Transforming institutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals after the pandemic, World Public Sector Report 2023

Book review by DAGMAR RADIN*
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The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations has issued the 2023 World Public Sector Report as part of their assessment of the progress made towards the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This report focuses on changes in national institutions and governance during the COVID-19 pandemic and on three main themes: the relationship between government and society in terms of solidifying public trust through various mechanism and combating elements that undermine it such as fake news and misinformation; identifying and matching policy priorities between national governments and SDGs including how to use the science-policy relation to advance SDG integration processes into national priorities, and the path toward using innovations in governance for the achievement of the SDGs.

The latest World Public Sector Report 2023 is another in a series of assessments of progress towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In its structure, the Report represents a departure from past reports in that it focuses on a smaller number of topics (three), followed by 23 short contributions from 38 experts from across the globe, ranging from regional contexts, to specific niches, but always related to the main three questions. This volume is specific also because 2023 marks the midpoint in the implementation of the SDGs and while institutions have always been a point of departure on the way to SDG achievement, new developments in the geopolitical arena such as the war in Ukraine have further threatened peace and justice as goals. Social and economic changes that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic have undermined the capacity of national governments to implement policies during periods of crisis and this report addresses some of the challenges as well as possible steps towards handling them by enhancing the capacity of national governments to achieve, and synchronize their policy priorities with, the SDGs. Issues that the pandemic has brought to the surface include risk management and crisis preparedness, communication with the public and the subsequent effect on social and political trust, science-policy interfaces, and transparency and accountability. The report examines the ways in which governments can use their institutional arrangements and innovations in building trust with social actors, in harmonizing their policy priorities with the SDGs, and how to use innovative ways of doing so.

Chapter one is dedicated to the need to strengthen the relationship between government and citizens, given that during the pandemic period there was a decrease in civic culture and an erosion of public trust along with political polarization, all of which had a detrimental effect on the success of governments in the implementation of emergency management in public health. The chapter begins with a review of the lessons learned in the pre-pandemic period about how relationships between public administration and society shape policy and societal outcomes. More specifically, this section restates how positive and cooperative relationships between all levels of government and different societal actors (private and public) have proved to be a key influence in the ability of public institutions to effectively deliver

their services. This relationship became especially apparent during the pandemic period when, for example, members of the scientific community in collaboration with government authorities were able to promote public health messages in the wake of the campaign of misinformation surrounding vaccine safety, among other services, where a high level of public trust in government was crucial in the successful implementation of immunization and other anti-pandemic measures. The chapter continues with a discussion on the assessment mechanisms of the relationship between government and other actors, trust being the central variable in the relationship. Trust in government institutions is an indicator of how effective people perceive the institutions to be, can be influenced by broader social and economic processes and has been shown to be key for the implementation of emergency management when the public is expected to follow rules to ensure public safety. The chapter gives a summary of existing measurement tools of the relationship between government and societal actors across the globe. It also shows successful examples of public service delivery, and the effect of accountability and transparency in government operations on the level of corruption and ultimately on the level of trust citizens have in their government and how the efficient and targeted utilization of digital technology, in part pushed by the need to keep social distance during the pandemic, has facilitated the implementation of government policies. The third section discusses the effects of false or misleading information which, coupled with the advances in digital communication, had a significant impact during the pandemic. It also describes the different response mechanisms used to combat these damaging effects through regulation, independent audits, and the increase in the salience of media literacy which continues today.

The individual contributions in this chapter are diverse ranging from: a discussion about the effectiveness of social redistribution in diminishing income inequality both within and among countries through fiscal policies such as the taxation of MNEs and high net worth individuals; the effect of the pandemic on gender equality in public administration; communication during emergencies with social actors; harnessing of digital technology in public administration while protecting human rights; e-justice; the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on civic space; the role of youth in democratic processes; an example of fighting misinformation in Africa, all finalized by expert recommendations to government administrators.

Chapter two uses the midpoint to the 2030 target of achieving the SDGs as a benchmark against which it reflects on the interdependencies and synergies of some SDGs and how these can be harnessed to propel them towards greater achievement. The authors provide six methods of analysing the interdependencies between SDGs and how each of them can be utilized for policymaking and goal advancement by supporting various stages of the policy process including scoping, prioritization, identification and evaluation of alternate solutions, and monitoring. The six methods include: self-assessment, expert judgement, literature-based analysis, statistical analysis, SD modelling, and coupled component modelling. This initiative comes in the wake of acknowledgment that little is known

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about the effect of the pandemic on SDG interactions particularly when some SDGs, such as SDG1 (ending poverty in all its forms everywhere) have experienced a fallback.

The question of how goals are prioritized has been addressed by several studies but approaches on which policy goals should take priority need to be placed in the country context and entry points should be identified that will in synergy advance other SDGs as well. According to the authors, although little is known about whether institutional changes have led to greater policy coherence, global, regional and national factors influence which policies are given priority over others. This chapter also makes it clear that global and contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have conditioned regional and domestic priorities towards security and away from the eradication of poverty; the lack of trust that has come hand in hand with an increase in positive perceptions of autocratic leaders indicates a movement towards illiberal values. The authors thus suggest a need to develop and use tools that will provide further support for the strengthening of policy coherence by using strategic foresight in the evaluation of government policies, among other things. Identifying and mapping the science-policy interface would improve responsiveness to the needs of policymakers and increase efforts to build capacity in identifying needs and priorities and subsequently develop responsive policies. This, too, should be supportive of the process of improving policy coherence to achieve the SDGs. The chapter concludes with two sections: one that addresses the use of public financial management strengthening to increase its efficiency, efficacy and equity in the wake of limited resources by using computational models and simulation modelling in projections to take advantage of local level capacities to achieve goals. Thus, budgeting for sustainable development need not be an unattainable goal or reserved only for wealthy countries. Finally, changes in institutional arrangements along with enhanced long-term planning and investment in capacity building and talent are all needed to increase SDG achievement.

Contributions to this chapter include: an analysis of both national and local level processes, examples of synergy for economic recovery in Sri Lanka; the strengthening of the science-policy interface; operationalizing strategic foresight and the transformative foresight triangle; transnational networks and exchanges, risk management, evidence based resource prioritization, government expenditure and prioritization in sustainable development, and how to build legitimacy to achieve open and transparent government. This chapter, too, concludes with a set of recommendations by the contributing experts.

Chapter three emphasizes the importance of innovations in advancing the working of the government to achieve the SDGs. Given that the picture likelihood of the SDGs being attained is now less optimistic than it was when the SDGs were created, there is a need to harness the experience and knowledge gained through the past few years of challenges. Examples of innovations in procedures have been

witnessed during the COVID-19 crisis when public administrations around the world, faced with a new situation, had to alter their processes to be more flexible in their reaction to the new emergency. These innovations that were the result of the response to the public health and economic crisis also had the effect of improving communication with stakeholders, thus bringing about improvement in governance processes. Here a positive effect is evident not only in the cutting of red tape by public administrations, but also in the utilization of digital tools to advance administrative processes both for citizens and businesses, among others. The authors stress the difference between innovation and transformation so that innovations represent incremental improvements or disruptions due to crises, while transformations change or replace processes including social distributions. Single point innovations may not always be sufficient to create long term transformations in government processes to accelerate achieving the SDGs and goals such as effectiveness and resource optimization and inclusive access to public services are necessary benchmarks for sustainability. Further topics such as innovation in public accountability and multilevel governance at subnational levels of government are discussed in this chapter focusing back on domestic capacity building of public servants which will help with developments in governance beyond crisis periods. One innovation that spurred transformations was the digital transformation forced upon governments during the COVID-19 crisis. The need for successful implementation of emergency policies and procedures has required the government to act in collaboration with other stakeholders which has created a channel of communication and collaboration. One example given is the integration of multiple stakeholders through channels of communication to gather epidemiological information in Poland including lifestyle habits and health for a better understanding of the spread of the disease. Next, co-creation, co-production and advancements in service delivery are discussed as methods that allow equal participation and partnership of all stakeholders in designing public policies acknowledging all along that the actual effects of these are difficult to measure. Finally, the authors conclude that technological advancements should be utilized for improved service delivery so that existing innovations can have a greater developmental effect.

The individual contributions to this final chapter address topics of government reform and public service provisions, co-creation at different levels of government, innovations in health care services, multilevel coordination and preparedness after COVID-19, blended learning in higher medical education in South Africa, models of public sector operation after the pandemic, and a summary of main recommendations of action points by the experts.

The fourth chapter concludes the report by summing up how the pandemic has not only changed the expectations of stakeholders about the forms of governance and participation by increasing engagement at all process and policymaking levels, underlining the need for public administration to keep up with the changing societies to become more inclusive and apt to accept innovation as well as adjusting the relationship between the different levels of government. The chapter concludes

with emphasis on the need to preserve the knowledge we have gathered during the extraordinary period of the pandemic and continue to follow the lessons learned on inclusiveness, change and transformation, flexibility and co-creation, among many other things, into the future.

In summary, the World Public Sector Report 2023 is a departure from the previous reports in that it focuses on its three main themes by looking at the significant and most valuable experiences and lessons learned during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. The structure of the chapters, where an introduction to each chapter is enriched through many short case studies provides for an interesting interlay of theory and practical applications. Finally, the key takeaway points presented as sets of recommendations for public administrators highlight the most important elements to be focused on when creating policies to improve government performance in achieving the SDGs.