



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

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The desire to improve the delivery of public services, understood as those services provided by or on behalf of governments (local, municipal or larger-scale) to the public, is a long-standing one in both developed and developing countries. The focus here is the efforts that have been, and are being, made to improve public service delivery in OECD countries.

The provision of such services, both now and in the past, involves the participation of other sectors in addition to government. Depending upon its specific institutional and cultural legacy, in any given country there will be a particular, often very complex, mix of financing and delivery arrangements that will include services directly provided by public sector organizations as well as others paid for from the public purse but produced by a commercial or voluntary organization under contract to government. This means that public service reform is “path dependent” (Pierson, 1994). Especially since the mid-1980s, however, neo-liberal ideological realignment has brought about a new balance of responsibility for public service delivery as between governmental, private and voluntary and community sector organizations, alongside fresh definitions of the scope and nature of citizen entitlements to public services.

Although there is an important sense in which the concern with lack of inter-agency coordination has remained a constant, the focus and intensity of efforts to improve public service delivery in OECD countries has shifted over time. Whereas the traditional pre-occupation in the post-1945 welfare state was with improving the “administrative” performance of governmental organizations (satisfying public expectations of equity and fairness in the application of rules and procedures, ensuring probity in the use of public money), since the 1980s new, more managerial public service values (value for money, innovation, customer service) have risen to prominence as concern has shifted to improving the “managerial” performance of public service organizations. Typically, managerialization or the new public management (NPM) has involved a number of interlocking strands: disaggregation of large, monolithic bureaucracies into separate units; more power for local managements based on control of budgets; a stress on private sector styles of management, with explicit standards and measures of performance linked to a greater emphasis upon outputs and outcomes; a shift to greater outsourcing of, and competition in, the delivery of public services; and increased responsiveness to users of public services, through various initiatives designed to treat them as customers of a service industry rather than as clients of professional experts (Aucoin, 1990; Hood, 1991; Le Grand, 2007).

In a number of OECD countries, managerial reform of the public services has high political saliency, with governments of various party political persuasions actively promoting to their

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electorates ambitious programmes of public service renewal, reinvention or modernization. The programmatic character of public service reform has been particularly pronounced in English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and USA), extending beyond the empowerment of local managers and technology-driven innovation in customer service¹ to include greater reliance on choice and competition as mechanisms to improve public service delivery. A common denominator of such programmes is that they are associated with the pursuit of new organizational forms and arrangements, including partnerships with other levels of government and non-governmental sectors, in order to improve the delivery of services. Even so, the academic literature is careful to distinguish between varying degrees and styles of national “buy in” to new public management reform packages (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

It should not be assumed that there is any clear-cut relationship between the extent of programmatic commitment to modernizing public services and demonstrable improvements in public service delivery. This is shown by Pollitt (2007)'s analysis of the consequences of the repeated, large-scale restructuring of the British national health service (NHS), an unusual case as measured by the speed and intensity of serial organizational reengineering. Putting to one side the technical difficulties of evaluating large-scale change and the transition costs resulting in at least temporary loss of service quality, a major consequence is the general loss of faith in stability and accompanying diminution in organizational loyalty. The sense of temporary-ness may inadvertently exacerbate tensions between managers and professional staff, and also spill over to affect service users, for whom continuous change can easily become a kind of irritating “white noise,” raising no particular hopes or interest but generating an anxiety that the latest initiative might in fact turn out to be a concealed cut (Pollitt, 2007, p. 539).

Work by Pollitt and others serves to demonstrate that fashionable modernization initiatives inevitably fail to resolve enduring dilemmas and trade-offs in reorganizing public services (Hood, 1998; Hood and Jackson, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). In the case of the NHS, for example, ministers and their advisers may be faced with multiple trade-offs between centralization (a national service) and local “ownership” and flexibility, between professional expertise and political control, between equal access and efficiency and between quality and affordability. The net outcome is a tendency to emphasize one thing and then swing to another once the downside of the chosen position on the trade-off becomes apparent to citizens and the mass media (Pollitt, 2007, p. 535).

Certainly in the UK, there is a growing belief that the top-down, programmatic approach to delivering public service improvement has been failing to deliver sustainable innovation. This failure is attributed by its critics to a misguided philosophy of change management. For example, Maddock (2008), identifies a tension between those who assume that restructuring and efficiency-based business models will lead to service improvement and those who recognize that innovative improvements depend upon the nurturing of collaborative relationships between front-line staff and local communities (entailing new forms of local public service leadership). She argues that the predilection for large-scale re-engineering rewards local managers who are in tune with central government's target and performance management culture while marginalizing those, often women, who are experienced in networking and communicating with diverse local communities.

¹ E-government – the growing use of information technology to deliver public services – is at the core of such innovation. In Europe and North America the development and management of IT services is a key dimension of private sector involvement, through public-private partnerships, in the financing and provision of public assets and infrastructure.

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It would be nice, suggests Pollitt (2009), if the UK political parties presently vying with each other to improve public service delivery were to consider the case for smaller scale, more modular changes (where specific pieces of a reform can be built up over time) rather than further programmatic upheavals.

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HOW TO CITE	Clark, D. (2012). "Public Service Delivery," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> , [online], www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
INFORMATION	For further information, please visit www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
LEGAL DEPOSIT	Library and Archives Canada, 2012 ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)