

# Government Fit for the Time

IIAS Finland  
Helsinki, Finland, August 21, 2014

First published by the Government of Finland



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Published by Public Governance International (PGI)

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September, 2014

ISBN 978-1-927441-32-9

# Introduction

What would happen if we could blend together powerful examples of how governments go about solving intractable problems in various parts of the world, new findings from a variety of academic disciplines, and conventional practice in public administration of enduring value?

The result would be a roadmap that is quite different from conventional approaches. It would be a synthesis of old and new ideas, traditional practices and new approaches that are better adapted to the changing landscape of the world we live in. This is the essence of the New Synthesis Initiative.<sup>1</sup>

A roadmap is not a journey. The journey can only take shape in the context and circumstances that are unique to each country.

## Stories People Told Me

### 1. The Municipality of Frederica (Denmark)<sup>2</sup>

The Municipality of Frederica is a town of 50,000 people. Its aging population was putting significant pressure on the municipality's financial resources and was challenging its capacity to maintain services for elderly people living at home. Municipal officials were facing the well-known dilemma of whether to inject more resources into current services or to ration services in some ways. In the end, reducing services promised to lead to more spending since people would resort to using care services more intensely instead.

The municipal council started to look at the issue from the perspective of users and society.

- They questioned what would happen if elders were asked about what they would need to live their life in their own way and in their home for as long as possible?
- They asked what would happen if elders could choose the services they valued the most (with professional guidance) within the fiscal constraints set by the municipal authority?

The results were enlightening. No one in the program wanted all of the services they were entitled to. Many wanted less services and some wanted support of a kind that was not previously offered.

1 For more information on the New Synthesis Initiative, please visit [www.nsworld.org](http://www.nsworld.org)

2 Full details of the case can be found in Jocelyne Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*. (Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).

Public programs typically provide users with standardised entitlements. This reflects a concern for fairness and equal treatment. But in reality, the end result may be neither fair nor efficient. In this case:

- It encouraged the passive consumption of resources and increased dependency.
- It was making people more vulnerable.
- The programs were not fulfilling their ultimate public purpose of helping elder people to live at home.

This realisation led to a major re-conceptualisation of the program. The services are now framed around common principles but encourage a diversity of approaches. After four years:

- 45 percent of participants have regained self-reliance;
- 40 percent need less care than before;
- 85 percent claim that they have a better quality of life;
- The municipality has enough financial resources to address the needs of an aging population.

The municipality has since applied similar principles to other services and is re-thinking its governance model.

The main lesson in this case is that a different mental map helps reveal a broader range of options available to government to address complex challenges. The most needed conversation was not about cost cutting. It was about what kind of society the Municipality of Frederica aspired to build. This is where political leadership is most needed.

## 2. Bolsa Familia (Brazil)<sup>3</sup>

There are powerful insights to be gained from practical initiatives large or small and from everywhere in the world. The next story is disproportionate by its scale, scope, and the complexity of the initiative.

Bolsa Familia is the largest conditional cash transfer program in the world. It reaches 50 million people. It has been instrumental in lifting millions of people out of poverty.

The story began with the awareness that public programs may be efficient, and still miss the mark. They may comply with every conceivable internal requirement without producing the desired public outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> For more information please see Jocelyne Bourgon. *Bolsa Familia Program: Funding Families for Development*. (Ottawa, Public Governance International, 2011). Full text available from [www.nsworld.org](http://www.nsworld.org)

Over the years, Brazil has introduced numerous programs to mitigate the effect of poverty—health programs to combat child mortality, nutritional programs to reduce child malnutrition, medical programs for the supervision of poor women during pregnancy, etc. The responsible ministries could provide evidence that their respective programs were managed competently. But the real purpose of all of these programs was to alleviate poverty and poverty levels were not coming down.

The Bolsa Familia evolved through trial and error. The initiative progressively straddled five ministries to pool knowledge, resources and capabilities from across all levels of government.

The program empowered families to make decisions on the best ways to use the funds provided to them in light of their particular circumstances. The funds were transferred once a month to the head of the family (generally a woman) by means of an ATM card. For most families, this was their first experience with banking and with IC technologies. It was a huge gamble.

The program came under severe criticism. Some argued that poor and illiterate people could not make wise decisions for themselves. It was a risky initiative but after some growing pains the program was a resounding success. The results have been audited and studied by the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the UN Secretariat. Today, it enjoys the support of all of Brazil's political parties and has been a source of inspiration for other developing countries. Many years of data have documented the impact of the program on reducing poverty.

A clear purpose framed in societal terms, a government-wide effort, a program designed from a user perspective and engaging the responsibility of program beneficiaries were contributing factors to the success of the initiative.

### 3. Singapore Prison Service (Singapore)<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, the Singapore Prison Service was facing many of the same problems experienced by other countries—overcrowded prisons, increasing costs, high rates of recidivism, low morale, high staff turnover, etc.

The situation was unsustainable. The system was costly and inefficient. Ex-offenders were generally unable to make a living and re-integrate into society. They ended up being a burden for their family, their community and society as a whole. Most of them would eventually be arrested again and sent back to jail.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, please see: Lena Leong, "The Story of the Singapore Prison Service: From Custodians of Prisoners to Captains of Life", in J. Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration*. (Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).

It was time to explore different avenues—“there had to be a better way.” The management team set their eyes on re-integration. They started to explore how the prison system could form part of a broader system to help ensure that offenders who had served their time could live a productive life and support themselves thereafter.

This required the contribution of many.

- They needed the support of employers and the business community to provide employment opportunities.
- They needed the support of voluntary groups for after-care and transition.
- They needed the inmates’ families to support their own while in prison.
- They needed the inmates to support themselves so that the time spent in jail could become time invested in a better future.
- They needed the prison staff to support and implement the program on a daily basis.

The most challenging step was to gain public support—“we all need a second chance” became the rallying cry of the initiative.

- Between 1998 and 2009, the recidivism rate dropped from 44 to 26 percent.
- Today the Singapore Prison Service is one of the most cost-efficient in the world and has one of the lowest inmate-to-staff ratios.

A key lesson from this case is that the role of government is not limited to what government can do on its own. Rather, the role of government is to steer an ecosystem of inter-related contributions—some across government and some across sectors—to achieve results of value for society as a whole.

Another lesson is that the impetus for change can come from anywhere—sometimes from the top down and sometimes from the bottom up. In the end, it must all come together.

## Learning from Practice

In every country, one can find many inspiring examples of how governments have found ways to address the problems that had remained intractable until then.

In all three examples, the challenges had reached crisis proportions. The question is: Why does government find it so difficult to do on an ongoing basis what it does so well in a period of crisis?

Each of the aforementioned examples display a number of common characteristics:

- They look at the issue from a broader perspective.
- They frame the issue from a societal and citizen perspective.
- They mobilise efforts across government—rising above the silos we have created.
- They actively engage the users of public services to work with government to produce better results for society.

The challenge is to understand what we need to do to ensure that public institutions and public organisations have the capacity to act as one in support of government-wide priorities, serve as one to improve citizen's experience and learn as one to uncover new and better ways to fulfill their mission?

The reality is that our model of government was not designed to make it easy to work that way—or put another way—the system is perfectly designed to generate the results we are witnessing. If we see silos, lack of co-operation, difficulty to innovate or to pool knowledge from across government, it is because our systems and practices encourage that behaviour.

The good news is that what was created by design can be changed by design. This requires:

- A different way of thinking about the role of government in society.
- An openness to different ways of doing things.
- A different relationship between government and citizens.

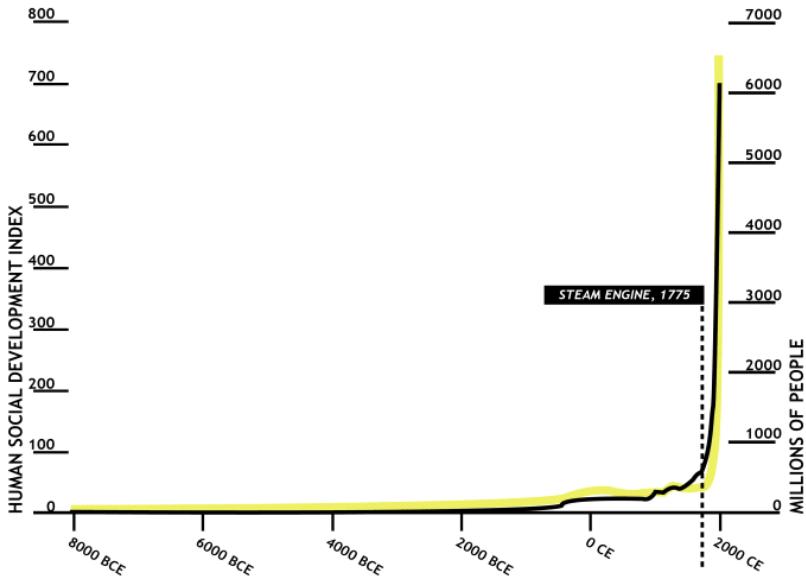
The good news is also that this is a good time to be in government. People in government today will invent new ways of governing in response to the changing landscape of the world we live in.

Preparing government that is fit for the challenge of serving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the focus of an international collaborative effort over the last five years—called the New Synthesis Initiative. I will share some of the findings with you but first let me bring you back in time.

# An Industrial State for the Industrial Age

Looking back is always useful. It helps us see more clearly what is already emerging.

Figure 1: What Bent the Curve of Human History? The Industrial Revolution



Source: Ian Morris, Why the West Rules for Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 497.

Figure 1 shows how the industrial revolution propelled population growth and social development. It was the result of several nearly simultaneous innovations.

These innovations gave rise to the mass production of goods, the industrialisation of the economy and the 'modern way of life'.

Government and public institutions played a key role in ensuring the successful transition of countries undergoing a dual transformation related to industrialisation and democratisation. They provided the legal framework for a market economy. They built schools, hospitals, roads, harbours, airports and the infrastructure to provide electricity to every village. They ensured wide-spread access to phone and modern communication technologies, etc.

Public Institutions inherited from that time share a number of characteristics:

- They are designed for the mass-production of standardised public services.
- They ensure the dominance of the rule of law and value compliance.

- They generate a subservient relationship with citizens—citizens vote, pay taxes, and obey the law.
- They encourage stability and predictability.

This model of government has contributed immeasurably to the success of OECD countries. It plays an essential role in nation-building. But this model will be insufficient for facing the complex challenges of governing in a post-industrial era.

## Different Times, Different Ways

People in government today are facing a different set of circumstances.

- They are the first generation to serve in a world where social media transform the public policy issues we are facing as a society and the context within which solutions must be found.
- People in government today face an increasing number of complex issues, such as an aging population, climate change and global security etc. These issues are multidimensional—the economic, social, political and environmental dimensions are intertwined—and respect no boundaries.
- People in government today are called upon to serve in a world characterised by volatility and uncertainty resulting from our global economy and our hyper connected society. The last fifteen years have witnessed crises of various kinds—there is every reason to believe that the scale, scope and frequency of crises will continue to increase.

Governing in a post-industrial era may not be more difficult than before in absolute terms—past generations governed through two World Wars, a Cold War and a Great Depression. However, the demands facing government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are different.

- We will not be able to find solutions to today's problems by relying on the ideas that gave rise to these problems in the first instance.
- We cannot solve the problems of 21<sup>st</sup> century with the tools of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Different times call for different ways of thinking and different ways of doing things.

There is much experimentation with different approaches to governing in various parts of the world at this time. Over time, some of these initiatives will come to dominate. The success of each country is not pre-ordained, but we can safely bet that the countries with public institutions fit for the challenges of serving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have a greater capacity to

influence the course of events in their favour and the ability to out-perform others.

They will be able to adapt to a changing landscape and to prosper in unforeseen circumstances.

## Preparing Government Fit for the 21st Century

Allow me to summarize for you some of the findings from the New Synthesis Initiative and illustrate what difference this makes in practice.<sup>5</sup>

### Public Purpose First

Public institutions, public organisations, and public policies and programs serve a public purpose. This is their *raison d'être*. This is the essence of their role in society. This purpose always exceeds the capacity of any single agency or ministry.

Articulating this broad public purpose is of critical importance. The way we *frame* an issue and position the contribution of a public organisation has a direct impact on the solutions that will be found and the outcomes that will be generated. This was illustrated by the Danish example of elder care in the Municipality of Fredericia.

The contribution of public agencies, programs and services must be positioned in the broader context of system-wide and societal results.

- The broader the view, the better the chance of finding viable solutions to the problems we are facing as a society.
- A narrow view or an agency centric focus leads to sub-optimal results even when additional resources are available.

Ministries face an inherent difficulty when attempting to rise above an agency focus. They have a legitimate concern about producing the best possible results within their mandate and within their legal and financial constraints.

5 Jocelyne Bourgon. The First New Synthesis Laboratory for Master Practitioners. *Ethos* 13, (2014): 88-95.

6 The case presented is a compilation of cases taken from Singapore, Australia (NSW), New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, which each faced similar challenges in the social service sector when dealing with children at risk.

The case presented uses elements of all of the cases to capture an average example but is no way illustrative of any individual case.

## Learning from Practice

The case of agencies dealing with children at risk presents a powerful example of the importance of positioning in practice.<sup>6</sup>

In many countries, agencies or departments tasked with protecting children from ‘significant harm’ have been faced with an increasing workload and a fixed budget. The ability to cope with an increased workload with the same level of resources was generally seen as a sign of success. But in fact, positioning the issue in narrow agency-centric terms obscured the larger problem—that more and more children were facing harm.

A system-wide or societal perspective would encourage managers to explore how to reduce the number of children in need. This would bring the focus to measures related to prevention, risk reduction, etc. The challenge is about moving agencies upstream to work with others to share knowledge and information to reduce potential risks. This would require the contribution of other actors—hospitals, schools and child welfare agencies—that have relevant knowledge and insight. Each could help anticipate, detect and act proactively to reduce the number of children at risk. They need to work together to achieve the common goal of protecting children from harm.

Going beyond managing cases with significant risk (agency results), the question then becomes “how can actors contribute to building a society where every child benefits from a caring family and where every family is able to fulfill its caretaker role (societal outcomes)?”<sup>7</sup>

Re-framing to focus on societal results helps ensure that the actions taken at the agency level contribute to advancing societal outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

Ministers and officials need to help others to frame and re-frame issues until they achieve a sufficient level of clarity about the desired societal impact. What difference will this make for society? What kind of future are these efforts aimed at building?

We are still lacking many of the tools to make it easier to focus on societal results:

- A Council of Ministers (CoM) system determined to ensure that the whole system focusses on what matters most for society and to ensure the overall coherence of government actions and decisions.
- A Centre of Government (CoG) with the legitimacy to mobilise resources and efforts behind government-wide priorities.

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyne Bourgon, *A Self-Help Guide for Practitioners*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> A further example of re-framing is associated with land transportation - changing the frame from one of building roads to connecting people and building communities provides [www.nsworld.org](http://www.nsworld.org).

- The management of Permanent Secretaries as a community to marshal support behind government-wide initiatives and for the stewardship of the civil service.
- A performance management system that recognises the individual, shared and collective responsibilities of senior leaders.

## Leveraging the Power of Others

In every country, a small group of people have the right to use the authority of the state to achieve results. They were granted this right because of the position they hold and because of their duty to serve the collective interest. It is the case for elected officials, and by delegation, for professional public servants. But not everything can be achieved by relying on the authority of the state to regulate, tax and spend government revenue.

Leveraging<sup>9</sup> is about expanding the impact of government actions by building on the strengths of others. It uses the authority of the state to lever the contribution of others in support of a common cause. This requires the capacity to work across boundaries and to pool resources (knowledge, know-how and capabilities) wherever they may reside.

Leveraging is my definition of smart government. It is the capacity to achieve a greater impact with less effort and resources by building on the strength of others. One of the great findings of our work on leveraging is that there are always enough resources around to achieve better results and make progress if we are smart enough to pool existing resources and capabilities. This was illustrated by the Bolsa Familia example.

Working across boundaries is a characteristic of government in a post-industrial era. Public institutions fit for the time must be able to serve as one.

In spite of the growing awareness of the need for whole-of-government efforts and to work across multiple boundaries to address complex issues or achieve better results at a lower cost for society, progress has remained slow. Departments are running into all kinds of difficulties.

- Legislative barriers slow the ability for departments and agencies to work across.
- A lack of mechanisms to support co-operation and co-decision-making across agencies—including sharing information, shared accountability for shared projects and shared reporting on collective efforts.

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyne Bourgon, *A Self-Help Guide for Practitioners*. (Ottawa: Public Governance International, 2013).

10 Jocelyne, Bourgon. Reclaiming Public Administration. Paper presented at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy Lecture Series held in Saskatoon, Canada on April 22, 2014. Available from [http://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/News\\_Events/JSGS%20Feature%20Lecture%20Series/index.php](http://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/News_Events/JSGS%20Feature%20Lecture%20Series/index.php).

- There are financial barriers to reallocating resources to fund shared initiatives.
- There are also individual barriers as performance pay and career progression reward individual rather than collective efforts.

Creating public organisations that are fit for the time will require a serious re-engineering of our existing public administration systems and practices.

## Citizens as Value Creators

Citizens are breaking out of their subservient relationship. On this, there is no turning back. They want to have a say in matters of interest to them. They want to play an active role with government in the services provided to them. Modern technologies are giving them the means to ensure that their voices will be heard.<sup>10</sup>

This also gives government the means to explore a different sharing of responsibilities and to design policies and programs that allow users to play an active role in the creation, delivery and monitoring of government programs and services.

This was illustrated by all three cases: the elder case in Denmark (co-creating with elders), the Bolsa Familia in Brazil (co-producing with families) and the prison case in Singapore (co-producing with multiple actors and agents).

In every country, one can find examples of how a different sharing of responsibility between government and citizens yields better results, higher user satisfaction and lower overall costs for society.<sup>11</sup>

Citizen engagement has attracted a lot of attention lately. Public administration is prone to fashion and fads. Suddenly ‘commissioning’ is the solution to all problems; the year before it was ‘lean’ or ‘nudging’. When a practice becomes fashionable, the label is applied to everything. If something means everything, then it means nothing.

The NS Initiative is focussing on practices that generate mutuality and shared responsibility between users and public service providers. Some of the most promising practices include:

- Co-production—when users and service providers make better use of each other’s assets.<sup>12</sup>
- Co-creation—when users play an active role in shaping policy responses and designing public services.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on innovative approaches to governance, see [www.govint.org](http://www.govint.org).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Bason, Johanne Mygind, and Runa Sabrow. *Co-Production: Towards a new Welfare Model*. Copenhagen: Mindlab, 2014. Available from: [http://www.mind-lab.dk/assets/878/Pixi\\_samproduktion\\_ENG\\_til\\_web.pdf](http://www.mind-lab.dk/assets/878/Pixi_samproduktion_ENG_til_web.pdf).

- Technology enabled self-organisation—when IC technologies empower people to pursue their individual interests in a manner that also promotes the collective interest. This may be the most promising avenue of all.

An important finding of our work so far is that “one model does not fit all” and one way of doing things does not work when it comes to addressing complex issues. A diversity of complementary approaches is needed.

The magic is in the capacity to combine issues, means and capabilities in new ways to achieve the desired outcome. It is in the interactions among inter-related activities. Conventional methods, some old ways and some ground-breaking innovations all have a contribution to make.

## Learning from practice

A good example of this is the case of the Swedish Clinic of Internal Medicine.<sup>13</sup>

The Clinic was facing unsustainable conditions. Demand was increasing and resources were declining.

The hospital decided to adopt a new approach. The approach was co-created among hospital employees and involved dividing patients according to the stage of their disease.

In the case of patients in stable condition, no regular visits and tests were scheduled. Patients were made responsible for their own health care on a daily basis. In cases where more active monitoring was required, patients enlisted the help of their families and friends. When acute care was required, patients were admitted to receive conventional treatment.

This placed patients in the middle of two streams—a community stream composed of the patients’ family and friends, and a medical stream composed of the hospital staff. By making patients responsible for their own daily health care, the hospital staff were able to reduce waiting lists and had more time to care for sick patients.

In this way, health care was co-produced by the hospital staff, patients and the community.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jörgen Tholstrup, Empowering Patients to Need Less Care and do better in Highland Hospital, South Sweden. 2012. Available from: <http://www.govint.org/good-practice/case-studies/empowering-patients-to-need-less-care-and-do-better-in-highland-hospital-south-sweden/>

<sup>14</sup> For more examples of the value of engaging citizens in practice, please see the case of the British Cyclists, Reducing Energy Consumption in Charlotte, USA, and the Scottish Center for Telehealth found at [www.nsworld.org](http://www.nsworld.org).

## Conclusion: Acting as One, Serving as One, Learning as One

Government is more than the sum of its parts and public administration is more than the inner-workings of government. It is a relationship that binds government and citizens and that propels society forward.

This is a time for a New Synthesis—one that brings together the contribution of government, citizens and society to build a better future.

The trajectory of a country is not preordained. Past success does not guarantee future progress. Countries with public administration fit for the time will be able to propel their society forward.

Essentially...this IS a good time to be in government.

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