these did not, invariably, result in better service or even lower costs, the downsides of such practices mostly took the form of corruption, as well as cost overruns and the abuse of power. These found a fertile ground in the new ways of management where proper monitoring, supervision and control left much to be desired; where personnel in charge of sub-contracted services had not been duly trained or properly acculturated in the discipline and ethos of the public service. Some of the worst examples in these regards involved paid mercenaries to whom were confided activities, which ought to be assigned to uniformed personnel.

The point we wish to make is not that sub-contracting, devolution and outsourcing are inherently undesirable but that they should be subject to very strict controls in order to safeguard important quality standards, legality, morality, the public or general interest and the *rule of law*. These, as well as the virtue and value of public administration have been the principal victims of the New Public Management and its drive to “hollow out” Administration of its professional core (De Vries and Kim 2014).

5. We Need an Intelligent Administrative State

Success in implementing the new, post-2015 MDGs is largely predicated on rebuilding public service, making it more efficient and service-oriented but also more aware of its pivotal role in a *Developmental Administrative State*. Somehow, we need to recapture the *mission* and the *ethos* of a proactive State, which actively promotes a business-friendly environment for private sector growth, but also helps safeguard the integrity and vitality of *public space* and an active public sector which truly is indispensable for *democratic governance*. Without a public sector and public service active in socio-economic development and the provision of services to all in need of these services, the government is limited in ways that hollow it out and take away the *substance* of democratic governance.

Democratic governance needs an active and dynamic public administration. This, in turn, requires a highly-skilled and competent professional public service. How to rebuild a Service, properly trained for the tasks of a re-energized public sector for 21st century governance, represents a top priority for post-crisis reconstruction, as well as MDG for the decade to come. The Crisis, which befell so many parts of the world and which still menaces others, was largely the result of a decline in the ethos that underpins the State, makes for a strong community and represents the core of public service values.

How to define this ethos, identify these values, delineate the skills and competencies needed for a strong public service should be the focus of a focused group consisting of practitioners and scholars from several cognate fields, as well as concerned citizens. To build an *Intelligent State*, we need to begin by revisiting our field and our Profession. It is a time to rediscover the merits of the State and Public Administration, revalue public service and do what it takes to build a truly competent and people-oriented public service profession.

References

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