

WHAT'S NEXT? THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT POST-COVID-19

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The post-COVID-19 crisis presents a difficult forecast, which translates into colossal tasks and challenges that governments and their public administrations will have to face. This paper intends to provide some thoughts in relation to these challenges due to this health crisis that the entire world is suffering. This moment generates uncertainty and it is possible that governments will not have time and perhaps resources to plan actions for the immediate future.

COVID-19

The arrival of COVID-19 seems to resemble a pendulum: even though we move forward, the health crisis met by all countries and societies seems to return violently, or perhaps it's a boomerang that hits all as a result of a huge and cumulative abandonment of our environmental and social environments, and also an indiscriminate use of non-renewable resources. Jorge Hinze offers the following data:

After rising steadily for decades, global carbon dioxide emissions fell 6.4%, or 2.3 billion tons, in 2020 due to COVID-19 that suffocated economic and

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social activities around the world, (...) and is expected not to last once the virus is under control...¹

Also the insistence or stupidity of refusing to act with a long-term vision, and make a determined effort to substitute those non-renewable resources.

Likewise, the meager investments in different public areas, and not considering or giving the necessary priority to an urgent investment on the research of life threatening infections or other health concerns. There is a clear disparity between military investment vs research regarding infectious diseases and health.²

To formulate an indication as to how governments will react and face new challenges when the pandemic is overcome, we must assess its impacts and tally the damages. Currently we can only foresee an uncertain and discouraging future due to a complex economic scenario (i.e. rising unemployment, insecurity in different spheres among others). The worst scenario being that societies will be left in an unprecedented vulnerable situation –presumably not temporary, but permanent–, by having to face the deficiencies and insufficiencies of our health services, provided by most public administrations worldwide.

THE CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS

In the midst of an economic crisis of enormous magnitude and depth, it is difficult to conceive how public services can be strengthened, at least in Latin American countries, that have a significant structural weakness. Socially and culturally societies will have to assimilate that the situation in the immediate future will not only register changes, but will differ completely. These changes will upset our known stability and certainties: our globalized world, countries, cities, workplaces, homes, all will be different. New references will appear, and people will not be the same, thus, there will be fresh social behaviors that were not known prior to the pandemic.

Social development will be marked by uncertainty that will be reflected in many of the fields of our social activity such as in our economy and labor. Repercussions will be felt on access to services, notably health and social security systems. Research will be constrained due to a lack of investment. Life, in numerous daily activities (financial, business transactions, online work

¹ Jorge Hinze, “La crisis Covid y las emisiones de carbono”, Nature (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00090-3>).

² Watch Bill Gates’ Youtube, “The next outbreak? We are not ready”.

and education, etc) will shift from face-to-face encounters to a virtual-online platform.

This scenario will undoubtedly affect governments and the way public administrations work. Their structures and bureaucracies will have to go from reactive to proactive. This means that bureaucracies must abandon traditional forms and develop empathy regarding the population's needs. Public officials who honor their participation in public administrations with their work, will have to amplify their service commitment and vocation and develop actions in a new direction, other than the one they have worked for decades. Technological resources will become a valuable input and ally to bring governments closer to their citizens. However, we must keep in mind that the so-called digital divide is still a critical liability that has not yet been reduced or overcome.

Administrations and their officials must make an effort to generate innovative and creative responses that internalize the needs of others, and seek different ways not only to face problems, but to offer solutions that go far beyond the sole purpose of being effective. Different values must be included and position them in a way that the responses are more equitable and empathetic.

This new form of action by public administrations requires sidestepping any attempt to simulate as in the past. Social programs, for example, must be designed and implemented to meet their objectives and not only seek to alleviate needs or worse, expand clienteles to favor campaigns in an electoral process.

We must leave behind the logics that foster inter-bureaucratic struggles and conflicts that have been the cause of abandoning modernizing initiatives or obvious failures. It is necessary to find harmony in the performance of elected officials with respect to appointed career public officers. Their discord has not helped to strengthen the governments' and their administrations performance, but has been the cause of strong resistance and deviations regarding improvement commitments.

CONCLUSION

The immediate future will register changes and will be different. The governments' and their administrations will be profoundly modified towards their citizens. Likewise, societies will have to stop their selfish behaviors and become more empathetic, supportive and generous, cultural. These latter traits perhaps do not characterize a vast number of our current societies; but that will have to be developed gradually, to effectively contribute to the construction of new relationships between governments their public administrations and citizens.