

A NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

NS is an International Co-Operation Project Led by:
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LEARNING FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

A NEW SYNTHESIS PERSPECTIVE [EXCERPT]

Excerpt from Keynote Speech Presented by Jocelyne Bourgon

National Conference – Association of Municipalities

Vejle, Denmark

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A New Synthesis Perspective
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Introduction

In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, the greatest cost will be the loss of lives. But, the greatest responsibility will be to ensure this cost is not wasted and that we learned from these events .

A crisis is an unprecedented opportunity to:

- bring about changes that were foreseen and needed in any event.
- prepare government and society for the challenges ahead.

You were asked: “what were you able to do during COVID19 pandemic that you would like to be able to do on an ongoing basis?”

Allow me to add a few questions for your consideration:

- What do we need to do to ensure that the capacity of government and society to invent solutions will keep pace with the increasing complexity of the world we live in?
- What do we need to do for public organisations to be able to do on an ongoing basis what some are able to do in time of crises?

Learning from the COVID Pandemic to Serve in the 21st Century

Learning is the starting point to building the capacity of government and society to face the challenges of the 21st century and, there is much to learn from the last few months.

The challenge you are facing is not to bring things back the way they were ...They will not. The challenge is to ensure that your country will be among the ones that will successfully navigate through an unprecedented period of change and emerge better positioned than before.

The challenge is to rethink practices that have served us well in the past but will be insufficient to face the challenges ahead.

A crisis on the scale of the COVIC-19 pandemic reveals the weaknesses of the systems, structures and the policy mix we have invented.

This is an important learning moment.

So, what can we learn from the COVID19 pandemic that would help governments prepare for what lays ahead. The lessons are many; I will mention only four.

A Predictable and Predicted Catastrophe

The COVID 19 pandemic was not an unexpected event.

Experts and scientists have been warning governments for years of the risks of a coronavirus pandemic. As a society, we chose to ignore the risks.

A pandemic or other high impact events are not black swans (unpredictable). They are the big black elephants in the room.

We know about the issue and we keep ignoring the mounting evidence at the risk of millions of people suffering and of permanently damaging the life sustaining capacity of the planet.

Climate change is at the top of the list of predicted and predictable catastrophic events.

Events like the COVID 19 pandemic and climate change share several characteristics:

- Their impact grows exponentially once a threshold is reached.
- They are risks multiplier events that trigger cascading failures. Failing to contain the pandemic overwhelms the health system, leading to the shutdown of the economy, the breakdown of supply chains, and massive public interventions at huge cost for society.
- They are regressive events. They disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people, regions, or sub-systems.

An important learning from the COVID pandemic would be to realize that it does not need to be this way; that it is preferable to act proactively than to bear the full impact of other predictable high impact events.

The COVID 19 pandemic is a foretaste of what a climate change crisis would look like. Reducing the risks means:

- Accepting to pay a price now because the cost later will be unaffordable.
- Achieving a new balance to reconcile the economic and social spheres with sound ecological principles.
- Achieving a high level of public awareness and collective consciousness to overcome the deliberate blindness that prevails in some sectors and some countries.

We know enough about the issue to act and we know how to change the course of events... if there is the will.

This is an important learning moment. Time will tell if we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Irreplaceable Role of the State

A key lesson from the COVID pandemics is about the importance of the public sector.

In many countries, the public discourse over several years has focussed on the market economy in general and the benefits of a global economy in particular. Important as this may be, this discourse has obscured the importance of the role of government and the public sector.

The New Public Management has exacerbated this tendency by focussing on efficiency, productivity and the infamous “doing more with less” in government.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that a more balanced perspective is needed:

- The State is the insurer of last resort. It is the instrument society has perfected over a long period of time to make collective decisions and to deploy collective resources and capabilities when needed.
- A crisis on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be left to private initiatives. It is the responsibility of government to ensure that the contribution of the public, private, civic sectors converge in a meaningful way.

The role of public institutions and public organisations is to invent solutions to the problems of society that cannot be solved without some use of the authority of the State, and to generate results that would not exist without some use of the levers of the State.

The lesson learned during the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic is that public institutions matter. Countries with:

- well performing public institutions and an elaborate social safety net were better able to mitigate the impact for the most vulnerable in society.
- a tradition for collaboration across sectors and a civic spirit that make it possible to act collectively performed better than others.

The pandemic also revealed the importance of public sector leaders at the national, regional and local levels.

We have witnessed the price paid in human life for denial and inaction and the heavy cost resulting from a lack of social cohesion.

This is an important moment to think about what we expect of government.

The way we think about the role of government has a profound impact on the kind of public sector we build, the capacity to invent solutions to the problems we experience collectively, and the kind of society that we will build as a result.

The Irreplaceable Role of Citizens

A significant factor in the success of countries that were able to contain the pandemic and limit the impact for society was people's behavior, the courage of families, and the solidarity demonstrated by communities.

In fact, in countries like yours, citizens deserve much of the praise:

- People, by and large, took on board the recommendations of their health authorities.
- They shouldered a huge burden by working at home, taking care of children, schooling them, and keeping them safe
- They reinvented: their work through digital means; their life to stay safe; and found new ways of maintaining some work-life balance to keep their sanity.

Resilient societies need responsible citizens:

- Able to balance individual rights and collective responsibilities.
- Able to share responsibility with government for the public results we aspire to achieve.
- Able to contribute to collective problem solving by generating results that are beyond the reach of government and that money cannot buy.

Citizens able to pursue their individual interest in ways that also advance the collective interest build a resilient society able to absorb shocks and to adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

This civic spirit is most visible in time of crises when it is most needed.

It is on display in the willingness of people to come together for common purpose or to face a common enemy.

Complex problems, like the COVID pandemic, cannot be addressed without the active contribution of citizens, families, and communities.

A Great Accelerator

My fourth and last lesson learned is about the accelerating velocity of change.

The last few months have been a period of acceleration. More changes were introduced in a few months than during the previous ten years:

- The digital economy and society are now a reality.
- Enterprises are rethinking their supply chains to reduce vulnerability. They are reconfiguring their production models.
- E-commerce has exploded.
- E-learning is now part of the education system.
- E-Medicine transforms the configuration of the health system and opens new avenues for a more active role by users.
- Work at home expands the range of options to modernize the workplace, etc.
- The programs launched by governments provide an unprecedented opportunity to re-think the mix of policies needed in the future.

Many of these changes were foreseen and would have taken place anyway but over a longer period.

A key lesson from the COVID pandemic is that we are underestimating the capacity of government and society to adapt at a fast pace.

We are underestimating the collective capacity to invent solutions to the complex problems of living in society

In summary, governing and serving in the 21st century is not a process of replication...we have not been there before.... it is process of invention.

This requires a different way of thinking and different approaches to problem solving.

We need to accelerate the pace to ensure that the capacity of government and society to invent solutions will keep up with the increasing complexity of the world we live in.

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