Public purpose, government authority and collective power

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Introduction

State and public sector reform processes vary in different countries and regions. They reflect different circumstances, different needs and different philosophies about the role of government in society.

Since the 1980s, reforms have dominated government agendas around the world. Some have focused on restoring the fiscal health of government and rebalancing the role of government in society. Many have attempted to seize the benefits of globalization while mitigating its negative impacts. Most public sector reforms have focused on improving performance, efficiency and accountability, improving service delivery, increasing user satisfaction and adopting various e-government approaches to leverage the power of information and communication technologies.

The context in which these reforms were shaped has been equally extraordinary. This period witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the birth and expansion of the European Union, the integration of regional economies, and the rise of new regional blocks anchored around China, India and Brazil. The binary power structure that characterized the world during the Cold War has been transformed into a shifting, complex geometry of power relationships. In response, governments are seeking better national, regional, international and global governance arrangements.

There has also been a prolonged period of growth over most of this time. To be sure, growth and the benefits stemming from it have been uneven. There have been setbacks, slowdowns and crises.

“May you live in interesting times” someone once said. Indeed we have. The context for public sector reforms is forever changing.

Reflecting back on the last three decades, we can see that governments around the world embarked on a remarkable journey of experimentation and innovation. The nature and pace of reform has been extraordinary.

The pace of reform is not likely to abate because public sector organizations are not yet aligned with the new, global context and the complex problems they have for their mission to solve.

Many public institutions were born in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, a period characterized by the industrial revolution, the emergence of public bureaucracies in democratic societies, and the influence of scientific management. Public sector organizations were expected to perform predictable tasks under prescribed rules. The power structure was top down and hierarchical. Rigorous controls ensured performance and accountability for delegated authorities. Over time, some of these original features and practices have changed in response to changing realities. But, by and large, an industrial model is still at the core of many public organizations.
While this model has served governments and societies well, it is no longer sufficient (Baltodano 1997; Khator 1994). An increasing number of public policy issues require the active contribution of many actors across and outside of government, including the private sector, civil society, individual citizens and communities. This requires government to work across conventional boundaries, using networks, public participation processes and other means (Huddleston 2000; Innes & Booher 2004; Klijn 2005). It compels government to use its authority and resources to enable and empower others. Increased complexity and uncertainty in the policy and governance contexts are prompting governments to improve their ability to anticipate, intervene, innovate, learn, be agile, and to bounce back from shocks and crises. There is an increased need for flexibility, and information and knowledge sharing, that traditional governance and organizational models militate against.

Future public sector reforms will need to continue pushing government beyond its traditional roles as a decision-maker on behalf of citizens and as a provider of services to citizens. They will explore how governments can work with citizens and other actors to produce results of high public value.

These reforms will require:

(i) a broader definition of public results that emphasizes the importance of public policy and civic results;
(ii) an expanded view of the roles of government and citizens that promotes the use of government authority to unleash the collective power of citizens and society in bringing about results of high public value; and
(iii) a more dynamic understanding of governance and public administration that supports the building of capacities required to pursue collective interests and the public good in an increasingly unpredictable global environment.

This paper explores what these three trajectories of reform may consist of and proposes some initiatives to help public servants face the challenges and dilemmas of serving in the 21st century.

**Pursuing Public Policy and Civic Results**

The role of public organizations is to achieve results of high public value in ways that advance civic—or what many states would recognize as democratic—principles (Van Dooren, Thijs & Bouckaert 2004). High performance in the public sector includes achieving public policy and civic results (see Figure 1).

**Public Policy Results**

In government, no organizational unit, agency or department works alone; no activity, service or program is self-sufficient. In most policy areas, governments achieve results through a mix of instruments, such as laws, regulations, tax credits, and transfers to individuals or other levels of government (Salamon 2002). Achieving results of high public value in government is often a collective effort that cuts across program or agency boundaries. Furthermore, governments achieve results by working through vast networks of actors and organizations, including citizens and civil society groups, who have a stake in achieving common policy outcomes.
Individual program and agency results are important because they link inputs, such as taxpayers’ money, to outputs and user satisfaction. However, the results that are most relevant to citizens and elected officials usually extend beyond the scope of single programs, distinct services and individual organizations. A government program’s true measure of success is the contribution it makes to system-wide and societal results (Bourgon 2008a). For instance, high user satisfaction with a particular medical service is not necessarily a sign of success if these results are achieved using scarce resources that could be allocated to meeting higher health priorities. Similarly, departmental successes achieved at the expense of government-wide results do not demonstrate performance or quality.

Public sector organizations have a responsibility to explore how to move their contributions up the value-added chain of results. They need to link their efforts to system-wide and societal goals and weigh the value of their contributions relative to system-wide and societal results. Governments in different parts of the world have started to pay greater attention to system-wide results. A few have focused on societal results.¹

A system-wide and societal focus offers more promise than the emphasis that has been placed on micro-performance measurement and management since the early 1990s (Bourgon 2008b). Of particular importance is that public policy results and civic results converge most meaningfully at the level of societal results. These are collective results achieved by all agents, whether from the public and private spheres or civil society. They reflect the state of society to citizens and decision makers, helping to shape the collective interests that, in turn, inform the actions of government and citizens alike. People increasingly want to have a say in shaping and defining collective interests; they are not satisfied with having a vote every four or five years.

Civic Results

¹ For an example, see the report of the Progress Board for the Province of British Columbia, Canada at http://www.bcp progressboard.com.
Public sector organizations are expected to live up to the ideal of democratic principles and to advance civic results, which they do in many ways. They allow for their oversight by the legislative assembly, ensure that holders of public office are accountable for the exercise of power, provide for transparency, ensure citizens’ access to information, and encourage citizen participation in the policy cycle to ensure a broader and more equitable representation of interests, and greater buy-in and support for government initiatives (Bourgon 2009).

These principles and related measures constitute what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2008) calls “open and inclusive government”, towards which many countries, including Latin American nations, have made progress over recent years. Many governments have enacted access-to-information legislation.² Many have leveraged communication technologies to improve their services and encourage greater access to them.³ Some are regularly using satisfaction surveys and other feedback and evaluation processes. Some countries have created “single-window” service centers to encourage interdepartmental co-ordination and ensure that citizens do not get stuck in a “bureaucratic maze” or “fall through the cracks.” Others have devolved service delivery to local levels to ensure better access and that services meet the specific needs of diverse communities.⁴ Many countries have used channels, such as citizen panels and participatory budgeting, to encourage deliberative participation and other forms of citizen engagement.⁵

But more can be done. Civic results include, but are not limited to, an active citizenry, empowered communities, and a civic spirit that infuses society and encourages collective action towards the common good. It is possible to improve the civic results of most government programs and activities by taking measures to remove the barriers to an active citizenry and encouraging community and collective capacity-building.

In the last two decades, governments have placed a great deal of emphasis—perhaps too much—on the challenges of citizen participation in new public policy initiatives (e.g., OECD 2008; United Nations 2007). During any government’s term in office, it may launch a handful of new policy initiatives while it delivers thousands of existing policies, programs and services. These existing activities have arisen from the political will, political decisions and policy choices made by successive governments to express the collective interests of citizens. Many, if not all, of these activities could benefit from some form of citizen involvement that would improve their democratic performance and, with it, the quality of public results.

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² For example, Chile, Uruguay and Guatemala all passed access to information legislation in 2008 (Michener 2009). This development was reinforced by a unanimous Inter-American Juridical Committee resolution in the Organisation of American States that recognizes access to information as a fundamental human right (Acosta et al 2008).

³ For example, Mexico has expanded its Internet based public sector procurement body Compranet into two new programs: DeclaraNet and TransmitaNet. DeclaraNet is an e-system for completing and filing tax returns and TransmitaNet is a catalogue of state forms. Brazil has had success with e-voting since 2000. Argentina and Mexico have used Brazilian e-voting machines in pilot projects, and Paraguay used the Brazilian model for e-voting in their 2003 election (Padget 2005).

⁴ Brazil’s Sistema Unico de Saude (SUS), for example, incorporates citizen involvement in deliberation over health policy as a mechanism for ensuring accountability, the appropriateness of decision-making, and the efficacy of service delivery. The SUS devolved roles to private sector partners, after agreements were made between the municipalities and the private sector, such that substantial purchases were made from private hospitals and clinics, so as to meet the diverse needs discovered in the consultative process (Cornwall and Shankland 2008).

⁵ For example, participatory approaches to budgeting, public expenditure and management in Porto Alegre, Brazil, have achieved observable results. Now, over 80% of Brazilian cities are following Porto Alegre’s model (Wold Bank: Participation and Civic Engagement Team 2003).
An explicit commitment to improving civic results would entail exploring an enhanced role for citizens and their communities along a number of vectors.

- **Transparency and accountability**: Expanding the concept of accountability from that of process accountability for the exercise of powers by office holders to public accountability for progress towards system-wide and societal results. This may take the form of a comprehensive public reporting system, such as a national scorecard or, as a more ambitious approach, a system of shared accountability when multiple actors are involved.

- **Access**: Building on progress with e-government, enabling citizens’ access to government (including knowledge held by government) on their terms and according to their needs. This would further the development of a modern knowledge infrastructure to facilitate networking, encourage collective innovation and allow governments and citizens to shape and harness the collective intelligence of our networked society.

- **Voice**: Expanding the avenues for integrating the voices of citizens and their communities in relevant aspects of public administration. It includes exploring the potential for integrating feedback into the program improvement cycle, building communication platforms that enable citizens to hear each others’ voices and to interact with each other as well as the service providers to improve results. This would also entail removing barriers to hearing the voices of the most vulnerable, the less literate, the poor, the young and the elderly.

- **Choice**: Instead of having public servants exercising all of the discretionary authority that stems from the flexibility that exists in most government programs and activities, allowing citizens and communities to exercise discretion on their own behalf to meet their own needs within the law and in a manner that respects professional and political accountabilities.

- **Action**: Encouraging the active role of citizens and communities as value creators and as active agents in producing public goods, inventing solutions to common problems and shaping a future they desire.

It is important to note that the vast array of initiatives that support more “open and inclusive government” has generated some concerns and confusion (Bourgon 2009). These include concern that citizen consultation and participation may be costly, delay decisions and prevent timely action (Irvin & Stansbury 2004); participation becomes a dogma such that more citizen participation is always seen to be better and is the one best way of doing things in government; and that consultation processes may be hijacked by single-interest groups. In addition, there is confusion amongst public servants about what politicians and citizens expect of them.

Citizen and community participation is not a substitute for representative democracy and political will. It can only take place in the context of the legal and constitutional laws in place in a country and in a manner that is respectful of legitimate public institutions and government authority. Government has the authority and is responsible for setting the agenda and rules of engagement.6

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6 In terms of roles and expectations inside government, those who have the authority to govern—whether that authority occurs through electoral processes or other constitutional means—are ultimately responsible for setting the policy intent. This intent represents the starting point for the role of public administrators who have at their disposal many ways and
Citizen and community participation is not a panacea and is not appropriate in all cases. Government needs to use it deliberately and wisely. Citizen participation has both intrinsic and instrumental value. It has intrinsic value in that it encourages an active citizenry, empowered communities and civic spirit. It has instrumental value in that it can help to produce greater support for government initiatives and better public policy results. Whereas a previous era gave some countries the adage “no taxation without representation”, a more contemporary maxim should be “no civic action without participation.” At minimum, governments need to engage citizens and other actors when government expects them to play active roles as “agents” of public policies. There is an increasing number of complex policy issues that require citizens and others to play active roles, from reducing carbon emissions, obesity rates or racism, to increasing literacy or improving public safety. Such issues require the participation of citizens and their communities, and the contribution of multiple stakeholders. Without participation, government initiatives will falter.

When poorly designed, citizen engagement efforts can become exclusive rather than inclusive ventures where the powerful voices of a “chosen few” dominate. The first responsibility of government is to create an enabling environment that removes barriers to the participation of groups most frequently excluded, including: the youth who cannot vote but are often saddled with the debt incurred in providing services to the generations in power; the poor whose voices must be heard if fairness and social justice are to be realized; women who are still, in most countries, under-represented in formal decision-making roles and who confront social and physical barriers to participation; and those affected by special barriers due to age, disabilities, geographic distance, and literacy.

The second responsibility of government is to build ramps that allow people to decide for themselves if and when to engage. To be sure, no one wants to engage on every issue. But channels of participation that are easy for all to access and use need to be in place. Citizen participation takes time and consumes resources, even if the increased use of information and communication technologies in this area may reduce costs going forward (Irvin & Stansbury 2004). However, these may not be the most significant costs to consider. Since the 1960s, a steady decline of trust in government and public sector institutions has been widely observed around the world (Nye, Zelikov & King 1997; Pharr & Putnam 2000). Declining trust is a cost to government and society as a whole. No country is rich enough to pay the price of distrust. It can lead to a variety of negative outcomes for government and society, including reduced scope for public policy approaches, low voluntary compliance, tax evasion, corruption, social unrest, instability and even violence. While it is still too early to gauge whether strengthening and deepening citizen and community engagement will reverse this trend, it is surely worth the price and effort.

The challenge for government is to achieve public policy and civic results—not one or the other, and not one at the expense of the other. The latter results build the credibility of governments, while the former increase the legitimacy of government. In combination, credibility and legitimacy enhance citizens’ trust in government, public institutions and public sector organizations.
Optimizing public policy results and civic results is a difficult balancing act. It requires fine judgment and can only succeed in practice by taking into account context, culture and circumstances. In particular, public administrators must mediate between a drive for efficiency gains and the need to engage citizens and communities, even at the expense of some degree of efficiency. Improving civic results builds the collective capacity in society to achieve better public results over time, even if it entails a higher cost in the short term. A focus on civic results positions citizens and their communities as active agents in shaping collective interests and as value creators in producing public results.

Many countries have made great strides towards achieving better public sector results. However, public administrators generally have been working from an incomplete definition of public results—one that does not give sufficient weight to civic results. They have allowed too high a degree of separation between public policy results and civic results in evaluating the contribution of public organizations to society.

The challenge of embedding a focus on civic results in all government activities on an equal footing with the pursuit of public policy results is not limited to societies with formal, conventional forms of democratic governance. It applies to countries with or without elections and with or without multiple parties (Mahbubani 2009). The world over, citizens are seeking to play a more active role in the areas of greatest importance to them (Fung & Wright 2003). Governments ignore the voices of their people at their peril.

**Government Authority and Collective Power: The Roles of Government and Citizens**

Traditionally, government is seen as the primary agent in defining the public good and serving the collective interest. According to this view, government sets the agenda for change, proposes new laws and enforces existing ones. Government is the provider of public services, the legislator and the mediator who arbitrates among conflicting interests. In this conventional perspective, citizens are seen as bearers of rights, taxpayers and beneficiaries of government programs. More recently, they have come to be seen as users of public services and clients of public organizations. As a result, many public sector reforms have focused on the direct delivery of services to citizens.

This view of the roles of government relative to citizens and its manifestations in reform agendas has arguably been too narrow to ensure results of high public value, particularly with respect to the increasingly complex issues governments and citizens are facing in a globalizing and unpredictable world. A number of developments already make this clear:

- **The importance of direct service delivery is declining.** Indirect tools such as transfer payments to individuals and other levels of government, tax credits, vouchers, grants, loans and indirect service delivery through third parties or public-private partnerships account for the bulk of government activity and spending. These tools have reduced the direct role of government in producing public goods and services (Salamon 2002).

- **Governments are not acting alone.** Increasingly, governments must reach out to other governments, the private sector, civil society and citizens to achieve many of the results people care about, ranging from food safety to national security or to poverty alleviation. In these cases, it is more appropriate to think in terms of governance than of government (Denhardt & Denhardt 2003).
As governments share responsibilities, risks and power, they play an increasingly difficult, yet pivotal role. They must use their authority in new ways to leverage and build on the strength of others; ensure equitable risk-sharing between the public, private and civil spheres; and anticipate issues and initiate corrective actions when the public interest demands it.

- **Citizens and other stakeholders are active agents and creators of public value.** An increasing number of public policy issues require the active contribution of citizens and other actors in creating common public goods. This is the case particularly when policy issues exceed the legislative and regulatory power of the state or government’s ability to act. It is also the case when the issues require a change in individual and societal behaviour (Bingham, Nabatchi & O’Leary 2005).

Examples of these developments abound. Governments can make laws on public health, crime prevention and habitat protection. They can tax and spend to build hospitals and fund public healthcare services. They can deploy police forces and inspection officers. But the choices people make and the actions they take at home, at work, in their families and communities are the main contributors to collective health, public safety or a clean environment.

Recognizing they need to harness the collective energy and ideas of citizens, many governments have been working to complement traditional ways of governing with new ones that enable and empower citizens. As governments move towards producing results with citizens, they strike a more complete set of relationships with them.

In so doing, they also expand the repertoire of roles they can play to achieve various public results (Lenihan, Milloy, Fox & Barber 2007). Governments can act as

- a **partner** who uses the resources and power of the state to encourage the contributions of citizens and others;
- a responsible and reliable **contributor** in a system of shared governance who shares responsibility and resources with citizens and others in framing issues, implementing solutions and accounting for results;
- a **facilitator** who encourages the creation and expansion of **collaborative governance networks of self-organizing actors and communities** that serve as platforms for co-operation, collective intelligence and social innovation;
- a **thought leader** and **proactive agent** who co-creates and evolves with others in a **system of adaptive governance** that transforms the context and the actions of all actors to improve the likelihood of favourable policy outcomes.

Governments have a broad array of options, ranging from acting alone to exercising the authority of the state, with which to lever the collective power of citizens and other actors in society (see Figure 2). The options that are available on the “governance” end of this continuum require a shared sense of responsibility, where actors inside and outside of government are empowered to contribute what they do best to solve common public policy issues and where actors mutually commit to results and to some form of collective and individual accountability (Kettl 2002). They also entail the proper and fair sharing of risks and rewards.
These options do not rest on a universal prescription for “shared governance” or “co-production” with the expectation that every citizen or actor can or wants to be involved in every issue. It does not point towards endless discussions and consultations. Nor does it mean that all decisions should be collaborative. In many instances, top-down decisions and actions are needed for good governance.

No matter which governance option is pursued, and in all cases, government remains the steward of the collective interest with the responsibility for mediating between the public, the private and civil society spheres and with the power to intervene when the public interest demands it. Events of the recent past, such as the global financial crisis, remind us that the stewardship role of government has received insufficient attention. In fact, the more dispersed the decision-making and the more distributed the exercise of power, the more important the stewardship role of government becomes. This role involves monitoring, anticipating and course correcting.

In using its authority to empower others to decide and act, government is not taking a laissez-faire stance, nor is it reducing its position relative to other actors in the state. Instead, it is playing a more complex mix of roles that is affirmative of the State on behalf of the collective.

Seen in this light, the role of government is taking shape in an increasingly expansive space of possibilities that is not defined by a rigid, conventional set of roles and relationships. Instead, public administrators, citizens and other actors form part of a dynamic, open and interactive system of governance where the authority of the state is used in different ways to achieve different public results—including engaging and empowering citizens, communities and other actors in order to realize societal and civic results (see Figure 3).
The Future of Governance and Public Administration: A Dynamic System of Capacity-Building

An expanded definition of public results combined with a broader view of the role of government, citizens and other actors in society provides the space in which new directions for public service reforms can take shape and new ways to build collective capacity in the State to achieve public results can be explored (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Dynamic System of Governance

Figure 4: Dynamic System of Capacity Building
Building the Capacity to Serve – A Solid Foundation

Public administration incorporates history, traditions and conventions. Building the collective capacity to achieve public results starts by valuing past developments and preserving existing capacities. Central among these is the focus on compliance, which is the hallmark of good government. It includes

- a respect for the rule of law and public institutions;
- due process, including fairness, transparency and accountability for the exercise of powers and the use of public funds; and
- public sector values, including the expectation that public servants, in serving the public trust, will exhibit integrity, probity and impartiality.

Together, these factors are key contributors to the institutional capacity of the state apparatus and provide a solid foundation for public organizations. They represent the starting point of any journey towards building a state. Institutional capacity means the state has the ability to make and enforce laws, to tax and spend without “leakage” or corruption, to separate the powers of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, and to account for the exercise of power. This capacity takes years to put in place; it is a never-ending process to sustain it. It is of fundamental importance. Every future generation will use and rely on it, and will be tasked with renewing it.

Since there is no such thing as good government without well performing public sector institutions, it is also important to retain the sharp focus governments have placed on performance over the last two decades. Public administrations should preserve and value

- the internal drive for making government more productive, efficient and effective;
- the attention paid to improving service delivery across organizational silos and the need for continuing improvements in response to the expectations of citizens and to changing circumstances;
- the focus on sound governance that incorporates other sectors and actors; and
- the power of modern information and communication technologies that is transforming the role of government, the relationship between government and citizens, and the role of public servants.

These factors contribute to building organizational capacity. This capacity forms the basis for achieving public results. It means that high quality public goods can be delivered at the lowest possible cost to society, that user feedback, continuous improvement and innovation feature centrally in the delivery of public services, that modern information and communications technologies are used to reduce the number of intermediaries and empower users in the service delivery process. It also means that organizations from the public, private and civil spheres can work together to achieve common public results; although, the ability to work across organizational boundaries must first be learned inside government, after which it is easier for government to reach out and work with other sectors of society.

The compliance and performance traditions, models and related capacities amount to building strong public institutions and efficient public sector organizations. They are of fundamental importance to any government. They are best suited to stable contexts, predictable tasks and a government-centric approach to achieving public results; therein reside their strengths and added value.
The question is whether a focus on compliance and performance will be enough for governments to meet the challenges of serving in the twenty-first century. Answering this question is, at once, a philosophical and pragmatic exercise for government. Different countries have different circumstances, needs and values. They will make difference choices. It is important to explore what these choices entail as governments are called upon to “serve beyond the predictable” (Bourgon, In Press).

Pursuing Public Purposes in the Context of Uncertainty and Complexity

The role of government today extends beyond predictable activities and circumstances. It entails dealing with complex issues—some of which have the features of “wicked problems” (Ho 2008)—in the unpredictable context of the global economy and networked societies, where multiple players are acting simultaneously.

Pressure is building on governments to improve their ability to anticipate, pre-empt and, if possible, prevent crises ranging from pandemics to global economic meltdowns, from global warming to food shortages.

Since the 1980s, the world has become vastly more interconnected, networked and “flat” (Friedman 2005). Local problems can quickly become global problems, and global problems can have a wide and unpredictable range of local impacts. An increasing number of people, groups and organizations make important decisions in an increasing number of locations. There is growing fragmentation. Their decisions are influenced by the decisions of others and by their expectations of what others may do. There is increasing interdependence (Kopperjan & Klijn 2004). With fragmentation and interdependence comes uncertainty.

Each decision and each action has limited effect, but the power of multiple decisions moving in a similar direction can change the course of events around the globe at the speed of light. Ideas about “emergence” have been used to describe this process. They observe how new patterns arise out of a vast array of interactions and seemingly out of nowhere (Holland 1998; Goldstein 1999). They reveal the powerful roles self-organization, adaptation and evolution play in complex systems (Mitleton-Kelly 2008) and highlight the limitations of “grand designs” for dealing with issues in complex systems, no matter how well informed and conceived such plans may be (Bovaird 2008; Westley, Zimmerman & Patton 2006).

The difficulties that arise for governments in facing complexity are not primarily due to a lack of knowledge or because public servants are somewhat wanting in comparison to their predecessors. They come about because conventional approaches to governance and public administration were not devised or designed to deal with complexity and uncertainty.

To be sure, most problems of public importance are difficult ones. Often, their main difficulty lies in a lack of knowledge, capacity, resources or time to address them. They can be solved incrementally and in a step-by-step fashion by setting priorities that help to remedy some of these deficits. Examples here may include fiscal or tax reforms.

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8 This condition is neatly captured in the famous “butterfly effect,” in which the flapping of a butterfly’s wing in Beijing can change weather patterns in the Gulf of Mexico (Morgan 2006, p. 255).
Some problems are complicated. The knowledge needed to address them exists or can be confidently developed, but their size, scope and scale is daunting and the process to produce a successful outcome is intricate and risky. Complicated problems may involve an elaborate web of actions in which every action, along with the sequencing and dependencies between them, is central to success and any misstep can lead to failure. Examples here may include building and running nuclear power facilities or executing missions in space (Westley et al. 2004).

Conventional practice that breaks down undertakings into simpler tasks that can be tackled through discrete policies and programs has been developed to address difficult and complicated problems (Wagenaar 2007). In the face of complexity, a conventional approach can leave government in a reactive position, unable to detect emerging patterns in an ever-changing landscape and therefore unable to intervene ahead of time.

Complex problems are of a different order. They may display

- *dynamic complexity* when causes and effects are interdependent but may be far apart in space and time;
- *social complexity* when the facts and the nature of the problem are contested and when positions are entrenched; and
- *generative complexity* when unique, unforeseen issues emerge with a high potential for recombining in different ways, at different times, in different places and at different intensities and scales (Kahane 2004).

Dynamically complex problems cannot be solved solely by breaking them down into smaller pieces and developing more knowledge about each piece. They can only be addressed by looking at the whole system and thus require a systemic approach (Senge 1990) that engages citizens and other actors who are implicated in and affected by them (Wagenaar 2007). The problem of deforestation in the Amazon rain forest is an example of a dynamically complex problem that requires a systematic solution.

But systemic knowledge alone may not help to resolve socially complex problems since the definitions, facts and solutions are often highly contested (Haveri 2006; Kahane 2004). It is becoming increasingly clear that the definitions and solutions that matter most are the ones that are co-created by the relevant parties. Even if such knowledge is imperfect, the process of creating it together holds the most value because it opens up the possibility of concerted, collective action (Senge 2004). The processes of reconciliation in post-Apartheid South Africa or post-conflict reconstruction in societies are examples of problems with high social complexity (Kahane 2004; Westley et al. 2006).

Generatively complex problems cannot be solved simply by replicating what was done before (Kahane 2004). Even if the situation bears some resemblance to past events, it requires emergent solutions that stem from the ongoing and anticipated interactions between actors and contexts, including public officials and citizens. The challenge for public administrators here is to read the complex landscape and to connect problems, people and solutions in the right contexts (Levinthal & Warglien 1999) and to unleash the power of self-organization and co-evolution (Duit & Galaz 2008). The potential impact of climate change on small island states, such as Indonesia, is an example of such a problem.
Wicked problems feature some or all of the characteristics of complex problems along with a particularly high level of uncertainty and unpredictability. Uncertainties stem from the fragmentation of decision-making and the interdependence of actions associated with the problem. Unpredictability arises from unstable relationships between the many actors and variables. Global warming is an example of a wicked problem that requires an adaptive mix of systematic, social and emergent solutions.

A range of theories, concepts and tools has been developed since the 1990s to help practitioners face complexity in an uncertain environment (e.g., Gunderson & Holling 2002; Mitleton-Kelly 2008; Teisman & Klijn 2008). But no magic bullet exists (Bovaird 2008). Confronting this environment requires new capacities. It starts with government embracing complexity and uncertainty as part of its reality and accepting that it has a role to play beyond the predictable (Haynes 2003). The implications and consequences of this new role for public sector organizations and public servants need to be understood. A coherent set of actions needs to be pursued in support of this new role for government.

Building Capacity for Anticipation, Innovation and Adaptation

Successfully confronting complexity and wickedness as part of the reality of public administration will require concerted efforts to build the capacity of government to anticipate, detect and proactively intervene where necessary. It will also entail building the collective capacity for anticipation, innovation and adaptation (see Figure 4).

Early detection through scanning or other means, and gaining a better understanding of the perspectives of the full range of actors and the relationships between them, can reduce uncertainty and unpredictability. Proactive action may improve the probability of more desirable outcomes. Countries with the best capabilities in detecting emerging trends and anticipating significant changes will have an important comparative advantage.

Most governments have developed relatively strong internal policy functions, which are needed to provide sound policy advice that takes into account existing capacity and lessons learned in the past. In general, policy units are departmentally-based and mission specific. They tend to value causal rationality and linear thinking, and rely heavily on evidence and data--and for good reason. This policy approach has contributed to great achievements in several domains of public policy.

But in the case of complex issues and emergent possibilities, the most important knowledge does not reside in the data. Rather, it rests in interpretation and insight, in discerning probable patterns where none had been seen before, and in the meaning extracted from diffuse information and imperfect knowledge. This work requires a diversity of perspectives coming from the interactions with multiple actors, a diversity of skills and disciplinary knowledge bases, and a diversity of approaches where linear thinking, non-linear systems-thinking and emergent understanding co-exist.

Many governments have a long tradition of intelligence gathering, environmental scanning, scenario planning, modeling and risk assessment. The challenge is to extend this capacity to complex issues and unpredictable environments by giving priority to building the anticipative capacity of government. Some countries are already taking ambitious steps in this direction (Habegger 2009).
For example, Singapore is using a cross-government approach that marries scenario planning with a risk assessment and horizon scanning system. Various ministries in the United Kingdom have come together to fund and use a “foresight program” to conduct “futures research” in particular sectors such as health, energy and land use. The Finnish parliament has established from among its members a “Committee for the Future” with a mandate to make submissions on futures-related matters and conduct futures studies.

Inferring from current examples, anticipative policy capacity relies on a government-wide approach, with tools that capture information from a wide range of sources and allow access to a variety of actors inside and outside government. It rests on leadership from the centre of government, but requires data sourcing, analytical and interpretive capabilities in line agencies, departments and organizations outside of government, such as universities and think tanks. This capacity could be further enhanced by more dialogue across government and between government and wider, more diverse array of actors outside.

In many cases, the best knowledge and the most powerful intelligence and insights about emergent phenomena do not rest with government. They reside in the minds of people living next door or thousands of miles away. They are shaped and circulate in self-organized social networks and in the multiple relationships citizens have in their local communities or globally dispersed communities of interest (Schuler 2008).

To address complex problems and uncertainty, governments need to improve their ability to tap the collective intelligence of society to extract knowledge and meaning about emerging patterns and trends in the social system. Citizens and other actors have invaluable information and diverse perspectives that can provide foresight, shape decisions and devise innovative solutions (Atlee 2008; Malone 2008).

Governments can also take steps to encourage social innovation (Mulgan 2007). The social networks and capabilities of citizens are powerful assets in generating novel solutions and pursuing new courses of action towards social goals (Westley, Zimmerman & Patton 2006). Government can leverage the power of networks to connect actors, problems and solutions as a means of achieving public results (Klijn 2008).

These actions can help government advance from a reactive to a more adaptive position. Overall, they amount to building the anticipative and innovative capacity inside and outside government.

Notwithstanding the efforts government and citizens make in building their anticipative and innovative capacity for solving public problems, unforeseen events will arise and unpredictable shocks will occur. Government will always be the insurer of last resort when the collective interest is at stake. Recent history shows, for example, with the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and the near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008, that passive approaches to dealing with “surprises” and emergent public policy issues can impose significant damage and a high cost to society. While governments cannot plan for what they cannot know, they can work proactively to limit the impact of shocks and increase the probability of more favorable outcomes.

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The role of government in the 21st century extends to building the resilience of their societies to absorb shocks, embrace change and prosper. Ideas about how government can foster resilience have been developing since the 1990s, particularly with respect to crisis management, security and emergency preparedness (e.g., Allenby & Fink 2005; Hanson & Roberts 2005; Masten & Obradovic 2008; Menon 2005; Norris et al. 2008). The fields of ecology and environmental studies, which have a longer track record of research on resilience, are good sources of inspiration (e.g., Anderies, Walker & Kinzig 2006; Gunderson & Holling 2002; Holling 1973, 2001). Promising guidance for public administrators is emerging.

Some shocks can be foreseen, even if only as probabilities. Building resilience entails planning for, preventing and pre-empting these shocks, and identifying and mitigating key vulnerabilities associated with them (Adger 2006; Berkes 2007; McManus et al. 2007).

Some shocks cannot be foreseen, prevented or mitigated. Moreover, change is inevitable and can be healthy (Berkes & Folke 2002), although the benefits and costs can be unevenly distributed (Norris et al. 2008; Scheffer et al. 2002). Attempting to prevent all shocks can create “brittle” communities, institutions and societies as it undermines the collective capacity to learn and adapt (Comfort 1994; Gunderson et al. 1995). Delaying change can increase the risk of large-scale crises later (Holling & Meffe 1996).

The goal for government is not to attempt to predict or control all potential shocks. This would be impossible and counterproductive. Rather, the primary goal is to promote the resilience of society, which means building the collective capacity to learn and adapt and ensuring a more equitable distribution of the risks, in a manner that mitigates the negative impact on society’s most vulnerable.

Resilience cannot be achieved by individuals, organizations or governments working alone (McManus et al., 2007). Resilient societies have at least two significant characteristics: 1) an active citizenry, comprised of a critical mass of people with the motivation, skills and confidence to take action to meet the needs of their communities, and 2) solid networks of community groups with the capability to bring a wide range of people together to identify the community’s needs and to mobilize resources in support of common solutions (Dale & Onyx 2005).

These capabilities develop through experience and practice. A participatory approach to public policy decisions and policy implementation is essential in building collective adaptive capacity. Public participation, citizen engagement and shared governance approaches provide powerful reinforcements to resilience, particularly if these approaches encourage actions and decision-making at the community level (Lebel et al. 2006). Dealing with issues at local levels also keeps problems from escalating up and across the social system to become crises of great magnitude (Berkes & Folke 2002).

Resilience and adaptive capacity cannot be bought or wished for when it is most needed. It develops from learned experience and practice (Berkes & Folke 2002). It grows out of the bonds and relationships built over time among people, organizations, communities and governments that have learned they can work together and count on each other when they need to. Resilience is based on the stock of trust, mutual understanding, knowledge and know-how that allows people to act, learn, adapt and evolve collectively (Longstaff & Yang 2008; Murphy 2007; Newman & Dale 2005).
Governments can do much to build the adaptive capacity of citizens, communities and themselves, including:

- intervening at the lowest possible scale before issues cascade upwards;
- experimenting and investing in pilot projects at local levels, then scale up where appropriate;
- simulating events that enhance collective learning; and
- accelerating the transfer of knowledge and know-how between actors.

Public administrators can improve the anticipative, innovative and adaptive capacity of their organizations by strategically maintaining a level of redundancy and nurturing sources of renewal. They can protect resources for exploration and discovery. They can conserve and build new capacities, such as a policy function that is adept at strategic anticipation, monitoring and dynamic response. They can create “safe spaces” or incubators that provide hospitable environments for experimentation and innovation. They can embrace diversity in terms of people and functions to provide a broader range of options in the face of adversity.

Implementing many of the measures to improve anticipative, innovative and capacities—and, with them, improve government’s ability to confront complexity and bounce back from shocks and surprises—will require some targeted investments for the long term and tolerance of the admittedly small amount of “excess” capacity that will be needed in public organizations. Ultimately, this will require recognition that less government, and more efficient government, does not necessarily amount to better government.

**Concluding Thoughts**

It has taken centuries and much sacrifice to build our modern nation states and a great deal of commitment to build the civil societies that comprise them. The art and science of public governance and administration has played an important role in building the institutional and organizational capacities to achieve public results and to serve the collective interest. Practitioners and scholars in this domain have much to be proud of.

The transformation that has taken place in the world since the 1980s, along with recent global crises, signal a need to search for a new balance between market and democracy; between the public and the private interests; between freedom in the private sphere and common responsibility in the collective sphere.

A new balance requires new capacity, new insights and new knowledge that complement what has come before.

As a professional and scholarly endeavor, the art and science of public governance and administration has a unique internal coherence. It was born out of constitutional law and political science. Over time, it embraced ideas and practices from economics and business management, it integrated knowledge from the organizational sciences and became enriched by ideas from the social sciences.
Those who practice and study governance and public administration must once again explore new frontiers as it begins to integrate ideas from many knowledge domains—from complexity to adaptive systems theories, from collective intelligence to network theories, and from evolutionary biology and ecology to epidemiology and national security. This will provide important insights for the future of governance and public administration and drive the process by which anticipative, innovative and adaptive capacities are developed further. It will also provide insights as to whether and how institutional and organizational capacity-building needs to be reshaped.

Above all, it may be time to rediscover some very old concepts of the public good, collective interests, democracy, civics and citizenship and to explore their meaning in the changing landscape of today’s reality.

A unifying framework may be helpful to guide the exploration and interrelationships between old and new ideas. One possibility is the conceptual framework that has been developed as part of an international research program that the author is currently leading in regards to a “new synthesis in public administration” (see Figure 5) and which has informed the presentation of ideas in this paper.12

Ultimately, any exploration on the future of public administration can most effectively be done by practitioners, academics and scholars working together because research and practice are inseparable parts of a common enterprise.

12 For information on the “new synthesis” project, see http://www.ns6newsynthesis.com.
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