

What will public sector reform efforts look like in the future and how can do we get there?

Views from participants at the UNDP-EIP workshop on 'Public Service Excellence and the Post-2015 Agenda'

Excellent public services should be right at the heart of international development. Despite our significant investment in strengthening our public sectors, still many questions remain. In particular: Are we getting our public sector reforms right? What makes a public sector or service reform effective? Is public service excellence possible? Do we have the right metrics to measure performance of the public sector and services?

A three-day workshop organised by the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) and the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) on 17-19 November 2014 attempted to answer some of these questions.

Over 80 delegates from 33 countries, including top government officials, international experts, academics and development practitioners gathered in Singapore for the workshop on 'Public Service Excellence and the Post-2015 Agenda'.

Participants considered the future shape of public service excellence, raising important and difficult questions such as: Are public sector reforms failing or is it the understanding of public sector reform that has failed? And, are general public sector reforms aligned to specific public service provision?

The need for responsive and accountable institutions in development is no longer questioned, as UNDP's Patrick Keuleers observed at the workshop. However, questions remain about what exactly is meant by 'institutional capacity', which institutions to focus on, and what type of capacity, as well as how to measure progress.

We must know which institutions will be the targets of goal 16 of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals, which aims to: "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

We must also ask ourselves why so much public service reform has ended in failure so far? And, could the public sector reform industry itself be reformed? Former World Bank head of governance Nick Manning sees the key as being to recognize that institutions don't exist as single actors. We must remember one can't teach or train an institution. The best alternative, according to Manning, is to figure out how to help the people working in these institutions to do their work better.

Questions also arise not only about the ‘what’ (is included in public sector reform efforts) but also the ‘how’ (to make these sustainable for the future). Alan Whaites, representing the EIP co-Secretariat explained the genesis and work of the Effective Institutions Platform and how EIP had come to adopt ‘peer learning’ as an alternative approach that provides a safe space for debating failures, innovations and successes in public sector reform. It is expected that future learning alliances will be based on peer-to-peer exchanges drawing on demand from government officials and other stakeholders.

Scaling up successes in development may not be about replicating outcomes, but about replicating starting points, as Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of Cognitive Edge Dave Snowden suggests. Rather than the traditional approach of asking “What can we do?”, he calls for a “narrative approach” to assessing development goals that asks: “Why do it?” This is a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to development, where results are seen as narratives that match development goals, rather than numerical targets to be attained.

As a part of the workshop, the delegates went on ‘learning journeys’ showcasing Singapore’s public service exemplars. These included visits to the headquarters of the Housing Development Board (HDB), the Urban Regeneration Authority (URA) and the Public Utilities Board’s (PUB) Marina Barrage reservoir facility.

The next day’s proceedings required participants to leapfrog to the year 2030 and assume the proposed sustainable development goal on building peaceful and inclusive societies¹ (i.e. SDG Goal 16) has been achieved. How would public services be delivered then? Are current public sector reform approaches preparing us for more inclusive, responsive and predictable public service delivery?

A foresight-led approach to public services can transform them by, for instance, linking long-term planning to scenario building, in order to anticipate future events in order to better control them.

However, the very concepts of “public sector” and “public services” are still loaded and evolving’ concepts. A starting point for a new generation of reforms could be the unpacking of these terms to better understand them. Without doing this, we risk losing sight of the main objective of the intervention.

Participants at the Singapore workshop agreed that public services should be at the heart of the post-2015 development agenda. But they also strongly indicated support to public service delivery had to be done differently, or better than it has been done before. This implies moving from normative assumptions of responsiveness, transparency and accountability to forward-looking assumptions of inclusiveness, equality and predictability.

In order to be future-prepared and flexible, the new generation of public sector reforms might need to be unorthodox in terms of their design and also in the metrics used to assess performance management. A quote that sums up a key lesson learnt was that “when a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure”. Some participants also called for more ‘endogenous instruments’ to measure governance and public service delivery.

The main outcome from the workshop was agreement to use the Effective Institutions Platform, to be jointly supported by GCPSE and OECD, as a way of fostering better reform. This will be achieved through the design and development of learning alliances on public sector reforms. Other actions will include promoting better citizen feedback through exciting new technology to better understand the motivation of public officials to deliver the SDGs.

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