

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, the advances of western capitalist societies that we saw during the past decades in several areas of development were astonishing. Evidence of this is everything that has happened in terms of speed and scale in technology, communications and scientific research, just to mention some advances. However, the problems and challenges that these very same societies face in the present and the near future also have an unprecedented scale.

One concern shared by all of us who work in the field of administration and public policy is that governments, and their public administrations, have not transformed with the necessary speed and depth to face these difficult challenges. The considerations I share with you in this document all point in the same direction: how to improve the performance of governments through their public administrations in order to face the present problems and future challenges, and to offer better solutions to the increasingly large, complex and diverse demands made by citizens.

All of these considerations come from one basic premise: public administration must be understood, used and systematically improved as a key resource for governance. The central proposal for this promise to be fulfilled is that public administration becomes the best resource for governance. This would effectively translate into the handling of the economic and social aspects of the development of societies through policies developed in the realm of the public sector or through those that privilege the participation of one or more sectors of society (L. F. Aguilar, 2017).

Under both assumptions, public administration is a mechanism that is very difficult to do without, together, in an indissoluble way, with the active,

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reactive –and even negative– role of public servants. In a considerable amount of specialized literature, this role seems to be limited in public policy to the stage of implementation, which we know to be crucial –as we have confirmed through empirical studies. But once governance is linked to public administration in a virtuous manner, the participation of public servants also appears at the design –and even evaluation – stage of policies.

Public administration is key for governance in at least two different ways: first, because it favors good quality public policies; i.e., in order for public policies to be of good quality, they must be based on the agreement that they are not created in a vacuum, but taking contextual aspects into account as well as the existing historical and institutional arrangements in which public administration operates. Second, citizens receive collective benefits as the result of legitimate administrative processes over which they can demand accountability. (R. Ackerman, 2016, 1).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

The virtuous circle of public administration-governance has faced several obstacles derived from the accent placed on what some authors know as micro-administration, the axis of which can be linked to the emergence of the ideas contained under the conceptual umbrella of the New Public Management (NPM). This means that the performance improvement of different administrations was based on managerial practices and the central notions of the ways in which markets behave, mainly, in competition. The main concern was to comply with the derivative precepts of management and the markets, instead of focusing the institutional and social energy in verifying that the decisions and adopted policies were correctly designed and implemented for achieving objectives of profound social reach.

The thoughtless taking of entrepreneurial ideas and capabilities could be seen in public administrations in several ways: a very important one was that public servants began losing their capabilities as advisors and for influencing the decisions made by elected politicians. This counsel was given to groups of advisors and external –even foreign– consultancy firms, which wasn't a negative decision by itself. However, this displacement did have negative effects and even brought some collateral damages like having stopped the consolidation of professionalization schemes, like careers, or having favored the loss of institutional memory since, among other things, the “new” public servants didn't acknowledge the history and the ways in which their agencies operated.

But even worse than that was the fact of not having considered the political conditions in which these reforms could be carried out, which translated into a simplistic “constant”: “reforming” politicians vs. “opposing” bureaucrats to those reforms or the other way around. This situation clearly had a negative impact and didn’t favor the virtuous circle of turning public administration into governance’s best material.

Finally, while “open” recruitment favored more democratic practices, to carry it out under the sole criterion of measuring a candidate’s technical capabilities, without considering values such as an “ethical” commitment to service, could have resulted in a sort of purging of those values, running the risk of politicizing the performance of bureaucratic bodies even more so and opening a new door to corruption practices, since the interests of these new managers could be aligned with change proposals different from the ones being driven by the politician in turn.

WHY DID THE NPM HAVE A RELATIVE SUCCESS?

The NPM was attractive because it established a clear idea of performance in an austerity framework that included less expending and doing more from a very clear market standpoint, which was to increase the productivity of the public sectors and the performance of public servants. This sort of remedy could have offered good results if well executed. However, it soon found limits in terms of contextual differences and in the economic and institutional development level. (C. Hood, 1991).

Another problem is that there hasn’t been an integration of indicators and measurements that not only refer results (“outputs”). For these measurements to work as references to “improve” institutional –and even individual– performance, they should go through the cause and effect relation that has been absent in so many evaluating initiatives of recent years and which would work to thoroughly assess the social impact of the services being delivered.

In spite of all the aforementioned, it is important to assert that the NPM’s ideas and proposals didn’t come from a conceptual and professional vacuum. These ideas were taken from management practices, like managing through goals or total quality, and offered a window of intellectual oxygen for one of the central ideas of the eighties and nineties: to make the government operate better with lesser costs. However, the “stubborn” reality shows that, although there have been improvements, there is still so much to be achieved in terms of better governments for societies to count on and public administrations whose explicit commitment continues to be the provision of benefits with the largest possible social reach.

WHY IS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION KEY FOR GOVERNANCE?

Without a doubt, the conditions in which public administrations currently operate are notably different from what was taking place in past decades, among other reasons, because of what several authors have identified as the dissolution of the State's power.

This has shown repercussions in at least three aspects that characterize current societies: first, the transnationalization of problems, decisions and policies; second, the appearance of national and supranational "autonomous" agencies, which results in a considerable increase of units foreign to traditional administrative structures; and, third, the rise of a growing and renewed need for coordination, but also collaboration. Hence, the growing importance of organized civil society, but also the growing complains of institutions such as Congresses regarding what they identify as an uncontrolled interference of these organizations in the design –and even the implementation– of laws and/or public policies. The enormous virtue of governance is that it favors the necessary balance for these "interferences" to be consistent and to create more solutions than problems. Because of all the aforementioned, it is evident that, in the last decades, public administration, as a field of studies and as a governability mechanism, lost ground before the rising and relative success of the NPM.

Public administration must become a dynamic resource, which means that its institutional solidity mustn't be confused with rigidity and the impossibility to introduce new resources and processes useful to adapt to these fast-changing times. That is why internal aspects should be considered, without losing perspective of what is happening in external environments. Problems such as security, environmental instability, environmental sustainability, natural and energetic resources, among others, require very solid institutional designs, but also with international exchanges that allow to add efforts and to find solutions for problems that went from being national to become problems of a different magnitude that transcended borders.

WHAT DOES GOVERNANCE OFFER?

Without a doubt, governance is an ambiguous term that, in many instances, has been used to give content to several situations far from its true essence. The accent for trying to understand it shouldn't be placed on the managerial and technical capabilities of public administrations, but on their intervention for generating decision-making processes with the largest possible degree of consensus.

Therefore, proposals of homogeneous nature that didn't acknowledge different specificities or unequal administrative developments favored the fact that the NPM's contributions couldn't be accepted in several countries. One of the greatest challenges for governance was to try a virtuous balance between those NPM instruments that were adequate for public administrations and improving those that, guided by a solid political and economic support, could be aligned with the explicit purpose of improving all of which is done from the government.

Thus, governance would mean the conduction –not the operation– by the State/government and the public administration of the economic and social development. This conduction would materialize through policies in which –at different levels and through different proposals– other social actors would get involved in their making as well as in their implementation, placing the nature of what's public at its center, therefore, distancing itself from the dominating criterion of efficiency and moving its center towards fairness, integrity and accountability. This theoretical/practical quandary: management/NPM or Public Administration/Governance for facing future challenges in the task of governing represents important differences in diagnoses and proposals.

AS A CONCLUSION

To think in terms of governance is not to deny the importance of economic, technical and scientific knowledge, but to look for the right balance between administration and participation beyond the ballot boxes for producing policies. Also, when looking for solutions in specific areas of economic and social activities, it is important to consider –as it was stated before– not only the internal contexts, but the also the external ones in complete awareness that these two are correlated.

Instead of considering governance as a new paradigm, one should view it as a method for public action to surpass the adverse results that have taken governments and their public administrations to a very difficult dilemma for generating effective solutions with wide social impact.

The idea of governance *per se* perhaps is not as clear as its theoretical defense defines it, but it is decisive for clearing the ways to improve institutional developments, as long as interventions at a micro level can be contextualized and adjusted in terms of previous experiences and innovative proposals as well. At the same time, large-scale changes must be suggested to push for improvements –which doesn't mean structural ruptures that destroy rather than build a base for further development. (M. Grindle, 2016, 4-7).

Thus, Governance implies the production or co-production of policies by the State, or other non-state actors, in all the different levels in which governments are organized since there is a present and growing need for collaboration in solving problems that, as it was mentioned before, even surpass national borders to become transnational problems combined with urgent local problems. This represents a challenge of a higher magnitude and depth.

Firstly, this means to know which capabilities and abilities are required of public servants to face this challenge. This would have to be centered on problem solutions rather than if they do or do not belong to a Weberian model or to the NPM. Secondly, to know –with a great degree of accuracy– what margin of innovation can be developed without falling into excesses that favor discretion or illegality. This innovation would then represent the generation, acceptance and implementation of new ideas that could have a positive impact in processes, products and services. Thus, a cycle of coming and going is presented: “renewed” administrative capabilities that facilitate the new governance, while innovation in governance helps the generation of better administrative capabilities. Thirdly, to generate mechanisms for assessing results, centering this axis on the causal relation of need/problem vs. result/impact. This must be done considering what can be achieved to avoid disappointments within bureaucracies as well as among citizens, acknowledging in a realistic fashion what the political/administrative systems are or aren’t capable of doing. (*The Governance Report*, 2014,18).

Lastly, governance must be understood as the government’s “rescue” mechanism. It offers a broad potential for better solutions to growing and serious social problems by finding a better balance between the offer of mechanisms that favor efficiency as the result of better capabilities for analysis, service, regulations and coordination/collaboration, as well as the incorporation of different values/attributes such as equality and integrity. Thus, public servants and non-governmental actors would have a larger margin for generating broad consensus that would allow participation and the necessary “political” legitimacy of those public actions, always looking for the greater benefit for society.

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