

Rethinking the Current Model of Operation for the Public Sector after COVID-19

Geert Bouckaert¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on societies around the world, but this major health emergency is just one of a series of global crises that have seriously undermined progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships elaborated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The world's societies and the challenges they face are becoming increasingly complex, and an obvious question is whether the current model of operation for the public sector is fit for future purposes. As part of this analysis, it is fair to ask whether the public sector has handled the recent crises effectively, as a review of actions taken can provide an indication of existing competencies. A related question refers to how the world can prepare for future crises, even though it is known that preventing a crisis is better than having to resolve one. It is (hopefully) a shared belief that achieving most or all of the SDGs can help prevent future crises—or at least increase the capacities of societies and the resilience of institutions so that they can better navigate any crisis that may occur.

The recent global crises have had a mixed impact on public sector operations. During the pandemic, the core functions of public institutions—including service delivery, lawmaking and policymaking—were negatively affected in a number of ways. However, this was also a period of promising advances, as managing the pandemic brought about innovations in administrative management and stakeholder engagement, increased transparency and accountability, and a growing awareness of the need for new systems and approaches.²

Public sector systems and institutions differ in terms of their legal framework, their historical development, and the cultural traditions on which they are based. A certain level of variability is expected; however, there are agreed-upon international standards—including the United Nations principles of effective governance for sustainable development—that provide a strong framework and solid benchmarks for good public administration, management and governance.³ Having an objective point of reference makes it possible to assess what works and what does not work under which conditions so that Governments can learn from one another's experiences. A review of effective COVID-19 responses highlights the importance of three key objectives:

- Responding rapidly to crises;
- Managing crises effectively;

- Establishing fit-for-purpose systems to prepare for future systemic shocks.

While most Governments now have a good deal of experience with crisis response and management and have integrated and institutionalized successful innovations in public sector operations, relatively few have experience with future crisis planning. As illustrated by recent crises, systemic shocks require robust public sector responses since these shocks destabilize entire societies and States and can even affect other countries and have global repercussions. One of the major lessons learned from recent crises is that it is vital to prepare for what may be referred to as “turbulence governance”⁴ by setting up systems capable of containing and handling systemic shocks.

Rapid crisis response is essential

Risk and impact assessments indicate that rapid response is essential for reducing negative impacts. Experience with recent crises shows that few public sectors can list a fast reaction time as one of their key competencies.⁵ In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, many developed countries demonstrated a lack of readiness—even with risk assessments, national modelling and scenarios, and roadmaps based on previous disasters.⁶ Some of the countries in Asia that had previously dealt with SARS were a step ahead in some respects as they could institutionalize some of their earlier response strategies, particularly with regard to monitoring, testing and tracing.

Evidence to this point suggests that the speed with which Governments react to a major disaster and make decisions to move forward with significant interventions depends on the following:⁷

- Rapid recognition of crisis status, a strong understanding of its implications, and acknowledgement of its urgency among relevant decision makers;
- The conviction that crisis policy measures are available and appropriate;
- The status of the decision-making architecture (actors and their relationships).

Certain other variables can also affect the speed of response, including the degree of centralization or decentralization, the extent of fragmentation or coordination, whether the governance culture is characterized by tradition or adaptability,

whether there is an openness to learning and a willingness to experiment and innovate, and where the public sector stands in terms of crucial capacity.

In her 150-country comparative study on crisis response times, Marlene Jugl observes that having a dedicated ministry tasked with crisis response can have “a substantial accelerating effect of several days on crisis response”.⁸ She cites evidence indicating that countries with a separate health ministry, for example, are able to respond more rapidly to health crises. When future crises hit and there is no distinct ministry or agency capable of fast monitoring and response, reaction times may be slower.

Horizontal fragmentation and specialization can have positive or negative implications for response time, depending on the level of coordination and prioritization. For example, specialization can be an advantage if it is linked to the type of crisis occurring, though efforts are sometimes concentrated in one area at the expense of other, related policy domains (with health being prioritized over economics and education, for example). Vertical fragmentation and decentralization can inhibit fast response, though decentralization (depending on the degree of autonomy) can also allow some regions to act more quickly.

Governments may learn from their own or others’ past experiences with similar or different types of crises. In the case of COVID-19, it seems that “intra-crisis cross-border learning was more significant than inter-crisis learning from own experience with past epidemics”.

There are some important lessons that can be learned from past experience. One of the main takeaways here is that having a dedicated crisis-related agency can speed up crisis response. Since crises take many forms and can have a serious impact on specific sectors, it would be wise for Governments to create a flexible matrix-type tool to set up permanent specialized task forces for different types of possible crises such as cyber collapse, extreme weather events and pandemics.⁹

Managing and containing “classical” crises

The design of regulatory systems governing health and other crises varies across countries.¹⁰ When the pandemic hit, many of those with traditional crisis management systems in place were initially resistant to change; however, innovative solutions were needed to address the unique challenges associated with this unprecedented crisis. There emerged a greater willingness to explore and experiment with new ideas and to introduce changes in the administrative and managerial culture within the public sector; thinking outside the box and creative problem-solving were often encouraged. Ad hoc solutions that proved successful need to be formally integrated and made part of standard operating procedures in crisis management systems.

Steps should be taken to institutionalize innovations relating to digital readiness, adaptability, simplified procurement, co-creation and co-production, citizen engagement and participation, staff mobility, and communication.¹¹

Digital readiness improved during the pandemic, as evidenced by the increased use and relative normalization of, for example, virtual meetings, electronic signatures and digital identification, paperless decision flows, and online health-care provision (telemedicine). However, the digital divide became more apparent in key areas, including education (online teaching and learning), health-care access, and mobility (the transportation of people and goods). Digital privacy also became a major issue, as a key component of the pandemic response involved accessing and sharing personal health data. There were concerns that database connections used for contact tracing could be used for other purposes as well. In some countries, special legislation was adopted to protect digital security and privacy.

Logistical speed and efficiency became particularly important during the pandemic. Governments were able to simplify procurement processes without compromising tendering procedures. Governments invoked force majeure to introduce changes intended to streamline operations. Systems were created to ensure the delivery of critical goods and services, and administrative processes—including those governing tenders and public procurement—were adapted to improve speed and flexibility within the public sector.

Co-creation, co-production, engagement and participation were assigned greater priority during the pandemic. The lockdowns and other restrictions on public movement and contact disrupted social interactions—including those between the public sector and the users of public services. Many countries and their institutions acted quickly to establish participatory processes in a number of sectors, including health, education and mobility.

Staff mobility within the public sector improved significantly during the pandemic. Under the traditional system, personnel assignments and movements tended to be sclerotic and to occur within silos. However, when gaps needed to be filled to ensure effective governance and business continuity, new opportunities opened up for staff reallocation and reassignment (driven by both institutional exigencies and individual volunteerism).

The lessons learned with regard to adjusting traditional practices may be summarized as follows: Governments should establish a problem-solving culture that supports and facilitates innovation, and flexible but transparent procedures should be adopted for the creative allocation of human resources, for maintaining a tendering system that allows public institutions to make best use of all available capacity in the market, and for actively promoting different productive partnerships between national

and local governments, non-governmental organizations and private sector actors to strengthen service delivery.

Preparing public sectors for future global and systemic crises

Classical bureaucracies need to introduce systemic changes not only for crisis management but also for the implementation of “turbulence governance” for crisis preparedness. Growing public awareness that the State and the public sector were not only part of the solution but were actually best situated and qualified to take the lead in addressing crisis-related challenges went a long way towards restoring the legitimacy of State authority. To maintain the trust of the public and its belief in the dedication and competence of government authorities and institutions, the public sector will need to consolidate innovations into a fit-for-future-purpose governance system that can handle systemic shocks and turbulence while also maintaining effective day-to-day service delivery. The three reforms suggested below can support the creation and maintenance of such a system.

Shift from sequential thinking (normal-crisis-normal-crisis-normal governance) to simultaneous thinking (combining normal service delivery with sustained crisis governance).

Governments should take steps to modify their public sector systems and operations so that they are flexibly able to combine routine service delivery with key elements of crisis governance. This will require some innovation around the allocation of personnel, project structuring, horizontal budgeting, and the creation of peer learning opportunities both within and outside institutions, sectors and countries. Public administrations should prepare themselves to engage in more complex decision-making based on improved access to different and more granular data.

Implement the United Nations principles of effective governance for sustainable development¹² in order to strengthen and preserve public trust.

National and subnational governments that are invested in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG 16) will have the tools they need to achieve the other SDGs and handle major crises.

The United Nations has set out 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development that are aligned with the objectives of SDG 16 (and all other SDGs). There is strong emphasis on enhancing public trust in government by focusing on responsibility, accountability, effectiveness and inclusion—four key concepts highlighted in SDG 16. Trust in public institutions and belief in their legitimacy are needed to implement the necessary societal and institutional changes.¹³

The Committee of Experts on Public Administration has produced a variety of strategy guidance notes that provide numerous concrete examples and cases illustrating front-line best practices.¹⁴ The United Nations recognizes noteworthy achievement through its annual Public Sector Award. The 10 winners for 2022—Thailand, the Philippines, Ukraine, Brazil, India, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Panama and Ireland—offer a look at creative best practices that integrate the principles of effective governance for sustainable development to ensure that public service provision is inclusive and equitable and that public sector institutions are effective and responsive.¹⁵

Practise whole-of-government strategies within whole-of-society approaches

Within public administrations, horizontal and vertical concertation, coordination, cooperation and integration generally intensify when there is a crisis to be managed and become even stronger when there is a systemic shock that needs to be addressed. However, individual practical experiences do not necessarily offer definitive solutions, as the structural features of government systems vary widely, and what works in one setting might not work in another. Across the board, however, horizontal interactions need to be consolidated within a whole-of-society approach, while a whole-of-government approach should inform vertical interactions. Institutionalizing stakeholder engagement for the pursuit of a shared objective is crucial.¹⁶ Special attention should be given to strengthening and supporting local governments because of their proximity to citizens. A whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach will require more diversity and flexibility to promote collaborative governance within the public sector and between the public sector, the private sector and social networks.¹⁷

Endnotes

- 1 Geert Bouckaert is a professor at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute.
- 2 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021* (Sales No. E.21.II.H.1), available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Research/World-Public-Sector-Reports>.
- 3 United Nations, Economic and Social Council, “Principles of effective governance for sustainable development”, *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2018, Supplement No. 24 (E/2018/44-E/C.16/2018/8)*, para. 31, available at https://publicadministration.un.org/portals/1/images/cepa/principles_of_effective_governance_english.pdf.
- 4 Christopher Ansell, Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, “The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems”, *Public Management Review*, vol. 23, No. 7 (2020), pp. 949-960, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1820272>.
- 5 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021*; for example, box 4.4 mentions the lack of government crisis preparedness in France and the United Kingdom.
- 6 Sabine Kuhlmann and others, “Opportunity management of the COVID-19 pandemic: testing the crisis from a global perspective”, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 87, No. 3 (2021), pp. 497-517, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852321992102>.
- 7 Marlene Jugl, “Administrative characteristics and timing of governments’ crisis responses: a global study of early reactions to COVID-19”, *Public Administration*, vol. 1, No. 4 (2022), available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12889>.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 10 Geert Bouckaert and others, “European coronationalism? A hot spot governing a pandemic crisis”, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 80, No. 5 (2020), pp. 765-773, available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13242>.
- 11 Paul Joyce, Fabienne Maron and Purshottama Sivanarain Reddy, eds., *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic* (Brussels, The International Institute of Administrative Sciences, December 2020), available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346945657_Good_Public_Governance_in_A_Global_Pandemic.
- 12 United Nations, Economic and Social Council, “Principles of effective governance for sustainable development”, para. 31.
- 13 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021*, p. 146.
- 14 United Nations, Committee of Experts on Public Administration, “CEPA strategy guidance notes”, available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Intergovernmental-Support/Committee-of-Experts-on-Public-Administration/Governance-principles/Addressing-common-governance-challenges/CEPA-strategy-guidance-notes>.
- 15 The list of 2022 UNPSA winners and a description of their initiatives are available on the United Nations Public Service Innovation Hub website at <https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database/Winners/2022-winners>. More information on the Public Service Innovation Awards is available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database>.
- 16 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *Working Together: Integration, Institutions and the Sustainable Development Goals—World Public Sector Report 2018* (Sales No. E.18.II.H.1), p. 7.
- 17 Xabier Barandiaran, Maria-José Canel and Geert Bouckaert, eds., *Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province* (Leuven, Belgium, Leuven University Press, 2023), available at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/61606>.