

CHAPTER 13

Strengthening the Role of Schools of Public Administration in Asia and the Pacific to Promote Mindsets for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

Schools and Institutes of Public Administration play a key role not only in disseminating clear and accurate information on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but, perhaps more importantly, as advocates for the attainment of the SDGs by 2030.

Schools of public administration play a major role in developing capacities of public servants and eventually helping to change their mindsets for SDGs implementation.

Therefore, it is critical that these schools and institutes of public administration develop strategies and mechanisms to collectively move in that direction.

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The crucial role of the School and Institutes of Public Administration to Change Mindsets and Achieve the SDGs*

Schools and Institutes of Public Administration (PA) play a crucial role in molding – and changing, when necessary – attitudes and mindsets to enable the achievement of humanity's shared aspirations, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ultimately, the SDGs embody the targets that articulate collective human desires and long-term vision for a prosperous future.

Even before conscious efforts to change mindsets for a certain goal have become mainstream in the discourse of public administration, there have been references to changing mindsets as a strategy for reform. For instance, during the development administration phase of public administration in the fifties, references to behavioral change among bureaucrats for good administration have been made for meaningful development for the wider society. Emphasis was given to the need of creating a strong sense of commitment through public servants' training. Within this context, as time went on, continuous training and capacity-building efforts were emphasized as strategies to change the mindsets of public servants. Schools and institutes of public administration were set up as part of the core strategy for nation-building.

Aside from schools and institutes, gentle pushes to promote new desired behaviour, called nudges, are highly relevant in changing mindsets. Changes should be made in a gradual approach in any polity. This is desirable because it is easy and inexpensive to accomplish (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). A key aspect of

a behavioral modification strategy is influencing a person's actions predictably without restricting their options or largely changing financial incentives. Investments and experiments in psychologically-informed nudges should be made and a central database can help document successes and failures to facilitate knowledge creation and sharing for behavioral change (Benartzi et al., 2017).

Hence, it is imperative that we root out limiting beliefs and those that settle for mediocrity by changing mindsets, institutions and its incentive structure. After all, our environment shapes our thoughts. Thoughts become our language. Then, language becomes experience. Experiences mold values. Values shape institutions and the world we live in.

Over the years, public administration education was intended to augment the civil service programs and initiatives that would not only help develop suitable policies, procedures, and institutions but also facilitate the implementation of needed reforms (Brillantes and Fernandez, 2013; Glassie, 2018). Changing public servants' mindset and values in the crusade against corruption is central. Hence, there are institutes of public administration that offer capacity development courses and ethics-related educational programs to assist the efforts of the civil service. These efforts are geared towards the creation and institutionalization of a more responsive and proactive public administration.

2

Global Perspectives to Changing Mindsets in the Public Sector

Taking off from the experience of the [Asian Association for Public Administration \(AAPA\)](#), networking among the schools is a core strategy. In Asia and the Pacific today, there are several public administration networks at the country, institutional, and individual levels. These include the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA), the Asian Group of Public Administration (AGPA) - a network of public administration institutions that is an affiliate of the International Institutes of Public Administration (IAPA), and the Asian Association of Public Administration (AAPA). The AAPA is made up of individual members, including academics and practitioners (“pracademics”) in the field of public administration¹⁷⁰. There are interlocking memberships and representatives in these various public administration networks in the region. Thus, it is not uncommon to see the same representatives in differing capacities in the various international conferences and meetings of these associations.

The UN DESA workshop entitled “Mobilizing and Equipping Public Servants to Realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” held in 2019 demonstrated that schools, institutes, and regional networks of public administration could indeed be powerful change agents in developing capacities and influencing the mindsets of public servants, and, equally importantly, in equipping and mobilizing them for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. Based on the experience of the AAPA and its partner institutions, public administration schools can equip public servants with the capacities to implement the SDGs and help them develop SDG-oriented mindsets and even make them advocates of the SDGs, being core concerns of the Theory and Practice (“praxis”) of public administration. A few recommendations include the following:

At the National Level:

1. Identification of a specific unit in the school of public administration that would serve as the focal point for research and training for the SDGs.
2. The SDG focal unit would be responsible for leading and coordinating the efforts of the institution’s various SDG-related efforts. This would include curriculum development, research, and documentation of good and best practices on the implementation of the SDGs, based on the country’s own experiences.
3. The various schools of public administration have as their natural partners students of public administration, professors of public administration from other institutions, and equally important, practitioners of public administration, i.e., public servants, including bureaucrats, local officials such as mayors and local legislators.

4. The various schools of public administration develop a national network where they come together and share their experiences in governance and public administration in general and the SDGs in particular.
5. Depending on the capacities of the schools of public administration and considering that all have varying levels of capacities, local institutes could be designated as SDG hubs for capacity development of public servants. As hubs, they would play a key role in further localizing the capacity building efforts for public servants.
6. It is important that in the above, the National Planning Agency – the partner institution responsible for the incorporation of the SDGs into the national plan – be a constant part of the process.
7. In developing local capacities of public servants and institutions, cross visits and “benchmarking” to agencies and local governments that have been successful in the SDG implementation can be incorporated in the capacity building strategies.
8. Knowledge sharing of national cases at the regional / international levels.
9. Public administration institutes and schools can act as SDG Hubs – critical thinker, researcher, knowledge creator, information disseminator, advocate, capacity builder.
10. Performance indicators of public servants and the various units at the national and local levels can be framed and aligned to the 17 SDGs.

At the Regional/ International Level:

11. Networking among the schools and institutes of public administration is imperative.
12. Embedding the networking efforts and aligning appropriate activities – whether they be research, international conferences, workshops, or exchange visits – to the 2030 Agenda.
13. Areas of knowledge sharing can include curriculum design and development, sharing of good and best practices, monitoring of implementation, and designing performance indicators.
14. Based on the experience of some members of AAPA, consortia arrangements have been established by its members; these include the conduct of long-term cooperation arrangements among the members on specific themes (e.g., leadership) with regular meetings among the members of the consortia.

3

Public Sector Reform Framework

This section discusses a Public Sector Reform (PSR) framework that AAPA has developed over the past decade (since 2008). The PSR framework underscore the various handles for reform which includes the imperative to change the mindsets and behavior of public servants (Figure 13.1).

Reform Institutions and Processes for PSR

Public administration has seen the imperative for structural and institutional reform with massive reorganization at the center of structural reforms. These have been variously referred to as “reinventing,” “reengineering,” “rationalizing” or “rightsizing.” Simply put, structures and processes need to be streamlined for improved public service delivery.

Administrative history has shown the limited success of such reorganization interventions. Challenges ranging from maldistribution of the bureaucracy, to perceived bloating, to graft and corruption and centralization, among others persist. Structural reforms are not sufficient.

Reform Mindsets and Behavior for PSR

Reforms to be successful must be accompanied by changes in behavior and values. Mindsets must be renewed. Rafael M. Alunan, a former Minister of Interior and Local Government in the Philippines called this the “mindshift.” Others call this a “paradigm shift.”

At the end of the day, reforming mindsets redound to a reorientation of the values of the people in the bureaucracy. Civil service commissions have launched programs to reorient the values, mindsets and behavior of public servants within the context of continuous capacity building.

Leadership Enables PSR

Leadership matters. This is a fundamental principle to bring about reform. This is true not only in the private sector but especially true in the public sector. This may also be variously referred to this also as “political will.”

Leaders¹⁷¹ play a key role to the successful implementation of reforms in the public sector.

Citizen Engagement Sustains PSR

The final handle for reform is citizens’ engagement¹⁷². Reforms, through well meaning, well designed and even sometimes even well implemented will not be sustainable unless the people are involved and own the process. Ownership is a fundamental principle of good governance. They have to be consulted – and involved – in the process of reform. Lao Tsu once said “A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

The context of reform implementation

Apart from the major reform, handles of reform (institutions and processes; mindsets, values, and behavior; leadership and citizen engagement) must be recognized. Reforms must be communicated to the people. The use of modern information technology in communicating the reforms to the people must be maximized. Various communication platforms, including social media in addition the traditional forms, must be utilized, and maximized. This will not only foster engagement of the citizens in the process, but will also inform them and enhance ownership.

Finally, the reform framework emphasizes the hackneyed principle of the need to “think global” yet “act local” hence “glocalization”. Reforms must not only be inward looking. They must be placed within the context of the regional and global framework. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for instance, a partnership among ASEAN neighbors has been built on the fundamental principles of “gotong royong” (mutual assistance and solidarity) and “*mushawarah*” (consensus building). However, ASEAN countries also must recognize the undercurrent of a constructive competition with each other. Hence, “coopetition” – cooperation and competition – is important in the regional context of the reform framework.

Figure 13.1: Public Sector Reform Framework



Source: Source: (Brillantes and Fernandez, 2010; Brillantes and Perante-Calina, 2018)

4

Conclusion and recommendations

Public sector reforms are never easy. It is difficult, but not impossible. Thus, administration schools play an important role in equipping public servants with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values. When reforms lead to strong institutions, their ranks are gradually influenced by their culture and process. To ensure strong institutions, it is necessary that public servants internalize, absorb and practice agreed upon formal values and rules. Hence, it is vital that there is a change in mindsets, an incorruptible, transformational leadership in place, strong citizen engagement to continuously build a high-quality, clean public administration until it becomes self-correcting and enforcing.

Endnotes

170. The AAPA has been granted UN Consultative Status by the UN Committee on Non-Government Organizations of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is also a partner of the UN Public Administration Network and has been invited to the meetings of the UN Committee of Experts of Public Administration (CEPA). Two of its former presidents have actually been members of the CEPA.
171. Leaders have been referred to as “duty bearers” by the UNDP.
172. The UNDP refers to them as the “claim holders.”