

CHAPTER 14

Europe and Central Asia – Sustainable Development Goals in European Public Administration Institutes: Mainstreaming or Decoupling?

The SDGs present a challenging and ambitious outcome-oriented framework for all countries, regardless of their level of development, which requires close collaboration across policy areas, levels of government, and internationally. Furthermore, the goals present a need to understand complex interactions and trade-offs among policy areas. This kind of complexity must be matched by the skills of civil servants, developed by institutions such as the members of the OECD's Network of Schools of Government (NSG). Mainstream Public Administration theories and practice offer an overarching understanding of the institutional, structural, and contextual components of this issue. However, what remains insufficiently addressed are questions about what capabilities, knowledge and attitudes are expected from civil servants to successfully engage in the attainment of the SDGs? The latter is crucial, as the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration noted in its 17th meeting (Risse, 2018): "Civil servants should not be left behind (...) since they are the core of governments' actions on the Goals".

The institutes of public administration are no strangers to this objective. In fact, they are instrumental in building public value by shaping the expertise of civil servants (i.e., competencies, awareness, and skills) (UN, 2018). Amid the 2030 Agenda, this chapter examines the overarching challenges institutes of public administration face in integrating the SDGs into their programs. More specifically, it focuses on the European Schools of Governments affiliated with the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS) Group (IIAS, International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA), and the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA) to add hindsight on the SDGs in European public administration curricula. Data is obtained through desk research and a questionnaire for top-level managers. The questions draw from the criteria indicated in the 10 Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA et al., 2015). Section 1 presents the theoretical streams for our research, while section 2 reviews the empirical findings on the training practices in European Public Administration. Finally, in section 3, we develop two arguments corresponding to the challenges and ways forward to integrate the SDGs into public administration.

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Mainstreaming and decoupling literature*

Meyer and Rowan (1977) offer a typology to answer our research question, how do European Institutes of Administration deal with the Sustainable Development Goals framework, by Decoupling and Mainstreaming? Organizations are surrounded by prescribed practices and procedures, so-called “institutional myths”, that are in this case the SDGs framework. In the decoupling line of research, compliance with institutional myths is assumed to positively impact organizational legitimacy and survival prospects, while negatively impacting organizations’ performance. In such cases, Meyer & Rowan (1977) argue, organizations, willing to secure legitimacy while maintaining performance, ceremonially incorporate institutional myths while leaving organizational life fundamentally unaffected.

The mainstreaming concept emerges from the Equal Treatment approach introduced by Rees’ (2002) research on gender policies. It focuses on the effective realization of institutional myths through

their “systemic incorporation [...] throughout all governmental institutions and policies” (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2011, p. 434). Scholten & Van Breugel (2018) argue that this approach has been extended to most ‘cross-cutting policy challenges’, including the contemporary debate on the SDGs.

When multiple channels consistently diffuse the same institutional myths to the organization, the shift from decoupling to mainstreaming can occur: it ceases to be a technical specialty and permeates the entire organization, which starts to use the discourse and diffuse it to the external world on its own (Scholten and Van Breugel, 2018). The literature on policy evaluation suggests a general bias of organizations for stability over change. This means that, in the absence of any evidence of mainstreaming, a given institutional setting is expected to remain unaffected, i.e.: the decoupling hypothesis should be preferred by default.

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Training practices in European public administration

This section provides an overview of the practices, trends, and models regarding training and development within European public administration. Such insight permits an understanding of types of training from a comparative perspective and facilitates critical assessment of existing opportunities for public service training. This overview does not aim to be exhaustive but to provide a helicopter view of the wide diversity of learning possibilities, training approaches and programs offered. The focus is set on five aspects: 1) models and systems of individual and organizational development; 2) training for specific target groups; 3) training for high potential civil servants; 4) leadership and top civil servant training; and 5) learning approaches.

Models and systems of individuals and organizational development

In general, it seems that models of training and development in European administrations are quite diverse. Roughly stated, they range from centralized competency frameworks with central training institutions to decentralized training policies with a large role for the private sector. Within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, when a central training institute (i.e. a school of government) is involved, three models can be discerned: 1) models with a central school of government; 2) models with cooperation between institutions across the government; and 3) models with a cooperation between public institutions and non-governmental stakeholders (OECD, 2017).

The way training institutes are organized is important as it might affect how training is provided and to whom it is offered. Based on the above models, three streams of action are highlighted: whether the approach is centralized, whether it is linked to a specified competency framework and whether the market plays a role in the provision of training. It goes without saying that different combinations might occur. Ireland, for instance, developed the 'Learning and Development Framework for the Civil Service 2011-14', which was assumed to be a period of change for the public sector overall (OECD, 2017). Another example of a framework where individual development is linked to organizational goals is the development circles in the Belgian federal administration (Op de Beeck & Hondelghem, 2010). A kind of comparative system can be found in Hungary where, via a mapping of competencies and skills, specific training programs have been developed (OECD, 2017). It is

the Hungarian National University of Public Service that has provided the training programs, and that has stimulated a learning culture within the public service.

In Croatia, it is a central body for the civil service training (the Civil Service Training Centre) that is responsible for public service training. This body operates autonomously, though it is accountable to the Minister of Public Administration (Meyer-Sahling, 2012). In Latvia, the training offered by the School of Public Administration was developed to fit the needs of the governmental agenda. In other words, by building a training system that is close to the policy agenda, the government ensures that civil servant learning is relevant to the context in which it operates. The training provided by the school focuses principally on competency development and is merely offered by practitioners (OECD, 2017).

Training and development for specific target groups

Next to the link between general competency models and training programs, it is important to note that throughout Europe certain public administrations develop training initiatives for very specific target groups such as public servants and top-level public managers. It is not surprising that training is tailored to the needs of certain groups of employees as different groups have different educational needs linked to their responsibilities and scope of action. However, what is interesting is that in those training programs a learning trajectory is often used as an HR-tool with other than strictly educational purposes, like recruitment or promotion. In other words, training is in some cases primarily used for competitive purposes between (future) civil servants and is in those cases not always linked to larger competency framework.

Italy has a relatively competitive system where government executives' skills are developed before official appointment (Angioli & Bianchi, 2015). This process has different periods for applicants (twelve months) and ministries departments (six months), and it is managed by the National School of Administration (SNA). According to Angioli and Bianchi (2015), the mission of SNA can be compared to the mission of the National School of Administration (École Nationale d'Administration -ENA) in France and the Federal Academy for Public Administration's (Bundesakademie für öffentliche Verwaltung) mission in Germany. In Ireland, the "Civil Service

Graduate Development Programme” was designed to support new recruits at the Administrative Officer and Junior Diplomat levels. A comparable system exists in Croatia where all new civil servants in managing positions below the level of the director are required to pass a certified course of three semesters (Meyer-Sahling, 2012). The programme was developed in collaboration with the Danish School of Public Administration where a similar approach is in place.

Training for high potential civil servants

The overall objective of this type of training programme is to provide career opportunities for those who are found to be talented to grow within the administration. Herewith the risk of drop-out of qualified personnel is also expected to be reduced. Kuperus & Rode’s (2016) research highlights the variety of programs offered to the group of civil servants that are identified as potential managers. In Italy, the National School of Administration (SNA) provides a 10-month internship for young managers and public officials preceded by a three-month intensive language course in the host country. In the Netherlands, there has been a system of training for young potentials for quite some time already (Op de Beeck & Hondeghem, 2010). The ministries select their young potentials for director-level positions in advance and provide them with the opportunity to enter the so-called Candidates Program, a 1.5 years development programme that includes access to a development centre, coaching and international orientation (Kuperus & Rode, 2016).

In Belgium, the “Public Management Programme” was established in 2001 to train young talents for two purposes: to increase their chances to take up managerial roles in their future career and to support the large reform project of the federal administration that had been launched in that period. The programme consisted of a series of lectures and internships. It was organized by the National School of Public Administration (Broucker, 2009). In Finland, it is the Ministry of Finance that organizes training for future leaders, though they already need to have a management position and are therefore not really considered as young potential. In general, the “new Future Leaders programme” aims to 1) strengthen professional management and strategic competencies, 2) develop value-base and common starting points among civil servants, and 3) to promote courageous leadership and sensitivity for the future (Kuperus & Rode, 2016).

In Estonia, the potential civil servants are centrally selected and are offered a talent management program: the Newton Leadership Offspring programme. The program has been targeted at mid-level managers and top specialists with the necessary skills and qualifications to work as top-level executives in the Estonian civil service. Recently the target group has been expanded to include the mid-level managers, regional managers and deputy director generals working in the agencies (Kuperus & Rode, 2016). In France, the Directorate General of Administration, and the Civil Service (DGAFFP) carries out a special training program for potential public servants focused on management and leadership development. In Hungary, training for talent pool members is organized ad

hoc and focuses on skills for a high performing civil service (Kuperus & Rode, 2016).

Leadership and top-level civil servant training

The importance of top-level civil servants has long been recognized by numerous countries and treated as a distinct cluster within the administration (Van Wart, Hondeghem & Schwella, 2014). Thus, it comes as no surprise that countries develop a wide variety of training and development practices. In some of these practices we can distinguish:

- The presence or absence of competency frameworks and the way they develop over time, as it is the case in the UK or in some of the countries described above. In Bulgaria, topics of training are usually tailored to the competencies' management, teamwork, and organizational skills (Kuperus and Rode, 2016).
- The central or decentralized position of a training institute within the administration. For instance, in Croatia, the training is centrally managed via a database of all training programs and participants.
- The level of private sector involvement in the training.
- The presence or absence of pre-entry training, such as the Mandatory Specialized Training Program for Romanian top-level civil servants. In Portugal, top-level managers are required to attend long-term training courses and refresher training in order to stay up to date with their competencies or competency profile, and
- The role of universities, such as the Copenhagen Business School or the Hungarian National University of Public Services, which collaborate with national administration, police, or military education.

Interesting is also that in some countries the training course for top civil servants is mandatory. For example, Croatia and Italy have a compulsory training system with the aim to ensure a certain level of expertise in civil service management.

Learning approaches

In general terms, the collection of learning methods has only grown over the years, and administrations are aware of that diversity. When scanning the existing literature, we see a whole range of learning approaches in Europe: classroom education, e-modules, interactive courses, informal learning trajectories, teamwork, peer learning, experience sharing and many others. On the one hand, there is a tendency to use the more traditional instruments first, which is not surprising, as those methods are common and ample experience exists in their use. On the other hand, some organizations try to diversify their methods. As the younger generation joins the administration, it is likely that more innovative methods will be adopted. However, it is also possible that public administrations need to develop their own expertise in modern learning methods. Of course, learning methods need to be instruments to achieve certain educational goals and not become a goal on their own.

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Challenges and ways forward

The European Union's impact on the attainment of the SDGs has faced a considerable challenge, namely strongly institutionalized fields. A myriad of multi-level governance arrangements complicates every goal and target (Litzo-Monnet, 2010), resulting in complex relations of labour division, incentive structures and interdependence between the public sector, the industry, NGOs, among others. Thus, our argument here is that such arrangements can derive from conflicting vested interests and strong bias towards 'inertia and conservatism'.

As one respondent institution of the survey on European Schools of Governments affiliated to IIAS state: "The implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires flexible organizations and decentralized [incentives] (...) for civil servants with the aim of aligning organizations with the SDGs" (INAP, 05 December 2019).

This phenomenon is very well-known in the public governance domain. It refers to the existence of organizational silos pursuing own objectives, insufficiently contributing to the overarching policy goal. Thus, restoring coherence in governmental actions has become an urgent priority.

In the European landscape there is still much action and enterprise needed for the attainment of the SDGs in public administration curricula.

Yet, Europe is going in the right direction: stakeholders commonly work in network settings to achieve mutual understanding, generate a shared agenda, and achieve overarching policy goals. Furthermore, government portfolios show breakthroughs in establishing workable transversal approaches. As we see in Box 14.1, intergovernmental initiatives and innovation in training programs are continuously sought to integrate governmental responsibilities and training options. Following the 'Decoupling and Mainstreaming' thinking and the empirical findings presented above, we develop two arguments reflecting the challenges of SDGs integration into public administration programmes in Europe. First, we argue that the SDGs encounter a less favourable context. Developed countries do not benefit from development assistance, and the SDGs framework is deprived of the financial incentive provided by aid

conditionality. Moreover, the SDGs framework being a non-binding policy agenda, the only steering mechanism remaining is networks. More specifically, the SDGs are supposed to be mainstreamed through 'governmentality': by the successive translation and reinterpretation of the SDGs framework, by overlapping networks operating at various levels, providing consistent isomorphic pressures (Miller & Rose, 1990).

Second, the collaborative governance approach is widespread in Western European countries, so-called 'soft power'. This type of governance has replaced traditional hierarchical schemes where the market incentives are insufficient to transform the nature of public service. Here we argue that the European Union countries rely on soft power strategies to generate policy-convergence among member states in matters related to integrating the SDGs into public administration curricula in the Schools of Government. This means that public administration institutes that have effective intergovernmental coordination mechanisms are likely to be at the forefront in successfully integrating the SDGs, driving change through the transformative processes of their training programs.

Box 14.1: Recent developments and outlook for Italy and Spain

European training actions vary among governmental agencies. In 2018 the Italian government launched a Training Department devoted to developing training plans on the SDGs and the attainment of the 2030 Agenda. In Spain, training services continue to accelerate, reflected in the strategic planning 2017-2020 of the National Institute of Public Administration. The latter emphasizes the need for a strong and secure institutional framework, with capabilities more in line with the new challenges that arise, that legitimizes public action and facilitates citizen confidence in public institutions.

Novel ways of doing

The National School of Public Administration (SNA) in Italy created a dedicated Unit (*Benessere Italia*) to support the Prime Minister in coordinating the government policies on well-being, sustainable development and integration of local needs. As a result, the 2017 Italian National Strategy for Sustainable Development is being updated and strengthened. In Spain in 2019, the training plans for public employees of the General State Administration have already included content related to the 2030 Agenda (e.g. open government, transparency, public ethics, gender equality). In November 2019, the National Institute of Public Administration (INAP) organized a module of the "Certified Public Manager" program in Madrid whose work theme will be "SDGs - Agenda for change". More recently, in 2020, the selective processes for access to the public service, managed by the INAP incorporate contents related to the 2030 Agenda.