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Editorial.

Public Administration after COVID-19.

Bigger or Smarter State?

In the last couple of months, public administration management has come at the forefront of public debate. What could be done to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic more successfully? This question has appeared in each corner of the world and urged us to think about the tools being at disposal and conditions according to which the public sector is running. Let start from the beginning and focus on the main characteristics of COVID-19 from the public administration perspective.

COVID-19 is not only unprecedented in terms of scale but also a completely new challenge for public administration. The global-scale disease is not a new phenomenon. In the last decades, at least a few examples have occurred globally, like a pandemic threat, not to mention SARS, Ebola, or swine flu. In this respect, in many national risk registers, the pandemic threat has appeared for the last decade. Despite this fact, COVID-19 has shown a complete lack of preparedness to fights against this disease, and as a result, traditional ways of responding to the threat seem to be obsolete in this context.

There is no better example of a wicked issue for public administration than pandemic COVID-19. After several months of fighting against this disease, we are witnessing considerable challenges in personal and public health, economy, public finance, and last but surely not least public behavior and attitudes to government guidance. Such a vast complexity and unpredictability in public policy is an entirely new phenomenon from the public administration perspective.

Local context and regional differentiation make COVID-19 much more challenging to solve. Public administration is this kind of organization that is very successful when the

one-size-fits-all approach works. However, territorial differences and multi-level governance increase the risk of failure, especially when there are no good practices and procedures on which public administration can rely. COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies these two challenges meant as a need to differentiate and coordinate public policy at the same time.

Considering this, public administration has to change to fit the upcoming challenges in the foreseeable future. Despite the country and socio-cultural context, the new reform agenda seems very similar for many public administration systems. It is worth underlining the most important points that are being discussed in many countries. Firstly, public administration is as strong and resilient for crisis as many networks it creates and operates in. Delivering public services has never existed in limbo. There is a relation between producer and recipient that can be filled out by co-production and co-creation of public value. Furthermore, there is a role to play by third parties, which can be additional producers of public services. The importance of this kind of network we witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional day-to-day public services were unable to be delivered. The public administration failed to do a flexible and quick reaction to public needs on the sub-local level. Thus, public administration should pay much more attention to how it operates and build solid and reliable networks among all stakeholders involved in public service delivery.

Secondly, information and knowledge are everything. It seems to be a banality. However, it is no exaggeration to say that most decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic have been rather intuitive than evidence-based. Therefore, it is more than sure that this element of public administration has to be considered very closely in two perspectives: (a) how relations between public administration and academia should look like? (b) how should public administration communicate with the public? It is important to keep in mind that these two elements are crucial during the crisis and as a tool to build networks and responsive public sector. Simple and understandable language, successful social media campaigns, and down-to-the-point communication should be prerequisites to any information process.

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the vast importance of central and local government relations. It is hard to imagine how to respond to this disease without close cooperation between these two parts of public administration. Exchange of information, coordination of actions, adequacy of response are only possible when central and local leaders work together. To make things worse, in many cases, these relations have been built from scratch, and as a result, they have been unable to respond effectively from the beginning of the pandemic. For too long, central and local relations have been a missing part of public administration research. Needless to say that this crucial element of public administration is avoided in many handbooks and monographs concerning local governance

The last couple of months have shown that the public sector needs a new reform agenda to fit the purpose. COVID-19 pandemic reveals that austerity policy weakened the capacity of public administration, especially in terms of health and social services. However, it does not mean that increase in public spending solves the problem. The new context requires a somewhat smarter than a bigger state.