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Public sector workforce matters

Questions of public sector workforce capacity and legitimacy in relation to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Alketa Peci in collaboration with fellow Committee members Devon Rowe and Najat Zarrouk.

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Questions of public sector workforce capacity and legitimacy in relation to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

Summary

In the present paper the authors elaborate on the capacity and legitimacy of the public sector workforce to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and for a robust and well-functioning crisis management system, specifically within the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The authors aim to build on previous policy recommendations of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration, with a focus on a public sector capacity approach that fosters the development of resilient human resources and competencies, which both contribute to the achievement of the Goals and can be mobilized in response to crises when they arise.

A robust and well-functioning crisis management system calls for competent leadership, adequate governance capacity and governance legitimacy. The authors propose a capacity approach to crisis management, through which the public sector builds a stock of resources and competencies that can be drawn upon and quickly repositioned when urgently needed and become a building block for more resilient strategies towards achieving the Goals.

The capacity approach to preparing for crises can helpfully be supported with attention to questions of robustness, whereby the ability of decision makers to realize a public agenda, function or value in the face of turbulent events is strengthened through the flexible adaptation, agile modification and pragmatic redirection of policy. Such dynamic resilience calls for an ability to evolve with the times, an agile workforce, enhanced collaboration across government, design thinking and a closer relationship with stakeholders in the creation and implementation of solutions to governance challenges.

The authors also draw attention to the benefits of focusing on the quality of government, assured through merit-based, professional bureaucracies operating independently from the political sphere. Further development of digital government practices could assist in this respect. Importantly, within the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the quality of government can be measured by the commitment of the public sector workforce to addressing questions of social equity and the reduction of inequalities and administrative burdens in the design and implementation of policies and programmes.

I. Introduction

1. Placing human resources development at the core of sustainable development and developing short-, medium- and long-term strategies to effectively enhance human resources capacities and achieve educated, skilled, healthy, capable, productive and adaptable workforces are the foundation for achieving sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and development (see General Assembly resolution 74/236). As far back as 1992, Agenda 21 recognized that the ability of a country to pursue sustainable development was determined by the capacity of its people. Focusing on the public sector workforce is an essential part of such strategies, considering that the public sector is large in many countries, regardless of their income level. Public sector human resources account for about 32 per cent of paid employment, according to the Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators database of the World Bank. As such, public sector human resources need to become a benchmark of human resources development, sending the correct signal to societies.

2. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has severely tested political leadership, institutional frameworks at the local, national and global levels and societal trust in governments and the public sector workforce. It has demanded resilient strategies to cope with the crisis while simultaneously keeping track of achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2021, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration advised on the role of inclusive, effective and resilient institutions for sustainable recovery from the pandemic and timely implementation of the Goals (see [E/2021/44-E/C.16/2021/7](#), chap. III.D). With respect to the public sector workforce, the Committee recommended that special attention be given to front-line workers, ensuring that their jobs – which are key in pandemic management in policy areas such as health, education, sanitation, waste management and public transport – remain sufficiently attractive, with adequate and safe working conditions and adequate remuneration and compensation schemes. The Committee also recommended that the scope of public sector labour relations be broadened, incentivizing more flexible work arrangements and enhanced use of information and communications technologies, taking into account differences in digital access and competencies, as well as gender inequalities. Finally, the Committee advised that regaining trust in government can be fostered through a humanistic style of leadership and management and a focus on citizen-centricity in public service delivery.

3. In the present paper, the authors extend these policy recommendations by focusing on a public sector capacity approach that may make it possible to build resilient human resources and competencies that can be activated in times of crisis and for the achievement of the Goals. Turbulent problems – shaped by surprising, inconsistent, unpredictable and uncertain events – may continue to occur and demand governance robustness. Strengthening the capacity for crisis management may lead to changes that also help to solve big societal challenges, such as poverty and inequalities. Crises increase the need to address social vulnerabilities and tackle inequality in its multiple dimensions (e.g. poverty, gender and age) through effective management and may lead to enhanced capacity (e.g. through multi-actor collaboration) that becomes an important building block for the achievement of the Goals.

4. Therefore, building resilient human resources capacities and competencies that can be activated in times of crisis and for the achievement of the Goals are key lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the professionalization of the public sector workforce at all levels seems to play a particularly relevant role regarding the quality of government and effective policymaking. Good practices for resilient public sector capacities and governance robustness strategies emerge from

both developed and developing countries. Even in low-capacity contexts, strong political leadership and skilful strategies that activate societal trust through collaboration and networks can lead to progress in the implementation of the Goals.

5. Finally, reducing administrative burdens and inequalities related to public administration will be central to leaving no one behind and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

II. Strengthening public sector capacities and legitimacy for crisis management

Governance capacity and legitimacy for crisis management

6. The COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call regarding the role of governments broadly, and the role of the public service workforce more specifically. Defined as an extreme crisis – a “situation in which there is a perceived threat against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system that requires urgent remedial action in uncertain circumstances”,¹ the pandemic challenged the design of clear-cut strategies to tackle it. Weaknesses in pandemic preparedness echo the multidimensional nature of a health crisis that quickly escalated to an economic, social and humanitarian crisis, reflecting the interconnection of the global economy, travel and trade, as well as inequalities regarding social, economic and health (protection) aspects.

7. Evidence indicates that a robust and well-functioning crisis management system calls for competent leadership, adequate governance capacity and governance legitimacy. Public sector capacity or governance and policy capacity are typically defined as the set of skills, capabilities and resources necessary to perform policy functions, from the provision of public services to policy design and implementation.² However, the set of public sector capacities necessary for crisis management is often overlooked or there is an excessive focus on exogenous factors, such as political leadership, instead of internal public sector resources, including the role of human resources.

8. Governance legitimacy is usually observed through public trust in government crisis management. Building trust and sharing trustful relationships is a complex endeavour that depends on the quality of citizens’ experiences with public institutions and, more concretely, with public servants. In addition, trust in institutions may be strengthened or challenged when a crisis occurs.

9. On the one hand, in difficult and dramatic situations caused by crisis, such as after terrorist attacks and in wars, support for government institutions often increases (the “rally round the flag” effect) because citizens tend to increase support for public figures or institutions that are associated with the nation. In particular during the initial months of the pandemic, citizens tended to support government strategies, independent of the political status of the regime. In democratic consolidated regimes, public support tends to grow during a crisis, despite debates about the correct strategies in crisis management.

¹ See Tom Christensen, Per Lægreid and Lise H. Rykkja, “Organizing for crisis management: building governance capacity and legitimacy”, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 76, No. 6 (November–December 2016); and Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles and Paul ‘t Hart, eds., *Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots, and Terrorism* (Springfield, Illinois, Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1989), p. 10.

² See Xun Wu, Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, eds., *Policy Capacity and Governance: Assessing Governmental Competences and Capabilities in Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Mariana Mazzucato and Rainer Kattel, “COVID-19 and public-sector capacity”, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, vol. 36, Supplement 1 (2020).

10. On the other hand, crises are politically and emotionally salient events that exacerbate litigation among different stakeholders, negative press coverage or fake news. The tangible consequences of such an infodemic – defined as too much information, including false or misleading information, in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak – are particularly prominent in politically polarized societies. Declining trust in government, institutions and the civil service also reflects the rise of authoritarian populism and the backsliding of democratic institutions.

11. In 2021, in his report entitled “Our Common Agenda”, the Secretary-General highlighted the growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them, leading to an increase in social movements around the world, but also reflected in social responses to the pandemic (e.g. vaccine hesitancy). He emphasized that it was time to renew the social contract between governments and their people and within societies, to rebuild trust and to embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights. He noted that people needed to see results reflected in their daily lives, including through updated governance arrangements, to deliver better public goods and usher in a new era of universal social protection, health coverage, education, skills, decent work and housing, as well as universal access to the Internet by 2030 as a basic human right. His report supports the citizen-centred approach advocated in the Committee’s report on its twentieth session.

12. The success of pandemic policy responses varied in sometimes unexpected ways. Research about the policy responses of European States,³ for example, identified several factors related to government type, general governance, the specific health-sector related capacities of institutions, societal trust and party preferences as possible determinants of successful crisis management, suggesting some counterintuitive relationships: more centralized countries with lower government effectiveness, freedom and societal trust, but with separate ministries of health and health ministers with a medical background, acted faster and more decisively. High (perceived) capacity may have provided false confidence to some governments, resulting in a delayed response in the early stages of the pandemic. Furthermore, more conservative and authoritarian governments responded faster, but this did not always lead to better health outcomes. However, the difficulty for democratic regimes to take forceful or even appropriate action was corrected by the benefits of better information flow and higher public trust. Within some countries, there is an echo of this regime effect – leaders with an authoritarian approach in a democratic country will damage the flow of information and undermine public trust. Some low- or middle-income countries showcased strategies to slow down the pandemic with limited resources.

13. In 2020, Francis Fukuyama noted that “the major dividing line in effective crisis response will not place autocracies on one side and democracies on the other. The crucial determinant in performance will not be the type of regime, but the State’s capacity and, above all, trust in government”.⁴

14. Despite these complexities, policy learning has begun, and such knowledge can spill over into stronger crisis management response strategies. This is particularly relevant in the face of the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution that is destroying the planet, reflecting some of the major global risks. A new world of human resources management will have to be institutionalized at this time of environmental, political and socioeconomic strain.

³ Dimitar Toshkov, Brendan Carroll and Kutsal Yesilkagit, “Government capacity, societal trust or party preferences: what accounts for the variety of national policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe?”, *Journal of European Public Policy* (2021).

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The thing that determines a country’s resistance to the coronavirus”, *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2020.

15. Some aspects of this change are already being witnessed around the world. Dominica, for example, aims to be the first climate-resilient nation and has adopted sustainable practices, which have been embedded in the island's climate resilience and recovery plan, the public sector transformation strategy and the ongoing organizational review and reclassification exercise.

16. Several other megatrends also come into play, such as population growth and globalization, possibly leading to more global pandemics. The pandemic aftermath offers an opportunity to rethink the role of the public sector workforce in handling emergencies and solving big societal challenges, while supporting the achievement of the Goals.

Resilient public sector capacities

17. As already noted, a capacity approach allows governments to build a stock of resources and competencies that can be drawn upon for crisis management and become a building block for more resilient strategies towards achieving the Goals. Public sector capacities are reflected at the individual, organizational and systemic levels, focusing on the entire policy process in an integrated approach. Having strong State capacity is not a sufficient condition for higher performance in crisis management, but it is a necessary condition for available policy options, as the COVID-19 experience has demonstrated.

18. In the Caribbean region, for example, public sector organizations have faced considerable pressure to change in recent years, owing largely to their vulnerability to natural disasters and environmental changes, fiscal austerity measures, limited institutional capacity and the desire to enhance efficiency through public sector transformation efforts. There is a recognition that, to survive, they can no longer simply respond to changes in their environment, but should proactively shape their environment to maximize their own effectiveness and become resilient. Such transformation is not just about getting through a crisis and requires fiscal discipline, human resources development, environmental resilience and an improved business environment. Resilience goes beyond mitigating economic and environmental vulnerability. The traditional business model of simply reacting to changes can no longer be applied; instead, change needs to be anticipated, and it is important that the public sector is agile enough to act on it.

19. One important lesson that emerged from COVID-19 management is the importance of building excess or slack capacities in ordinary times – a revision of the new public management focus on efficiency, cost effectiveness or resource optimization. A growing body of research highlights the role of strong capacities of health-care systems in pandemic responses (e.g. in Germany and Singapore). However, capacity continues to be generally measured by physical resources, such as the availability of hospital beds, ignoring the role of slack capacities of the public service workforce – for example, health-care workers or military forces that can be flexibly reallocated to manage a health emergency.

20. As the experience of Singapore in the early stages of the pandemic has shown, the ability to mobilize relevant personnel from other parts of the public sector, such as investigative officers from the police force and military, contributed immensely to the Government's contact tracing capabilities. Currently, in many low- and middle-income countries, subject to new public management reforms with a focus on efficiency, the conditions for this strategy are severely constrained, demanding a new orientation for capacity-building.

21. Resilient governments also need to build capacities, mindsets, expertise, skills and tools for strategic anticipation and risk management. Such skills differ from those required to deal with an ongoing crisis and refer to the ability to anticipate future

shocks. The workforce involved in such an endeavour has a long-term orientation avoiding a focus on operational routines and procedures. In addition, these capacities need to expand to networks of international collaboration to account for the borderless nature of most of the complex crises that the world may face.

22. It is useful for government to be seen in a broad sense, including not only the Government at the national level but also and above all at the subnational level, be it delegated services or local and regional governments. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the crucial role that local governments play at the front line dealing with the pandemic, in particular by informing and raising awareness among populations, distributing prevention or protection equipment, as well as enabling access to care and basic public services such as water, electricity and public transport.

23. Crisis management indicates the important role of resilient institutional designs that allow for expert-based decision-making (e.g. autonomous regulatory agencies). Public sector capacity also embraces having an adequate number of human resources with the right training and skills to carry out the tasks that are assigned, from local firefighters, police officers and health workers to the government executives and experts making higher-level decisions about issues such as quarantines and bailouts. Strong institutional foundations (e.g. autonomous decision-making processes and professional instead of politically appointed staff) can buffer the role of authoritarian political leaders attempting to sideline key agencies and policy experts.

24. Citizens need to believe that their governments will respond to their needs, expectations and priorities by using expertise, technical knowledge, capacity and impartiality to make the best possible decisions based on available information. This is particularly challenging in times of partisan polarization, in which the attitudes of elites and citizens are clustered around their partisan affiliation.⁵ However, in the face of crisis, there is a special need for evidence-based policies and citizen-centred solutions. Emerging research indicates that, *ceteris paribus*, people trust expert-based criteria more than political criteria.⁶

25. Developing countries often score poorly regarding public sector capacity, including human resources capacities, which makes them even more vulnerable to crises. A recent survey in seven countries, for example, found an alarming lack of face masks in many hospitals.⁷ In addition, serious shortages of respirators, intensive care unit beds and human resources such as physicians and nurses were detected owing to limited public health capacities.

26. In recent decades, aid conditionalities, such as structural adjustment programmes, have sometimes demanded fiscal cuts and/or encouraged privatization of the public health sector with deleterious effects for health capacities.⁸ Nevertheless, some developing countries have creatively relied on important strategies to build governance robustness, as demonstrated in section III.

⁵ James N. Drukerman, Erik Peterson and Rune Slothuus, “How elite partisan polarization affects public opinion formation”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107, No. 1 (February 2013).

⁶ Victor Lapuente, “El leviatán contra la COVID”, presentation during the conference of the Centro Latinoamericano de Administración para el Desarrollo, Bogotá, November 2021.

⁷ The countries were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Nepal, Senegal and the United Republic of Tanzania.

⁸ Anis Z. Chowdhury and K.S. Jomo, “Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries: lessons from selected countries of the global south”, *Development*, vol. 63, Nos. 2–4 (December 2020).

III. Governance robustness as a dynamic resilience approach in support of the Sustainable Development Goals

27. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a stark reminder that human health is inextricably connected to planetary, economic and societal health and well-being. In addition, it can be seen as an additional test added to other challenges, such as massive flooding, drought and large streams of refugees, further challenging public sector capacities. Turbulent problems – shaped by surprising, inconsistent, unpredictable and uncertain events – will continue to occur and demand governance robustness.

28. Robust governance strategies refer to “the ability of one or more decision makers to uphold or realize a public agenda, function or value in the face of the challenge and stress from turbulent events and processes through the flexible adaptation, agile modification and pragmatic redirection of governance solutions”.⁹ In other words, governance robustness refers to dynamic resilience, engaging actors in an adaptive search for a new, emerging order instead of restoring a past equilibrium.

29. Robust governance demands flexible and agile public institutions, programmes and workforces that can transform and adapt in turbulent times. Closed bureaucracies shaped by large, compartmentalized and insulated hierarchies, careers and positions, standardized routines and public service production, control-fixated administrative systems and a legalistic zero-error culture challenge innovation and scalable solutions that provide governance robustness.

30. In the past, robust governance strategies were skilfully adopted by many low- or middle-income countries. The Kerala state government in India and the Government of Viet Nam, for example, stand out as cases applying an effective model, adaptive to time and context, that mobilized and engaged wider society.

31. In Viet Nam, the merging of different health system units into the Centre for Disease Control as a health system organization saved massive resources. The early establishment of a formal committee responding to the pandemic helped to unify every public health strategy. The mobilization of different stakeholders and communities added resources and facilitated the synchronous implementation of response strategies, even where those strategies involved significant personal or financial sacrifice. National training on COVID-19 treatment for health-care professionals across the entire hospital system was useful to expand health service availability. Quickly published response guidelines helped to activate every level of the health system and involve every sector of society.¹⁰

32. In Morocco, an interministerial commission representing all stakeholders established a solid road map to, among other things, inform and raise awareness, ensure the distribution of prevention and protection material and equipment, set up the structures needed for the national vaccination process operation, support sectors

⁹ See Christopher Ansell, Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, “The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems”, *Public Management Review*, vol. 23, No. 7 (2021); John M. Anderies, and Marco A. Janssen, “Robustness of social-ecological systems: implications for public policy”, *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 41, No. 3 (August 2013); and Michael Howlett, Giliberto Capano and M. Ramesh, “Designing for robustness: surprise, agility and improvisation in policy design”, *Policy and Society*, vol. 37, No. 4 (2018).

¹⁰ Huy Van Nguyen and others, “An adaptive model of health system organization and responses helped Vietnam to successfully halt the COVID-19 pandemic: what lessons can be learned from a resource-constrained country”, *The International Journal of Health Planning and Management*, vol. 35, No. 5 (September 2020).

affected by the crisis and mobilize resources. This has enabled the country to be cited among those coping well with the pandemic.

33. The repertoire of robust governance strategies is still evolving, but some initial strategies that emerged during the pandemic indicate potential venues, in particular for the public service workforce.

34. A whole-of-government approach for effective coordination among different government departments and their various layers has been key in countries shaped by scarce public sector capacities. The Kerala state government in India, for example, set up 18 interdepartmental committees involving all branches of government, which meet daily to evaluate the situation. In Argentina, the Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers has responsibility for the General Coordination Unit of the comprehensive plan for the prevention of public health events of international importance.¹¹

35. Scalability is important in order to flexibly mobilize and demobilize resources across organizations, levels and sectors to scale up the provision of specific solutions to meet changing needs and demands. To face COVID-19-related pressing demands, some governments created a public job bank with trainees, retired health-care workers or medical and nursing students. The Kerala state government mobilized more than 300,000 volunteers to help to implement various infection control measures. This additional workforce participating on a voluntary or compensatory basis was relevant to assist health-care workers. However, rigid and highly formalized bureaucratic systems of human resources may face operational difficulties in quickly adapting to and implementing such new policy measures.

36. Previous, limited, crisis-related experiences confirm the need for collaborative partnership, based on increased communication, along with enhanced coordination and strengthened cooperation within and among organizations and different stakeholders, including the public. Such collaboration based on an integrated approach is an essential element of managing a disaster or crisis, regardless of scale or type, in particular at the local level.¹² In addition, multi-actor collaboration that emerges and consolidates in times of crisis can also become an important network that supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

37. Multi-actor collaboration is aimed at creating commitment to an overall strategy while encouraging actors to adapt to changing conditions on the ground. There have been interesting cases of local municipalities, school principals, teachers and parents collaborating to find safe and responsible ways of reopening schools after COVID-19 lockdowns on the basis of national health regulations that require interpretation and adjustment to fit local conditions. The Kerala state government invited religious leaders, local bodies and non-profit organizations to participate in policy design and implementation, avoiding using the term “social distancing”, which has caste and class connotations, and instead emphasizing “physical distancing” as part of a more socially inclusive approach in line with more people-centric development practices based on social solidarity. The government successfully mobilized civil society organizations to support its Break the Chain awareness campaign aimed at promoting the importance of hand hygiene, physical distancing and cough etiquette, and motivated numerous micro-enterprises to produce hand sanitizers and face masks, while distributing interest-free loans worth 200 billion rupees to families in need.¹³

¹¹ Chowdhury and Jomo, “Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic”.

¹² Claire Connolly Knox, Vanessa Lopez-Littleton and Tonya E. Thornton, “The nexus between emergency management, public health, and equity: responding to crisis, and mitigating future hazards”, *Public Administration Review* (November 2021).

¹³ Chowdhury and Jomo, “Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic”.

38. Design thinking may help to transform the culture of the public workforce by encouraging teams to create user-friendly new solutions as well as develop and test prototypes through experimentation. Collaborative relations with relevant and affected actors and across bureaucratic silos need to be built, cultivated and nurtured. Multi-actor collaborations around key purposes are key to mobilizing relevant resources and enhancing knowledge-sharing and innovation. During a crisis, local managers are particularly trapped between the politics of the crisis, blame-shifting games and the needs of the citizens that they serve. Imagining a future without such pressures would be naive. However, previous experience in public-private collaboration has built relational trust and a stronger positive reputation and has made it easier to collaborate during turbulent crises or for achieving the Goals.

39. A simultaneously adaptive and flexible governance approach is challenging, as the decentralization dilemma points out. On the one hand, decentralization is necessary to adapt to local circumstances but, on the other hand, centralization is key for coordination, which also facilitates adaptation. The Dutch example of developing a smartphone COVID-19 track-and-trace application exemplifies this point. The Government centrally announced an “appathon” to encourage developers to quickly produce a variety of candidate applications. In a decentral undertaking, different companies were to develop their applications in parallel, and each proposal would be evaluated at a central event, with the best one chosen. The approach was very agile, resulting in seven applications being developed in one week. However, all were quickly eliminated owing to privacy issues upon closer scrutiny by the (central) Data Protection Authority of the Netherlands. A lack of institutions in place to facilitate this coordination, such as mature regulations on privacy that could be easily incorporated into the development of applications (part of the above-mentioned resilient institutional designs) hindered the strategy, despite the existence of agile methods.¹⁴

40. Finally, dynamic resilience demands a closer relationship with citizens that become co-creators and co-implementors of robust governance solutions. To build popular support, which is necessary to overcome the discomfort of experimental solutions, governments need to build proximity with citizens, inviting them to participate in the co-creation of strategies necessary for robust governance. Political leadership is key in communication with citizens. Daily press conferences were organized by the Kerala state government at which the state Minister of Health and the Chief Minister provided key essential epidemiological information to help citizens to better understand the threat and related issues, to ensure compliance with prescribed precautionary measures and to avoid panic. In Viet Nam, the Ministry of Health online portal immediately publicized each new case with details including location, mode of infection and action taken. The Government has been creative, teaming up with two famous pop singers to produce, promote and broadcast an educational song about the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and by mobilizing influential youth leaders to broadcast supportive messages to raise the morale of those quarantined and others.

41. In times of vaccine hesitancy, the trust that society may build towards the front-line workforce is particularly relevant in terms of short- and long-term benefits. Bureaucratic representation (e.g. in terms of race, ethnicity and gender, depending on the context) and more sophisticated reputation management strategies are necessary to build such trust.

¹⁴ Marijn Janssen and Haiko van der Voort, “Agile and adaptive governance in crisis response: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic”, *International Journal of Information Management*, vol. 55, art. 102180 (December 2020).

IV. Quality-of-government approach

Definition and examples

42. Most of the characteristics associated with a strong crisis management response reflect the quality of government, which is defined by some theorists as the capacity to impartially implement public policies and by others as the ability of the government to formulate and execute policy in a competent way.¹⁵

43. The quality-of-government approach has been key to understanding the association between the public service workforce and socioeconomic development or curbing corruption. Indeed, a series of academic studies indicates that impartial Weberian bureaucracies, shaped by political autonomy and a merit-based human resources system, tend to be positively associated with socioeconomic development and the prevention of corruption. A stable and professional bureaucracy is also correlated with political legitimacy, satisfaction with government and support for democracy.

44. In other words, merit-based bureaucracies, which tend to operate independently from the political sphere, tend to be more effective administratively and prevent corruption better. When civil servants are autonomous from their political superiors, they have incentives to check and balance potentially biased political decisions, sustaining their views on professional criteria. Some countries, such as Denmark or the Republic of Korea, contained the spread of COVID-19 through an adaptive approach, thanks to the preparedness, professionalism and technological capacity of expert public servants.

45. According to Victor Lapuente, the approach improves responsiveness to the pandemic in two important ways: directly, because the public sector shares more capacities to provide services and urgently reassign budget priorities in a timely and efficient way; and indirectly, because it generates social trust in institutions, which is key to generating social acceptance of decisions that carry enormous social burdens (e.g. closing schools and businesses). Overall, countries with an impartial or Weberian public service workforce, such as Germany or the Republic of Korea, tend to have a more effective crisis management response.

46. When the pandemic hit, many governments activated their pre-existent protocols for crisis management, which facilitated coordination at the highest level. A crisis protocol is an example of a bureaucratic procedure that facilitates quick reaction and adaptivity. The crisis management protocol of the Government of the Netherlands, for example, indicates that coordination tasks are to be delegated and distributed among key ministers (the Minister of Justice and Security, the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport and the Prime Minister) and a key advisory role is to be assigned to the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment. This facilitated quick decision-making by key ministers and ensured the availability of essential knowledge.

Components of the approach

47. It is important to identify the factors that shape the quality of government. One is the quality of the public service workforce, alternatively called bureaucrats,

¹⁵ See Bo Rothstein and Jan Torell, “What is quality of government? A theory of impartial government institutions”, *Governance*, vol. 21, No. 2 (April 2008); Carl Dahlström and Victor Lapuente, *Organizing Leviathan: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Making of Good Government* (Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Brink Lindsey, “State capacity: what is it, why we lost it, and how to get it back”, Niskasen Center, 18 November 2021.

referring to non-elected personnel working in administrative and managerial positions within the State. Such a workforce is the manifestation of government in action and the public face of politics. Focusing on related personnel politics – regarding recruitment, selection, promotion, dismissal or compensation schemes – is particularly relevant to understand how public sector capacities develop and what their role is in supporting the achievement of the Goals.

48. Victor Lapuente highlights some important dimensions that determine the quality of government.¹⁶ A merit-based and professional public service workforce – recruited and promoted through merit-based competitive processes and autonomous from political interference – is positively associated with more effective public service delivery, more efficient government spending and less corruption. In 2018, the Committee recommended strengthening merit-based recruitment processes as an important strategy in the ongoing professionalization of the civil service and emphasized the need to balance this strategy with more agile processes of recruitment and selection while ensuring a focus on future-oriented skills and the promotion of public sector workforce diversity. Such recommendations are particularly relevant for agencies responsible for policy formulation, programme design and implementation of the Goals, which demand public servants with baseline analytic and monitoring abilities, as well as prototyping or futuristic design integration skills, among other things.

49. The daily processing and publication of data and statistics on COVID-19 infections and deaths required a reliability that only a professional bureaucracy can deliver. Without formal bureaucracies with clearly defined responsibilities, formal lines of authority and deadlines, these statistics could not have attained a sufficient level of reliability and certainly could not have been processed with the same regularity. Transparent data, open to the scrutiny of the media and non-profit organizations, are key to maintaining the legitimacy of official information, even in scenarios shaped by the negative impacts of false or misleading information during disease outbreak.

50. Research indicates that bureaucratic professionalization is a contagious and self-reinforcing process inside government.¹⁷ In other words, a professional workforce does not depend exclusively on recruitment, but may be incentivized within the government, since public servants tend to acquire greater expertise when new educated entrants arrive to compete for organizational awards inside the public sector or outside government.

51. In addition, more agile human resources and bureaucratic procedures that adapt to new demands, in contrast with closed bureaucratic systems shaped by rigid civil exams and no lateral career entry, play an important role for the quality of government and, consequently, for competent public policy implementation. Agile human resources and procedures facilitate robust governance strategies, allowing for scalability in the face of turbulent crises as discussed above. To this end, it can be beneficial to transform traditionally compliance-based functions of human resources management so that they support a public sector striving to become agile, business-integrated, data-driven and deeply skilled in attracting, retaining and developing talent. Such practices are best positioned at a strategic level in government to drive change, attract talent, develop skills, adapt to any new context and make the most of the potential of each public servant. Public sector organizations are urged to rethink

¹⁶ Lapuente, “El Leviatán contra la COVID”.

¹⁷ Kim Sass Mikkelsen and others, “Bureaucratic professionalization is a contagious process inside government: evidence from a priming experiment with 3,000 Chilean civil servants”, *Public Administration Review* (2021).

their human resources management strategies and use technology as a key component to ensure the responsiveness and added value of organizational results.

52. Existing digital technologies were often adapted for an agile pandemic management strategy and, for example, used for online medical examinations; online delivery of food and supplies; and diagnosis, follow-up and tracking of COVID-19 cases. Pre-existent rigid bureaucratic procedures demanded quick approval of a new legal framework in some countries, such as Brazil. More agile technologies used in other places, such as Singapore, including electronic monitoring devices, which use an unknown number of sensors and cameras that allow the Government to monitor a variety of things – from the cleanliness of public spaces to crowd density, the precise movement of each locally registered vehicle or the possibility of infectious diseases spreading inside buildings – may be more contentious.¹⁸ Despite clear benefits from a health crisis management perspective, some digital technologies raise legitimacy concerns in terms of political centralization and soft authoritarianism. While in some countries the use of digital technology has made it possible to better cope with the pandemic, a digital divide persists, affecting many countries and regions, such as Africa, which needs to be urgently addressed.

V. Public service workforce and social vulnerability

53. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could also be seen as a synthesis of complex biological and social interactions that are important to understand in the prognosis and treatment of the disease, as well as in designing health policy more generally. One consequence of these interactions is that the pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable countries, shaped by socioeconomic inequality, as well as vulnerable groups in both developed and developing societies. Specifically, COVID-19 interacts with an array of non-communicable diseases, typically affecting social groups according to patterns of inequality deeply embedded in societies.

54. According to a recent report of the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund, children in many countries, in particular in developing countries, who faced more than 40 weeks of school closure compared with less than 20 weeks in developed countries, missed out on most or all of the academic learning that they would ordinarily have acquired in school, with younger and more marginalized children often missing out the most.¹⁹ Primary and secondary school students in São Paulo, Brazil, learned only 28 per cent of what they would have in face-to-face classes and the risk of dropout increased more than threefold. In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in so called "learning poverty" – already over 50 per cent before the pandemic – will rise sharply, potentially up to 70 per cent, given the long school closures and the varying quality and effectiveness of remote learning.

55. The consequences of strong inequalities became more evident owing to the pandemic, indicating that a unidimensional biomedical solution to overcome the crisis will fail. An integrated approach, with a larger vision, that encompasses education, employment, food, housing and the environment, is necessary not just to overcome the COVID-19 crisis but also for achieving the Goals.

¹⁸ Ahmed Mohammad Abdou, "Good governance and COVID-19: the digital bureaucracy to response the pandemic (Singapore as a model)", *Journal of Public Affairs*, vol. 21, No. 4 (November 2021).

¹⁹ World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the Global Education Crisis: a Path to Recovery* (Washington, D.C., Paris and New York, 2021).

Need for equity-driven strategies

56. Public organizations and their personnel share the obligation to protect citizens without discrimination and need to acknowledge that structural social inequalities exist and pose important challenges. Disregarding such disparities and inequalities can hinder positive policy outcomes and undermine trust in and the legitimacy of the government. Social inequalities are also reflected in the lack of legitimacy of difficult decisions commonly taken during crises, such as quarantines, potentially leading to active defiance, protests or riots. The experience of Singapore shows how historical deficiencies in the recognition by the public sector of the challenges and needs of foreign workers, working on permits in construction, cleaning and essential services sectors, and housed in densely populated dormitories, became a key weakness in COVID-19 management. With the Government not cognizant of its vulnerabilities, the excess operational capacities that were built into the country's health-care system were barely sufficient to deal with the unexpectedly high levels of COVID-19 infections that suddenly emerged.²⁰

57. Strategies to prevent social stigmatization and support inclusion demand a thorough assessment of administrative burdens²¹ that poor and marginalized social groups face in their day-to-day interaction with the public service workforce and deliberate reduction. Administrative burdens make it both costly and difficult to navigate and use public services. For example, in Pakistan, the Khawaja Sira – individuals culturally defined as neither men nor women – face higher administrative burdens when seeking legal identification.

58. Reducing administrative burdens is central to the promise of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. Preventing social stigmatization also demands more creative approaches in crisis management. During the pandemic, the Kerala state government in India relied on the support of civil society organizations and local leaders to discreetly deliver free meals in community kitchens to those infected with the virus, without publicly identifying them. Viet Nam also protected the identities of those infected by referring to them only by their case numbers. Political leadership also intervened in favour of a more inclusive approach by speaking out when some local businesses were reportedly ostracizing foreigners. This approach was key to encouraging citizens to be more open and cooperate fully in contact-tracing, testing and treatment.²² In Morocco, COVID-19 measures benefited not only women and vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, but also migrants who were treated the same way as nationals.

59. In conclusion, an equity-driven approach needs to become a fundamental goal of the public sector and is crucial for any crisis response and for achieving the Goals.

Addressing inequality within the public sector workforce

60. An equity-driven approach towards vulnerable citizens will not advance without facing inequalities that sometimes exist within the public sector workforce. Such inequalities exist in many forms: substantial differences in wages and compensation schemes within different public sector careers; poor working conditions and salaries for front-line workers; and the lack of a diverse public sector workforce, shaped by a lack of representation (race, gender and ethnicity, depending on the context), including at the highest hierarchical levels, among many other things.

²⁰ J.J. Woo, "Policy capacity and Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic", *Policy and Society*, vol. 39, No. 3 (2020).

²¹ Pamela Herd and Donald P. Moynihan, *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means* (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2019).

²² Chowdhury and Jomo, "Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic".

61. The considerable disparities that continue to exist between the working conditions of employees of the central government and those of local and regional public administrations in decentralized systems need to be highlighted, including in terms of wages and bonuses, access to training and capacity-building, respect for diversity and retirement, especially as this can make a career in local or regional government less attractive to young people, often remaining their last choice or last resort as they prefer to work for the central government or civil society, the private sector, international organizations and donors or even to emigrate to other countries.
62. Vertical and horizontal strategies to strengthen bureaucratic representation, as well as public sector reforms aimed at equality among public servants, need to be prioritized.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

63. As stressed by the General Assembly in its resolution [74/236](#), human resources development lies at the heart of economic, social and environmental development, and health and education are at the core of human resources development. Short-, medium- and long-term strategies for an educated, skilled, healthy, motivated, capable, productive and adaptable public sector workforce are the foundation for sustainable, inclusive and equitable economic growth and development.
64. An integrated public sector capacity and legitimacy approach makes it possible to build resilient and agile public sector institutions that can be activated in times of crisis and future societal disruption, while accelerating and monitoring the achievement of the Goals. The slogan “building back better” should be interpreted as “building forward better” by, among other things, integrating into public institutions the resilience necessary to deal with future societal disruptions.
65. While public sector capacities refer to the skills, capabilities and resources necessary to perform public policy and manage crises, public sector legitimacy is observed through societal trust in government and public institutions, which is particularly relevant in the face of a growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them.
66. Strategies to enhance both capacity and legitimacy, with a particular focus on the public sector workforce, have been highlighted in the present paper. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic indicate how governments in developed and developing countries have been able to build a stock of competencies, capabilities and resources for crisis management that may become the building blocks for more resilient strategies for future crises and for achieving the Goals. These best practices could also serve as case studies for others. The important role of additional capacities for crisis management is an important form of policy learning, in particular in the face of new public management reform and its excessive focus on efficiency, demanding a new orientation for capacity-building.
67. New mindsets and behaviours in public institutions, paired with expertise and tools for strategic anticipation and risk management, are recommended to be better prepared for complexity and uncertainties. Networks of transnational collaboration are important to account for the borderless nature of a complex future crisis, such as the pandemic that the world is currently facing.
68. A focus on public sector workforce professionalization, expertise and motivation is recommended in the present paper, owing to the role of the workforce in building resilient institutions, improving the quality of government and strengthening citizen trust in public institutions. This is particularly relevant in times

of partisan polarization, authoritarian populism and the propagation of false or misleading information through both digital and physical media.

69. Governance robustness emerges as a dynamic resilience approach for the achievement of the Goals, which demands flexible and agile public institutions, programmes and workforce that transform and adapt in turbulent times. Low- and middle-income countries have skilfully adopted a series of robust governance strategies by engaging wider society in crisis management, including through: coordination by a whole-of-government approach and a whole-of-society approach; scalability that makes it possible to flexibly mobilize and demobilize resources to adapt to changing needs and demands; and multi-actor collaboration and partnership.

70. All of these strategies, however, demand solid but more flexible and more agile legal institutions, less formal, compartmentalized and insulated bureaucratic hierarchies and closer relationships with citizens as co-creators and co-implementors of robust governance solutions. Public sector organizations cannot continue with the same set of organizational barriers, such as limited planning, reluctance to share information, cultural attitudes, lack of trust, reluctance for flexibility, lack of coordination and collaboration, archaic systems, inefficient workplace processes, ineffective workplace technology and poorly designed structures and jobs. Changing the way of doing things will be vital for their survival. This means adopting and stretching not only human resources strategies and practices, but also mindsets. Public sector organizations should be encouraged to envision, think outside the box, adapt and implement transformation activities as part of a sustained process of improving service delivery to citizens, within the limitations of resources. Policy learning that has emerged from errors and successes in COVID-19 crisis management may become important assets to make public administration more effective for the achievement of the Goals.

71. The quality-of-government approach argues that merit-based, professional bureaucracies operating independently of the political sphere not only tend to be more effective in terms of public policies and curbing corruption, but also to improve responsiveness to the pandemic crisis in important ways, such as by sharing more public sector capacities to provide public services in a timely and efficient form and by enhancing social trust in institutions, which is key to generating social acceptance of difficult and unpopular government decisions that are necessary in turbulent times.

72. The quality of the public sector workforce is one of the main drivers of the quality-of-government approach. A merit-based and professional public service workforce – recruited and promoted through merit-based recruitment processes – continues to be crucial, with the benefit that bureaucratic professionalization is a contagious and self-reinforcing process inside government. Digitalization may induce more agile human resources and flexible bureaucratic procedures that also play an important role for the quality of government.

73. There is a need to institutionalize and better structure the dialogue between institutions at all levels and employee representatives, civil servants and other workers to avoid possible human resources conflicts, especially in times of crisis, as well as to co-create decent working conditions.

74. Finally, the public sector workforce needs to acknowledge deep structural inequalities that led to disproportional effects of the COVID-19 crisis on vulnerable communities. It should also protect citizens without discrimination. Disregarding inequalities hinders the achievement of the Goals and undermines social trust in government. Strategies to support inclusion, leaving no one (and no place) behind, demand an assessment and deliberate reduction of unnecessary administrative burdens that marginalized social groups disproportionately face and the establishment of strategies to avoid social stigmatization.

75. An equity-driven approach needs to be pervasive in the public sector for achieving the Goals, which also demands addressing inequalities within the public sector workforce itself, at all levels of governance, vertically and horizontally.

76. Investment in the public sector workforce, enhancing its skills, capacities and resources, aligned with the challenges ahead, and raising its awareness of social inequalities, will be key not only for more effective crisis management but also for implementing the Goals.
