



Innovation Brief

on International Development Services

Public Administration for Results

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The Problem

Governments and international development agencies frequently run into problems of insufficient capacity of the machinery of the state. Development ambitions are often diluted or even corrupted by weaknesses in a country's public administration. Indeed, an overburdened or misdirected administration may absorb huge resources without turning these into effective services to the public, while obstructing dynamic development of other sectors of society.

Common flaws in the design of international development support are its segmentation and contradictory impacts. While some projects may aim at improving aspects of public administration, other, usually much larger, interventions are designed on a sectoral and technical basis. Such interventions often assume that a competent administration is in place and ignore the impact they may have in this regard. This makes many interventions fail twice: they often fail to deliver on their own objectives, but they also, inadvertently, reduce the performance of the state at large.

There is no international consensus on what makes a public administration effective and efficient. But there are intelligent responses to frequent problems. A country may consider those responses, examine the experience of others, and adjust its system of public administration against goals, needs and constraints. International agencies may design and monitor their assistance against the background of evolving systems of public administration, instead of simply aiming for limited sectoral approaches that often thwart the performance of the state at large.

When designing, executing and monitoring interventions, systematic attention should be given to three principles that stand out from the international experience and that link public administration to achieving lasting results. These principles provide the basis for more specific guidelines to be applied across programmes and projects. They are:

1. **The state to focus on strategic roles**
2. **The state's structure to be dynamic,**
3. **The state to manage on the basis of results**

A. Focus on strategic roles for the state

1. Move the state away from operational roles

For any public administration to be able to look after its core tasks in the most efficient way, it has to dispense with roles and tasks for which it is not well equipped. This certainly applies to most operational roles, which require systems, skills and incentives that do not easily thrive within the usual public administration. That context does not encourage constant innovation, entrepreneurial initiative or responsive service delivery. The state, especially a weak one, should avoid taking on operational roles, and rather concentrate on a limited set of key responsibilities that cannot be delivered by non-State organisations.

2. Establish policy units at the Centre

Whatever the state's responsibilities may be, it is crucial to have well-informed policy making at the centre. The need is for a more thorough and dynamic understanding of issues in each sector, a higher level of professional competence, and greater familiarity with alternative policy options and international best practices. This requires a high

level of capability and a perspective far beyond the agency but including awareness of the private sector and civil society. In many countries, governments face the daunting task of establishing and updating the policies of many sectors. This requires professional skills, political space, and information systems and networks both within and outside of the state apparatus. The demand will often be for high quality analysis, strategic management and insightful monitoring, rather than detailed instructions, internal administration and political compliance.

3. Expand the mix of policy instruments

Governments can have more instruments to their disposal than legislation, regulation and financing. Other approaches are often more effective and efficient in realising ambitious goals. These include, among others, research, networking within and outside of the country, using targeted incentives, facilitation, sponsoring, public-private partnerships, training and monitoring. Any arm of Government must carefully choose the instruments best suited for realising its objectives, be able to judge the trade-offs of the various tools and fine-tune and continuously adjust its mix of instruments.



4. Separate politics, policies and management

The political process has its justification and place, as does the making of policies and the management of resources. It is, however, essential to unbundle these and ensure that these functions are, separately and specifically, shaped and monitored. Often they are mixed up in non-transparent and slow decision making processes, resulting in short-sighted politics, incomplete policies, and inefficient management. While state agencies in many countries need to strengthen their policy making capabilities, politicians better stick to their own

territory and compete for the voters' favour by presenting alternative views in the public arena. Meanwhile management skills in agencies need to be greatly strengthened to give senior and middle level management more space to do their work: converting scarce resources into well defined outputs to achieve clear goals.

B. Treat state structure as dynamic

5. Reduce hierarchy and size of public agencies

The seemingly uncontrolled process of public sector growth needs to be monitored, halted and turned back. An effective state is one that has modest, flexible and purpose driven organisations. Hierarchical relations among such organisations are rarely effective, since many elements are better pooled into a fluid mix. The state needs to learn to capitalise on the quality of ideas and results, rather than on formal or political control.

While there may be tasks that are better done by large bureaucratic organisations, notably those allowing standardisation or requiring detailed control, these often do not capitalise on available enthusiasm, creativity and expertise among staff. Smaller agencies can more easily operate in a dynamic, flexible and demand-driven manner. They can provide room for their staff to learn, experiment and develop.

6. Move from hierarchical control to contractual relations

Complex tasks will require flexible coalitions of state and non-state actors. Imposition of top-down control undermines the effectiveness of such cooperation. The tasks to be faced in modernising a country's economy cannot be resolved by decrees only. In a multi-stakeholder society government agencies need to attract and provide support on the basis of conceptual strengths, incentives and agreements.

Such agreements are, in effect, contracts between agencies rather than top-down instructions that are often formally accepted but actually ignored. While contracts between commercial agencies are widely practised, there are also less known successes with contracts for public sector agencies. These can hold leaders accountable for producing specified outputs while allowing them flexibility in managing inputs.

Government organisations should not be involved in operational activities such as transportation, research, education, production. However, at least in the short run, a considerable number of operational tasks may still need to be handled by state agencies. In such cases it will be desirable to separate such tasks from mainstream public administration. Large-scale bureaucracies are not properly equipped for those tasks and it is usually very difficult to hold them accountable.

A solution can be found in so-called executive agencies which offer a hybrid between public and private sector management. Though publicly funded and established by law, they have a clear and limited mandate, considerable control over their financial and human resources, and professional leadership contracted and rewarded to deliver well-defined outputs.

7. Establish the right measure of decentralisation

Central government institutions have inherent constraints in their abilities to fine-tune their outputs, mobilise local resources and respond to unique and changing contexts. Instead much is better be delegated to strong and relatively independent, lower levels of Government, provided capacity is in place at that level.

Deconcentration, devolution and other forms of decentralisation do not provide easy or universal recipes. These may spread scarce resources too thinly, open opportunities for rent seeking by local elites and alienate the centre from local needs. Each country must learn to reduce central control while allowing for more space for local institutions to address local demands and adjust organisations at both levels.

C. Arrange for the state to manage for results

8. De-bureaucratise procedures

Large scale bureaucracies in centralised systems give rise to paralysing administrative procedures that ensure that there is no deviation from central instructions. Meanwhile informal systems of politically driven decision-making co-exist. The result is a focus on external compliance, endless processes of approval, and a gradual loss of accountability. If procedures play such a central role, any middle or low level public servant will not grasp,

let alone control, what she or he is really contributing to meaningful results. This does not only de-motivate most people. It also results in slow, protracted procedures focusing not on the issues to be resolved but on meeting administrative requirements.

De-bureaucratising procedures and allowing more flexible procedures can greatly increase productivity and job satisfaction. Teams can be allowed more autonomy, provided objectives are clear and outputs and results are monitored in effective ways.

9. Ensure simplification

When one takes a closer look at rules and regulations, it may turn out that many do not meet any useful purpose. They are often inherited from earlier situations, or reflect needless controls over processes for which common sense would be sufficient. There often is ample scope for reducing regulations and procedures in ministries and lower level agencies. If units in the public administration have a clearer and shared view of what they should accomplish, and if they have access to information and specialised expertise, they may be allowed greater autonomy to shape their work. Putting greater responsibilities at lower levels and phasing out needless operational and procedural demands can unleash enthusiasm and creativity which are sorely needed while conditions change and resources are limited.

10. Manage accountability and transparency

Common flaws of public administrations are needless secrecy and limited availability of information. These present unhelpful barriers in communication through formal channels. This slows down processes and undermines the credibility of the state in the eyes of citizens. They may feel at the mercy of anonymous bureaucrats and caught between rules and decision making that occur beyond their view. The need for secrecy is often a sign of weakness, of inappropriate agendas, of diversion of public resources away from their intended uses, or of plain incompetence.

A strong and effective government has nothing to fear from exposure and has much to gain. Public-private partnerships will arise so much easier if the public understands what specific agencies do and if

their tasks are clear. Transparency is not just a moral issue; it is a matter of efficiency.

11. Build attention to continuous improvement

In a dynamic perspective on public administration, the emphasis is on outcomes, purposeful resource utilisation and continuously trying to do things better. The traditional approach, in which standardised practices were used to administer a stable situation, is now often obsolete. There are no truly stable situations any more in our world. Internal and external pressures fluctuate and opportunities and threats come and go. This requires a public administration geared towards continuous change, forever reviewing its performance and forever searching for better skills, methods and strategies.

Many public sector agencies do not have incentives for stimulating continuous improvement. In fact they may impose sanctions against innovation. The quality and attractiveness of their work could be greatly enhanced if there would be real scope for improvement. This can be done through continuous training, exposure to alternatives, resources for experimentation, removal of needless procedures, and a consistent focus on results rather than inputs and procedures.

D. Tailor Assistance to Opportunities

Even when the context of public administration is taken into account, procedures and systems between the national government and donors often carry their own momentum, reinforcing tendencies in state bureaucracies that may be counter to professed goals. Development assistance clearly is not a neutral intervention that would leave the recipient public administration unchanged: it is either part of the problem or part of the solution.

This dilemma can be overcome through more in-depth analysis and better understanding, weighing intended and unintended effects, understanding the dynamics of state machineries and donor agencies, and recognizing that assistance can easily undermine local capacities.

This means that, when developing interventions, governments and donors may apply the above guidelines in serious but creative ways. It also

implies that regular feedback from state and non-state sources should be sought to understand and fine-tune effects. While goals should be clear and consensual, considerable flexibility should be allowed in budgets and inter-organisational arrangements, in order to be able to capitalise on opportunities and learn from experience. The focus should be on results, not procedures. The distribution of resources and rewards should reflect this. Donor agencies, as much as governments, may adjust their style and understanding to this and approach public administration as a central problem, and as a key result of their joint efforts.

The public administration experts of BMB Mott MacDonald deal with many of the above issues. They do not bring ready-made answers, but they help to ask probing questions, identify options, share relevant experiences and select optimal responses. They can assist, as trainers, advisers, managers or monitors, to introduce improvements, build capacities and test alternative approaches.



You are welcome to contact us about this subject through:

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