

The role of public service and public servants during the COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected over 180 countries, infected more than 6.5 million people and killed more than 383,000 (as of 3 June 2020). In addition to the health implications and loss of life, the pandemic has strained health care systems, disrupted the education system, wreaked havoc on businesses and economies, led to job losses and disrupted social life with lockdowns, curfews and other stringent measures aimed at containing the virus being implemented globally. All this has happened in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where the Public Service and Public Servants are critical.

The following are identified as the roles public servants play in implementing the 2030 Agenda:¹ (i) policy and strategy planning; (ii) provision of services; (iii) development of infrastructure; (iv) mobilization and utilization of resources; (v) monitoring and evaluation; and (vi) institutional and human resource capacity development.

The abrupt and brutal disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the public service and public servants into a frenzy, forcing them to not only deal with fighting its spread but trying to manage its accompanying socioeconomic fallout. It has catapulted public servants onto the frontlines in the response to the crisis without any clear roadmap, forcing them to deal with a quickly and ever-changing situation and improvising along the way.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SERVICE AND PUBLIC SERVANTS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From frontline healthcare workers and public health officials to teachers, sanitation workers, social welfare officers and more, the humble public servant has been thrust into the spotlight, helping elevate awareness and understanding of the critical role public servants play in everyday life, and in particular during times of severe crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic however, public servants are working under life-threatening circum-

¹ International Institute of Administrative Sciences (2016).

Summary

For the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be achieved effective delivery of public services is needed, including in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. If not contained, the pandemic will jeopardize meeting the 2030 deadline, by diverting resources from development efforts to crisis response. The public servant sits at the heart of ensuring effective response to the crisis, whether as a frontline worker in healthcare, or in devising strategies and plans to mitigate its impact.

This policy paper outlines nine key roles public servants have been and must continue to play to ensure an effective response to the pandemic: (i) ensuring continuity of public services; (ii) providing service before self: courage and humanness in practice; (iii) quick thinking, creativity and innovation; (iv) information and awareness creation; (v) strategic thinking and planning amidst chaos; (vi) sustaining resilience and building a better effective and more responsive public service; (vii) building and enhancing State legitimacy, government credibility and people's trust; (viii) resource allocation and distributive accountability; and (ix) collaborative and networked leadership.

In order to effectively play these roles, a public servant must have a profile characterized by the following: self-sacrifice, trustworthiness, risk-taking, versatility, adaptability, creativity, transparency and accountability, and they must be knowledgeable and skilled, persistent, empathetic, collaborative, and competent in the use of technology all driven by humanness in their personality.

The following policy recommendations are made: (i) comprehensive public service capacity development; (ii) institutionalization of early warning, emergency planning, preparedness and quick response in the public service; (iii) networking collaborating, sharing and learning from successful practices and mistakes to build better and more effective public services for future pandemics and crisis; (iv) sustaining development of responsible, responsive, accountable and people-focused leadership in public sector institutions; and (v) providing for financial resources for pandemic and crisis before they happen.

stances. In all COVID-19 pandemic affected countries they are both expected to deliver services despite the pandemic while at the same time suffering its impact, either by being directly infected or having family members who are. Moreover, the pandemic hit the world at a time when, according to World Health Organization (WHO), the world needs six million more nurses and midwives to achieve global health targets within the SDGs. These critical workers are confronting a dangerous highly infectious virus but they in insufficient numbers. The following are some of the roles public servants have played, are playing and must continue to play in the pandemic response:

ENSURING CONTINUITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES

By threatening disruption of public service delivery, the COVID-19 pandemic touched a cardinal principle of public service, that of continuity. In a show of courageous response however, in many countries, public servants have been quick to adapt and re-adjust the way in which services are delivered so as to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities. For example, as many schools, including colleges and universities, were suddenly closed as a result of nationwide lockdowns, teachers and education professionals rushed to provide at home learning solutions via online platforms and e-materials, where there was infrastructure to support such approaches. Similarly, in many places where medical facilities have been overwhelmed by high numbers of COVID-19 patients, online tools, such as telemedicine and telehealth, have been set up or enhanced to provide non-emergency medical services so as to not disrupt the delivery of health services to people with other ailments. Courts are hearing and judging cases through video conferencing, while in some places virtual marriages have been legalized. In these cases, and others, public servants have demonstrated versatility in service delivery that has benefitted service users amidst challenges caused by the pandemic.

SERVICE BEFORE SELF: COURAGE AND HUMANNES IN PRACTICE

Many public servants have put their lives at risk in order to continue serving the public throughout the pandemic. Sadly, many have subsequently been infected and an alarming number have lost their lives. For example, in the UK at least 100 medical and health workers have died as a result of COVID-19. In China it was reported that within the first 3 months of fighting the virus some

3000 healthcare workers had been infected. In the USA, although the exact figure is unknown, an estimated 5,000 healthcare workers have been infected, while in New York City 1000 of the city's police officers accounted for some of the 40, 000 people in that city who tested positive for the infection by April 2020. The numbers are likely much higher, given not all public servants have been tested for COVID-19 and many may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus.

One reason for such high infection rates amongst public servants, particularly frontline public servants like healthcare workers, has been a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Most countries have struggled to ensure enough medical masks, N-95 respirators, surgical gowns and other protective gear, forcing many to improvise, including using bin liners for gowns and home-made masks. It is tragic and regrettable that many public servants have been working under such dangerous conditions. Their heroic self-sacrifice and extraordinary humanness have saved many lives. In recognition of this, governments should work towards developing and/or enhancing preparedness and contingency plans for future such crises so that public servants always have access to the protective gear that both their profession and safety demands.

QUICK THINKING, CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic public service and public servants, many who were used to operating in routine, predictable and regulated systems had to deploy quick thinking, instant creativity and innovation to counter the destruction caused by the pandemic in service delivery, particularly in critical areas such as healthcare. For example, at the onset of the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, the Chinese military took only 10 days to construct a makeshift two storied hospital which could hold up to 1000 patients and included several isolation wards and 30 intensive care units. COVID-19 responses have seen innovation in the public service flourish. From the development of drive-thru testing sites and contact tracing apps in the Republic of Korea, to the use of robots to carry out medical tasks such as temperature taking so as to minimize contact between infected patients and healthcare workers in Rwanda, public servants have leveraged innovation and creativity, often on a shoestring budget, to come up with unique and quick responses to the crisis.

RELIABLE INFORMATION AND AWARENESS AS A CRITICAL SERVICE

One of the most needed and lifesaving services during the pandemic has been accurate and reliable information about the virus, including on its spread, prevention, recognition of symptoms and importantly, on debunking myths and misinformation around it.

In the early days of its spread, a lack of or inadequate knowledge and awareness about the virus helped it to penetrate communities before government authorities realized its seriousness. Public servants in the health sector, including frontline doctors and nurses, virologists, epidemiologists and other health experts, were some of the first to document this new infection, getting the word out that a new and highly contagious virus was gaining ground. As information about the virus started filtering through, public health officials, the news media, and research institutions started giving information to both the public and authorities which progressively proved vital in the fight against the spread of the virus.

However false or misleading information about the virus, including conspiracy theories surrounding its origins and unproven cures, have greatly hampered efforts to ensure the circulation of reliable information. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, notes that “As the world fights the deadly COVID-19 pandemic—the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War—we are also seeing another epidemic, a dangerous epidemic of misinformation.”

STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING AMIDST CHAOS

Many public servants have been strategizing and planning amidst the chaos about how to beat the pandemic, save lives, ensure social protection, and sustain economies. National taskforces have been formed incorporating representatives of a cross-section of the public service to plan and coordinate efforts to fight the spread and impact of the pandemic. In a whole of government and whole of society approach they brought on board scientists and experts in public health, to ensure the effectiveness, coordination, coherence and integration of the strategies and plans aimed at stopping the spread of the virus and managing the broader impacts of the pandemic.

These taskforces and the lessons learned from their work will develop or enhance institutional mechanisms with capacities to deal more effectively with such crises in the future. If leveraged, these taskforces could provide

a foundational building block for enhancing government preparedness and crisis response.

SUSTAINING RESILIENCE AND BUILDING A MORE EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE PUBLIC SERVICE

The world has experienced global pandemics before and COVID-19 will not be the last. Therefore, one of the critical roles the public service must play is to prepare the service to be more resilient for any future crisis. Public servants must turn the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic into an opportunity for devising strategies for strengthening the resilience, effectiveness and responsiveness of the public service and the services they deliver, so as to be better prepared in future. It should be every government’s strategy to have in place institutional arrangements, policies, systems, infrastructure, plans, including contingency plans, and resources to foresee, identify and quickly respond to pandemics and other crises.

BUILDING AND ENHANCING STATE LEGITIMACY, GOVERNMENT CREDIBILITY AND PEOPLE’S TRUST

Public servants who deliver services responsively, equitably and with humanness help enhance the credibility of the government, and as a consequence, foster trust amongst the people. The determination of public servants to continue providing services in the face of the dangers the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to their own lives has contributed greatly to the government being seen as critical in and caring for the lives of the people. The ongoing work of public servants, therefore, has in many places elevated a sense of trust in government. The sustainability of this trust, however, will be heavily dependent on the extent to which the struggle against the pandemic succeeds.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND DISTRIBUTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Crises that emerge abruptly, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, catch governments’ budgets by surprise, presenting a big challenge to the public servants who are responsible for preparing and implementing them. The way in which resources are allocated and utilized determines whether systems, practices institutional arrangements meant to protect societies against pandemics of this nature, get put in place and become operational or not. In many countries public servants have had to quickly re-

view available resources, mobilize others and deploy them quickly in tackling the pandemic and all the challenges it has caused. About US\$130 billion in budget support has been pledged² or is under consideration by governments around the world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resource allocation and distributive accountability is a critical role that public servants have played during the pandemic and one which has had great bearing on trust in government, delivery of critical services, minimizing of inequality and the saving of lives.

COLLABORATIVE AND NETWORKED LEADERSHIP

In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that collaborative and networked leadership is critical when it comes to dealing with complex challenges and problems. The need for resolved people-focused, calm, credible, trusted leadership is critical in times of crisis. Public servants played their roles in a collaborative way to ensure a coordinated and successful response in containing the spread of the virus and mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

At the global level too, collaborative leadership is essential. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided opportunities for public services in different countries to learn from each other's successes and failures in their ability to identify and respond to pandemics. Multilateral institutions, such as WHO provide a critical platform for this type of collaboration and for the sharing of public health data and information. Public servants must be facilitated to network, collaborate, and share to enhance co-learning at local, national and international levels.

PROFILE OF A PUBLIC SERVANT WHO CAN WORK EFFECTIVELY IN CRISIS

Considering all the above roles public servants have played, we can derive that an effective public servant has the following profile: self-sacrificing, trustworthy, risk-taking, transparent, accountable versatile, adaptable, creative, innovative, knowledgeable and skilled, persistent, empathetic, collaborative, and competent in the use of technology. Above all, they have a high dose of humanness in their personality which makes them work for others even at the risk of their own lives. This profile should be part of the guide in training public servants to enable them serve in crisis.

² Bloomberg (2020), "Covid-19: Here is how much money countries have pledged for virus relief", 13 March.

KEY MESSAGES

- 1. Comprehensive public service capacity development:** Governments must pay attention to developing the capacities of the public service and public servants; be it in their numbers, their competences, values, the protective gear they need, the incentives for their productivity, the tools and facilities as well as the technology they require to effectively do their jobs. Governments must invest in having very well-functioning public services and effective public servants.
- 2. Institutionalize early warning, emergency planning, preparedness and quick response in the public service:** Governments must put in place and operate effectively, permanent, public sector, well-coordinated institutional frameworks that can support public servants to be anticipatory and prepared, to look out for signs of crisis, such as pandemics, find solutions quickly and respond appropriately in time to avoid severe impact.
- 3. Network, collaborate, share and learn from successful practices and mistakes to build better and more effective public services for future pandemics and crisis:** Public servants must be facilitated to network, collaborate, and share to enhance co-learning; something that stands better chances for improvement in finding quick solutions not only to pandemics and crisis but in the work of public service delivery in general.
- 4. Sustain development of responsible, responsive, accountable and people-focused leadership in public sector institutions:** The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that during uncertain and fluid times, resolved people-focused, calm, credible, trusted leadership is required. The development of this kind of leadership in the public service must be sustained.
- 5. Provide for financial resources for pandemic and crisis before they happen:** Governments must always provide budgetary resources to take care of emergencies and crisis such as this pandemic. The often-cited excuse that Governments have no funds for problems that have not happened has been proven wrong by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many governments have had to spend lots of money suddenly and in unforeseen way; probably more than they would have spent if they had already provided for this in their public service delivery budgets.