

Stagility: Ensuring stability and agility in institutions, leadership and public service workforce to build resilient and responsive governance

Policy paper prepared by Alketa Peci, vice-chair of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA)

Stagility: Ensuring stability and agility in institutions, leadership and public service workforce to build resilient and responsive governance

Governments worldwide are facing an era of multiple crises that are threatening social wellbeing, economic prosperity and security, with more profound impacts for the most vulnerable. As the world attempts to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions and political instability are exposing deep inequalities and fragilities in human rights demanding a new approach to a whole society approach. The revision of the implementation of SDGs at this critical development juncture demands a focus on the public service workforce.

Public servants are the key drivers of change in the implementation of administrative reform strategies aimed at the modernization of government, delivery of the 17 SDGs and transformation of resilient and responsive institutions for a greener and more inclusive world. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Sustainable Development Goal 16 underlines the need for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions that are people-centered, guided by values of professionalism, competence, and high ethical standards, and able to skilfully navigate current and potential future economic, social, and environmental crises.

Public servants sit at the heart of ensuring effective response to crises and to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. As the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, whether as a frontline worker, or as strategizer or policy formulator, public servants need to: (i) ensure continuity of public services; (ii) provide service before self: adopting courage and humanness in practice; adopt (iii) quick thinking, creativity and innovation; (iv) information and awareness creation; (v) strategic thinking and planning amidst chaos; (vi) sustain resilience and build a better effective and more responsive public service; (vii) build and enhance State legitimacy, government credibility and people's trust; (viii) assume resource allocation and distributive accountability; and (ix) practice collaborative and networked leadership.¹

These diverse and challenging roles for public servants call for a *stagile*² approach in public administration: fostering agile stability in institutions, leadership and public service workforce to build resilient and responsive governance. *Stagility* refers to the simultaneous capacity of the public sector to offer agile change, but also stability, delivering both at the same time. These capacities are necessary to ensure the continuity of public services, while planning among chaos and being quick thinker, creative and innovating; to assume resource allocation and distributive accountability, while building a better effective and responsive public service.

¹ UN. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The role of Public Service and public servants during the Covid-19 pandemic. Policy Brief No 79.

² Kattel, R., Drechsler, W., & Karo, E. (2019). Innovation bureaucracies: How agile stability creates the entrepreneurial state. *UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, Working Paper Series (IIPP WP 2019-12)*. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/wp2019-12>.

Kattel, R., Drechsler, W., & Karo, E. (2022). *How to make an entrepreneurial state: why innovation needs bureaucracy*. Yale University Press.

To ensure *stability*, the public sector needs to build both, capacities (institutional, legal and policy frameworks oriented by public values) and capabilities (skills to implement these policies). As Katter, Dreschler and Karo (2019; 2022) highlight, what matters for capacity and capabilities are not individual organizations or individuals, but organizational configurations and how they evolve.

Organizational configurations comprise different combination of institutional capacities, leadership, and public service workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how diverse configurations of institutional capacities and human resources capabilities were critical for a successful pandemic response. Vaccination plans advanced even when political leadership sidelined the role of policy expertise in tackling the pandemic, due to mission-oriented robust institutions in place (capacities) and expertise-based decision making correctly allocated (skills)³. In places as Republic of Korea and Rwanda, public servants leveraged innovative solutions, such as drive-thru testing sites or use of robots for temperature taking to minimize contact between patients and health workers, despite restricted budgets, leveraging on legal malleability to innovate.

Other good practices of the agile stability exist beyond the pandemic. In South Korea, a strong innovation bureaucracy was developed while the Economic Planning Board became, next to presidential ones, the central coordinating body of economic and financial policies. Between 1967 and 1969, the Science and Technology Agency was set-up as a rather flexibly organized umbrella department of the Prime Minister's Office, having freedom to hire top-level staff outside normal rules of hiring, to plan and coordinate overall science and technology strategies.⁴ The hybrid adaptive Chinese bureaucracy has evolved over time counting on strengths resulting from a relative elite unity, such as a long-term orientation at national level, but also autonomy and flexibility to change course if demanded, evolving forms of merit-based governance, and learning capacities, which co-exist with weaknesses as short-termism and flawed discipline over business⁵. These processes indicate a policy learning curve, which is shaped by inconsistencies and variation, but integrated by a broader mission-oriented strategy.

The agile stability demands a different political leadership, able to navigate volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity, while keeping track of SDGs implementation. Long-term plans and national development strategies should also help to create the context for the workforce of the future, especially in developing countries. The growth mindset as defined by Carol Dweck⁶ could be useful to consider in this regard.

³ Peci, A., González, C. I., & Dussauge-Laguna, M. I. (2023). Presidential policy narratives and the (mis) use of scientific expertise: Covid-19 policy responses in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. *Policy Studies*, 44(1), 68-89.

⁴ Kattel, R., Drechsler, W., & Karo, E. (2019). Innovation bureaucracies: How agile stability creates the entrepreneurial state. *UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, Working Paper Series (IIPP WP 2019-12)*. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/wp2019-12>.

⁵ Gomes, A. D. P., & ten Brink, T. (2023). A Chinese Bureaucracy for Innovation-Driven Development?. *Elements in the Politics of Development*.

⁶ Dweck, C., *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Updated edition) (2019)

The tenuous relationship of political leadership with the public service workforce shapes any democratic context. Yet, times has come for political leadership to recognize that there is a core of civil service practices that is paramount to configurations that better government performance. Among such practices, meritocratic appointments/recruitment, tenure protection, impartiality, and professionalism are strongly associated with higher government performance and lower corruption⁷.

Nevertheless, other obsolete civil service practices resist, despite evidence that hamper performance and agility. The meritocratic recruitment sometime is locally translated in rigid and overly specialized civil service entrance exams, that are not able to capture public service ethos of the incoming public servants. In addition, is well known that mobility of civil servants within administrations is relevant to build capacity, innovation and enhance resilience of public workforce. Bureaucratic hackers challenge obsolete practices and create conditions for innovation from within the borders of the civil service. However, evidence within the OECD countries indicates that mobility of civil servants was mandatory or expected in only 3 out of 35 OECD countries, recommended or encouraged in 11 countries, and possible but not encouraged in 21 countries. New organizational configurations exploring the potential of agile stability need built on positive practices and overcome such barriers.

Huge challenges persist ahead, as public servants navigate the world of poly-crises⁸, with communication and information technologies demanding growing attention. While these digitalization technologies create and enable rapid and timely responses to different pressures and demand, they also expose public leadership and workforce to highly mediatized and disrupting events that disrupt stability and divert their attention for core policy issues.

Indeed, digitalization offers both, opportunities, and challenges, to democratic institutions and to the public sector as a whole. On one hand, digitalization can create opportunity to expand the direct participation of citizens, particularly vulnerable citizens, in public institutions and activities, contributing to enhance trust in government institutions. The supply of online services for vulnerable groups, including the poor, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the youth, immigrants and women, for example, has increased since 2020 in all regions.⁹ The digital age, including the much criticized social media, has been pivotal in promoting universal human rights across the globe, despite misinformation, disinformation and direct censorship in some countries.¹⁰ Digitalization can also create pivotal opportunities to the repertoire of online and remote jobs, to bridge different public organization silos, creating the infrastructure for the agile stability to take place.

⁷ Oliveira, E., Abner, G., Lee, S., Suzuki, K., Hur, H., & Perry, J. L. (2023). What does the evidence tell us about merit principles and government performance?. *Public Administration*.

⁸ Zeitlin, J., Nicoli, F. & Laffan, B. (2019) Introduction: the European Union beyond the poly-crisis? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(7), 963–976.

⁹ United Nations, *E-Government survey 2022* (2022). Available at: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2022>

¹⁰ OECD, *Government at a Glance* (2021). Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/government-at-a-glance-22214399.htm>

There is a need to develop the fundamental skills demanded in the digital era, within the public service workforce. Training programmes may blend online, classroom and hybrid instruction or rely on virtual trainings, using online training platforms, gamification, and a variety of digital training assessment tools and case-based learning. The following competencies attempt to define the new baseline skills all public sector leaders should have in the digital age¹¹:

- Values the experience of service users; can collaborate with specialists to understand user needs and will design, test, and adopt effective solutions accordingly
- Can anticipate and mitigate privacy, security and ethical risks that are inherent to governing in a digital era
- Understands the need to blend traditional public service skills with modern, digital skills, and can effectively work within and lead multidisciplinary teams
- Understands importance of iteration and rapid feedback loops and can create a working environment of continuous learning and improved outcomes
- Can identify opportunities to improve government operations, service delivery or policy making, and can overcome structural and institutional obstacles to change
- Can use a range of techniques and tools to make the government more open, collaborative, and accountable
- Understands how to use data to inform decisions, design and run services, and create public value inside and outside government
- Understands current and evolving opportunities of digital technologies and can assess how they can be used to improve public outcomes

On the other hand, digitalization also presents several challenges. There are examples of relying on digital means to control and impose surveillance to citizen behaviour. There is evidence of undue influence in policymaking both domestically and from abroad, and new technologies provide an opportunity to amplify the spread of mis- and disinformation. Social media played a role in the “Arab spring” popular uprising, but also become a locus for human rights disrespect¹². Risks of violation of protection of privacy, reduced transparency regarding data usage and illegitimate use of data are considerable, as is the increases of the digital literacy gap.

¹¹ See for more details: The Digital Era Competencies:
<https://www.teachingpublicservice.digital/en/competencies>

¹² Warofka, A (2018). An independent assessment of the human rights impact of Facebook in Myanmar. Facebook Newsroom, November, 5. <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/11/myanmar-hria/>

The digital literacy gap also shapes public sector's workforce, exposing intergenerational conflicts and demanding new approaches to training and upskilling of the workforce. Digitalization will most probably alter the size, shape, and workforce composition of public sector entities. In the long run, these developments challenge social cohesion, deliberative democratic and sound policy making processes, as much as they contribute to the resilience of democracies by making hidden conflicts transparent and public.¹³

Similarly, trust emerges as a challenge, as multiple crises can reduce democratic resilience by undermining trust in public institutions. Even within OECD countries, surveys indicate high or moderately high trust in government in just 41% of the people. Although people tend to view public institutions as reliable and are broadly satisfied with public service (more than 60% of respondents), few people perceive governments as responsive to their needs and wants and are skeptical about government improving a poorly performing service or implementing an innovative idea (38%)¹⁴. OECD identifies five drivers of trust in government: (1) responsiveness in delivering public services; (2) reliability in anticipating new needs and safeguarding people; (3) integrity; (4) openness; and (5) fairness. Countries display great variations along these dimensions, indicating that they need to build resilience through concrete policy actions.

There is a need to strengthen public servants' public communication strategies and skills¹⁵. Innovative practices¹⁶ emerging in some countries, like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, reinforced the crucial role for an inclusive communication to combat the virus, skillfully bridging ethically and linguistically diverse groups or digital literacy gaps between generations and urban and rural populations. Behavioural insights were used to inform communication content which was then effective in encouraging compliance with public health policies. These insights also helped communicators account for the cognitive factors shaping how people navigate complex information ecosystems. Public servants involved in communication, whose role should be legitimized by expertise and professionalism, need to play an active role in public communication strategies aiming to inform and inspire people to take action towards more democratic, sustainable, resilient, and greener societies.

Last, but not least, SDG achievement and innovation demands bridging control and audit bodies (SAIs)' recommendations with policy implementation resources and workforce. SAIs have the legitimacy and the necessary human and financial resources to advance in audit criteria for Agenda 2023. The collaboration of DESA/DPIDG and the Federal Court of Accounts of Brazil (TCU) has resulted

¹³ Renn, O. et al., *The opportunities and risks of digitalisation for sustainable development: a systemic perspective*. (2021), pp. 23-28. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350494384_The_opportunities_and_risks_of_digitalisation_for_sustainable_development_a_systemic_perspective

¹⁴ OECD (2023). *Government at a glance*.

¹⁵ CEPA Expert paper: Reinventing public sector workforce training and institutional learning towards changing mindsets (E/C.16/2023/5)

¹⁶ OECD. *Public communication trends after COVID-19: Innovative practices across the OECD and in four Southeast Asian countries*. OECD Working Papers on Public Governance. Nr. 55. (2022) Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/digital/public-communication-trends-after-covid-19-cb4de393-en.htm>

Enhancing Innovation to Building Resilient and Responsive Public Administration to Support the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - An SDGs Mid-Term Review

on a global initiative to develop a methodology to conduct rapid assessments of national responses to climate change on three dimensions: governance, financing and policies. The “Climate Scanner¹⁷” has used CEPA’s work on climate action as a source of information and referred to CEPA’s governance principles as one among several international standards for audit criteria. Explicit assessment of the public sector workforce and political leadership need to become an important building block of this overall assessment of governance for climate change.

¹⁷ More information can be found at <https://sites.tcu.gov.br/climatescanner/ingles.html>.