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## **Public Sector Management for the Next Century:**

### **Towards a Radical Agenda<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

Taking responsible wellbeing for all as objective and direction, this paper seeks a basis for a radical pro-poor agenda for public sector management. This follows the convention of standing normal bureaucracy, professionalism and behaviour on their heads. It seeks to achieve three Ds - decentralisation, democracy and diversity - through three Ps - changes which are procedural (or institutional), professional and personal. Procedurally, this inverts normal top-down control-oriented bureaucracy in favour of minimum rules for self-organising local systems "on the edge of chaos", and replaces targets with trust. Professionally, it shifts values from things to people, from reductionist measurement to holistic judgement, and from the uniform and universal to the diverse and local. Personally, it changes the roles of "uppers" from teaching and controlling to facilitating and enabling. The personal dimension in development is neglected. For pro-poor public sector management, personal awareness, commitment and action are crucial.

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) have revealed policy priorities of poor people, often at variance from those of professionals. Drawing on evidence and ideas from participatory methodologies such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), the paper asks to what extent the incentives of fulfilment from personal disempowerment and generosity can outweigh losses. A pro-poor agenda is proposed for procedural, professional and personal change. A pedagogy for the non-oppressed stresses immersion learning, PPAs, and behaviour and attitudes training. The greatest methodological challenge for the 21st century is how to tackle the personal dimension.

"It is not that we should simply seek new and better ways for managing society, the economy and the world. The point is that we should fundamentally change how we behave"

Vaclav Havel 1992

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is, as it were, in midstream. It can be cited as a draft. Any reader is requested to recognise that it is provisional, and will change in the light of reflection, comments and criticisms.

## **A Vision**

A radical agenda needs first a vision. One starting point is responsible wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. In the experience of facilitators of PRA (originally participatory rural appraisal), it has again and again been something close to "wellbeing" rather than wealth that local people have expressed as their aspiration. For its part, "responsible" brings in considerations of equity and sustainability, and of relations with others. Both responsible and wellbeing can be defined personally, and in different ways by different people. In relation to responsible wellbeing, the role of the state can be seen to differ between the poor and wealthy, the weak and powerful. For the poor and weak, it is more to assure conditions permitting wellbeing. For the rich and powerful, it is more to provide conditions for responsible behaviour. The ideal to which society should strive is then an environment in which both "responsible" and "wellbeing" are continually and individually defined, and the role of the state is to enhance opportunities for responsible wellbeing for all its citizens.

This can be seen to entail three Ds - decentralisation, democracy and diversity. They reinforce each other. Enabling conditions for responsible wellbeing need local control through decentralisation, an equity orientation and responsiveness through democratic norms and institutions, and scope for diversity to accommodate and encourage different expressions of responsibility, initiative and creativity on the part of communities, groups and individuals. The implications for public sector management are many. Public sector management is taken to refer mainly to the maintenance of an equitable rule of law, the provision of basic services, and the management of public finances, and includes the management of government bureaucracies.

## **Reversals in Three Domains**

The argument is that to achieve the vision and the three Ds requires reversals of what is normal, through changes which are procedural, professional and personal. Normal bureaucracy, professionalism and behaviour have to be stood on their heads. Normal here indicates what could be called the default mode: it is the condition which tends to prevail unless a special effort is made. The vision is of public sector management and public servants working in structures with procedures and rewards with more downward accountability, with a professionalism which values and respects people and the individual, and with a personal commitment which seeks to serve those who are weaker and more deprived, accepting and celebrating diversity.

Let us explore these three domains in a little more detail.

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<sup>2</sup> Responsible wellbeing is elaborated somewhat in Whose Reality Counts? (Chambers 1997: 9-12). The point is, though, not that it should be defined for everyone, but that anyone who wishes should define and redefine it for herself or himself, sharing ideas with others.

## **i. procedural**

In these terms, normal bureaucracy has tendencies towards centralisation, standardisation, and control. The challenge is to reverse these: to decentralise, allow and encourage diversity, and empower through minimising controls. This inverts normal top-down control-oriented bureaucracy in favour of minimum rules for self-organising local systems "on the edge of chaos", and replacing targets with trust.

Top-down attempts to manage complex interrelations rarely work<sup>3</sup>. The Integrated Rural Development Projects of the 1970s are a case in point. Centralised top-down planning for local conditions generates dependency, high costs, low morale, misinformation and actions which cannot be sustained. It is a problem, not a solution.

The computer-based science of complexity has reached the same conclusion (see e.g. Resnick 1994). In one view "top-down systems are forever running into combinations of events they don't know how to handle. They tend to be touchy and fragile, and they all too often grind to a halt in a dither of indecision" (Waldrop 1994: 279, citing Chris Langton). To achieve life-like behaviour the key has been to start with a few simple rules, to use local control instead of global control, and to "Let the behaviour emerge from the bottom up, instead of being specified from the top down" (*ibid*: 280).

A spectacular example is the computer simulation "boids" devised by Craig Reynolds (Waldrop 1994: 241-3). Birdlike agents on a screen are given three rules of behaviour: to maintain a minimum distance from other boids and other objects; to try to match the velocities of nearby boids; and to try to move towards the centre of mass of boids in their neighbourhood. These three rules invariably lead to boids flocking about the screen like birds. A top down rule "form a flock" would have been impossibly complex. The rules which worked were simple, local, bottom-up, and the system self-organising and emergent. In the computer simulation, simple rules generate behaviour which is complex, diverse and, for practical purposes, in its detail unpredictable.

Computers are one thing; social systems another. How transferable principles and experience are from one to the other is hard to judge. The parallels are, though, intriguing. Development projects can be paralysed by overload at their centres of control. But they differ from "boids". Projects deal with varied environments and with idiosyncratic people as independent agents. The simple rules which then work have to go further, allowing and enabling people to manage in many ways in their local conditions, and facilitating not the uniform behaviour of flocks, but the diverse behaviour of individuals.

This runs counter to the administrative reflex to control. Caution calls for care to guard against all imaginable error or deviation, and for uniform and universal regulations to prevent these. In March 1992, I asked a group of Indian administrators what would be the basic minimum to standardise and regulate in setting up village-level savings and credit societies. Their list included rates of saving, application

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<sup>3</sup>

This and the following paragraphs are from Whose Reality Counts? pp 199-200

forms, eligibility, purposes of loans, rates of interest, repayments, penalties for default, and credit ratios.

In contrast, the programme of some 2500 savings and credit societies initiated and supported by MYRADA, an NGO in South India, are diverse in their practices, entrusting rule-making to individual societies. Each society is free to meet its needs and its members' needs in its own way. Each makes its own rules for how much each member should save and at what intervals, what loans can be for, interest rates, conditions for repayment, penalties for defaulters, and so on. MYRADA insists on only two operating requirements. The first is transparent, accurate and honest accounting. The second is that those with special responsibility are regularly rotated through democratic election, and are not called Presidents or Secretaries, but "representatives" (pers. comm Aloysius Fernandez 1996).

These minimal rules or controls permit behaviour which is complex and locally diverse. The striking resonance by analogy with the few simple rules of non-hierarchical self-organising systems in computer simulations poses the question whether we have here a deep paradigmatic insight, an interesting parallel, or an insignificant coincidence. Whatever the answer, it would seem provisionally that with both computers and people the key is to minimise central controls, and to pick just those few rules which promote or permit complex, diverse and locally fitting behaviour. The practical conclusion is to decentralise, with minimum rules of control, to enable local people to appraise, analyse, plan and adapt for local fit in their necessarily different ways.

A repeated experience is that decentralisation transfers powers to local elites who then abuse their position for personal gain, or to local managers who are authoritarian and do not themselves behave in a participatory, decentralising and trusting manner. The key is to identify just what the minimum controls are: the experience with savings groups may be defining here. For the minimum controls concern transparency (through access to the financial records) and accountability through democratic process of changing leadership and responsibility. A further control, in bureaucratic organisations which seek to become participatory, may need to be sanctions against those in power locally who act in an authoritarian manner and endanger participatory and democratic approaches "below" them.

Apart from these minimum controls, trust replaces targets. The centralising, standardising and controlling mindset has many manifestations, some of them even disguised participatory clothes. The Logical Framework or ZOPP are arguable an example (for various points of view see Forster 1996). Top-down targeting is so deeply ingrained in the official mind in some countries that senior civil servants find it inconceivable that there could be an alternative. Yet targets have a tendency to demoralise, disable and distort: they demoralise because they are rarely negotiated, but rather handed down, often without regard for local conditions; they disable because they diminish flexibility (as a situation evolves, it often makes sense to achieve something else); and they distort because of the tendency for prudent or threatened juniors to mislead in reporting achievements.

## **ii. professional**

Normal professionalism - the concepts, values, methods and behaviours dominant in professions - tends to be related to things (or people-as-things) more than people as people, and values precise reductionist measurement in controlled conditions. The challenge is to reverse these: to place more value on qualitative and holistic judgements about complex realities. "Things-and-numbers" professions and disciplines value and use measurement and precision often with extraordinary effect, usually in tightly controlled environments and conditions. They also tend to have the highest rewards and the highest status. Compare computer sciences with social work, micro-surgery with physiotherapy, or genetic engineering with agricultural extension. Not surprisingly, their values and methods dominate and tend to be transferred and adopted by those professions and disciplines which are dealing with people, farming systems, and other realities which are local, complex, diverse, dynamic and often uncontrollable. But reductionist measurements make little sense when imposed on these other realities. Which leads to endless conflict and debate.

What is required here is an upending of professional values to give more recognition and reward to judgement, approximations and comparisons without measurements, to flexible adaptation, and to local social and individual realities. This is already increasingly occurring. A recent example is the shift from poverty defined as income-poverty (or more commonly as measured, consumption-poverty) as used for poverty lines throughout the world, to a multi-dimensional view of human deprivation<sup>4</sup> which can include lack of assets and vulnerability, physical weakness, social exclusion, powerlessness and humiliation. Another is the transition in agricultural research and extension from the transfer of technology to approaches which start more with farmers' realities.

## **iii. personal**

Personally, the central issue is power and interpersonal behaviour. Normal behaviour has tendencies towards dominance and subordination, in the many relationships between "uppers" and "lowers"<sup>5</sup>. These are found especially in teaching institutions and in government bureaucracies where they are manifest both internally, and in relationships between officials and the public. The challenge is to change the relationships so that uppers respect and empower lowers without destroying necessary minimum hierarchy. It is to change from teaching to facilitating, and from controlling to enabling.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the [Human Development Report 1997 \(HDR 1997\)](#) which firmly establishes income-poor and income-poverty as terms to be used for that subset of deprivation which is measured for poverty lines.

<sup>5</sup> I apologise for referring again to [Whose Reality Counts?](#) but uppers and lowers are elaborated and explored on pages 58-62, and also in chapter 5 "All Power Deceives"

The experience with PRA (participatory rural appraisal)<sup>6</sup> has pointed sharply towards the prime importance of personal behaviour and attitudes on the part of "uppers" if "lowers" are to be empowered (see e.g. Kumar 1996). The various injunctions like "unlearn", "sit down, listen and learn", "hand over the stick", "ask them" and "they can do it" (having confidence in the lowers' capabilities) entail the substitution of facilitating behaviour to replace normal dominant behaviour. This often requires personal change. It is striking how frequently those who have been facilitating PRA for a matter of years rather than months report that they have themselves changed in how they relate to others, in their families as well as in their work.

### **The 3 Ds, and the Question: Whose Reality Counts?**

Decentralisation and democratic values combine in the recognition of realities which are local, individual and diverse. Among these, the realities - the conditions, values, preferences, criteria, and priorities - of poor people and those of professionals often differ<sup>7</sup>. Again and again the realities of those who are poor and marginalised are ignored or misread. The challenge is how to give voice to those who are left out and to make their reality count.

This means that if public sector management is to serve the poor, measures have to be taken to enable poor people themselves to analyse and articulate their priorities. Until recently, this has been a neglected activity. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), initiated first by the World Bank through bilateral support, and now promoted by both the Bank and UNDP, provide a powerful means for poor people to express themselves. Participatory methodologies, perhaps most notably PRA, have shown both power and popularity in enabling those who are subordinate to express their realities<sup>8</sup>

Insights and priorities have included, for example, the importance of all-weather roads for access to medical treatment and markets during the rains, the need to reschedule the timing of school fees away from the most difficult time of year, and training health staff to be friendly and respectful to poor people seeking treatment. In Bangladesh, where the focus of analysis by poor people was on "doables", differences in priorities between women and men, and between urban and rural, were highlighted (UNDP 1996). The first doable priority of urban women was drinking water, and the second private places for washing. A widespread desire of poor people was enforcement of

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<sup>6</sup> For an early source on PRA see Mascarenhas et al 1991. More recent sources include Whose Reality Counts? chapters 6,7 and 8, and for reflective critiques, PLA Notes 26 (published by IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD)

<sup>7</sup> For evidence supporting this assertion please see Whose Reality Counts? especially chapter 8

<sup>8</sup> PPAs using PRA approaches and methods have been pioneered in Ghana (Norton, Kroboe, Bortei-Dorku and Dogbe 1995; Dogbe 1996), Zambia (Norton, Owen and Milimo 1994), South Africa (Attwood 1996, May 1996, Murphy 1995, Texeira and Chambers 1995), and most recently in Bangladesh (UNDP 1996), using a variety of processes (for reviews see Norton and Stephens 1995, Robb 1996, Chambers and Blackburn 1996, Holland with Blackburn in draft).

the anti-dowry laws. Elsewhere, a better understanding of sectoral priorities, for example between health and education, has also resulted.

The PPAs are, however, no part of the analysis or recommendations of the World Development Report 1997 (WDR 1997) on The State in a Changing World. In its 13 pages of references I can find not one to any of the PPAs, even though many have been carried out under the auspices of the World Bank and there is an extensive literature. Nor does Chapter 7 of the Report, on "Bringing the State Closer to People", mention PPAs, nor does it consider how the realities of poor and marginalised people can be expressed. The words are there - "participation" and "decentralisation" - but not the recognition of other realities. The mindset is centre-outwards, "protecting the poor" (page 27) rather than empowering them. The implicit answer of the Report to the question "Whose Reality Counts?" is that it is the reality of the centrally placed, highly educated, and intelligent authors of the report.

### **The Primacy of the Personal**

The neglect of the personal dimension in development at first sight seems bizarre. It is self-evident to the point of embarrassment that most of what happens is the result what sort of people we are, how we perceive realities, and what we do and do not do. Whether change is good or bad is largely determined by personal actions, whether by political leaders, officials, professionals or local people, by international currency speculators, executives of transnational corporations, NGO workers, or researchers, whether by mothers, fathers or children, whether by soldiers, secret agents, journalists, lawyers, police, or protesters. Chaos theory (Gleick 1988) tells us that big differences can result from small differences in starting conditions. This is a commonplace, anyway, of human experience. And all people can affect a host of starting conditions with multiplying chain effects.

That said, what happens depends especially on those who have most power and wealth. What they do and do not do they can make a phenomenal difference to the wellbeing of others. It is ironical that the World Development Report 1997 should quote Napoleon's remark "Men are powerless to secure the future; institutions alone fix the destinies of nations" (WDR 1997:29), since Napoleon himself is an extreme example of the extraordinary ability of a single individual to shape history, not least through the institutions which he was responsible for creating.

One might then have supposed then that trying to understand and change the perceptions, motivations and behaviours of those with power and wealth would have been at the centre of development and development studies, and a major focus of concern for the IMF, the World Bank, other donor agencies, Governments and NGOs. But studies of greed and generosity are few<sup>9</sup>. There are quite a number of institutes

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<sup>9</sup> One study (Frank et al 1993) showed alarmingly that economists were more likely than non-economists to act in a non-trusting, non-cooperative, self interested manner. The median gift to big charities by economists among 1245 randomly selected college professors was substantially lower than for non-economists; and about 9 per cent of economists gave nothing, as against a range of 1 to 4 percent for other disciplines. In a prisoners' dilemma game economics students defected 60 per cent of the time compared with 39 per cent for non-economists.

devoted to development studies but there is, to my knowledge, no institute devoted primarily to the study of power or greed.

Part of the neglect may stem from academic culture with its anathema of evangelism, its value of objectivity, and its search for general rather than individual explanations. More potently, perhaps, the neglect is a defence. It can disturb profoundly to reflect on what one does and does not do. It embarrasses to be confronted by poverty and suffering compared with one's own condition. When a poor farmer in India asked me my income I could not reply. To put the personal to the fore in this paper is to expose my own hypocrisy. But hypocrisy is no excuse for silence.

The enormity of this missing link is shown by the most recent Human Development and World Development Reports (HDR 1997, WDR 1997). The Human Development Report 1997 is concerned with poverty. It recommends six essential actions - empowering individuals, households and communities; strengthening gender equality; accelerating pro-poor growth; improving the management of globalisation; ensuring an active state; and taking special actions for special situations. All of these require action by those who are powerful and relatively wealthy. For its part, the World Development Report 1997, on the state in a changing world, presents many recommendations for action. In recognising the importance of leadership and vision (e.g. pages 14, 123, 154-5, 166), in noting political constraints and vested interests, and in lamenting the "unbridled pursuit of riches or power" (159) it gets closer to the personal. But it does not go the whole way. It does not confront the need for personal change. Where the moving force is to come from is not clear. Incentives are recommended, but the question remains who determines and pushes through the incentives. Neither report comes to grips with the personal dimension.

Nor does it appear prominently in academic analysis. There have been few studies of individual officials as leaders.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, given the sensitivity of the subject, studies of the new corruption (IDS 1996, and Harriss-White and White 1996) (contrasting the "old corruption" of economic *dirigisme* and political authoritarianism and a "new corruption" associated with economic and political liberalisation) do not deal in detail with the personal dimension and level. Nor is the issue solved by calling for political will. For political will arises only from the commitment of people, usually in powerful positions, which takes us back again to the personal.

Adopting the concept of responsible wellbeing is one way of putting the personal in the centre. Responsible wellbeing is an individual condition. In her address to this Conference, Clare Short said of the new pro-poor agenda "the selfish and the greedy have to favour it too." One might add, all those who enjoy the exercise of power, almost all managers, and all who are out-of-touch with poor people. The major issue is how to encourage and enable the powerful and wealthy accept the implications of responsible wellbeing, or something close to it, as an ideal, and to define it for themselves in ways which make things better for those who are weak and poor.

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<sup>10</sup> David Leonard's African Successes Four Public Managers in Kenyan Rural Development and Emery Roe's study of James Leach are notable exceptions (references to follow)

## Towards a Radical Pro-Poor Agenda

A radical agenda can have many elements. Each of us would have our own list. And each stage in history has its own favoured prescriptions.

For *procedural and institutional change*, the challenge is to transform public bureaucracies into responsive organisations which are poor-friendly (Blackburn with Holland forthcoming). For this, they have to become participatory learning organisations (a la Senge 1990). Some elements in this are:

- \* recruitment of staff with a participatory and pro-poor orientation
- \* downward accountability, for example through citizen empowerment, as with the Bangalore report cards (WDR 1997: 118)
- \* 360 degree participatory evaluation for each person
- \* social audits
- \* gender and other social balance and sensitivity
- \* abolition of top-down target setting in rural and urban development
- \* facilitating in place of teaching roles in extension
- \* PRA-type activities at community and group levels
- \* participatory monitoring and evaluation, in which local people monitor and evaluate their own projects and government and NGO actions
- \* transformative learning experiences for officials and especially managers (see personal change below)

For *professional change*, the challenge is changes in professional concepts, values, methods and behaviours. This has implications for the content and style of teaching and training, with a shift from transferring knowledge to enabling learning. Many other shifts of balance and degree would include old familiars, for example from measurement to judgement, from blueprint to process, and from reductionism to holism. Economists and accountants would have their place but their modes of thinking would cease to dominate so much, and management would be more by trust than numbers.

It is, though, the person dimensional which is crucial, and it will often entail *personal change*. Like political will, changes which are procedural, institutional and professional all depend on personal commitment and action. This is then the key to all else. For those with power and wealth we need a pedagogy for the oppressors<sup>11</sup> (or to be kind to ourselves, for the non-oppressed). The aim is responsible wellbeing through awareness, commitment and action.

At first sight it looks improbable that the powerful would disempower themselves, or the wealthy willingly make do with less. We need to explore to what degree such pessimism may be unfounded. Pessimism can be based on two propositions which are at best weak, and often false.

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<sup>11</sup> With apologies to Paulo Freire (1970)

The first is that power is like a commodity. We are trapped into thinking this by our syntax: power is gained, lost, surrendered. There is also the self-defeating reflex to control too much. (A recent visitor from the World Bank introduced himself as a "recovering controllaholic). Yet disempowering oneself can have many rewards: effectiveness, as with decentralisation to permit self-organising diversity; liberation, with the reduction of stress; the opening of space for relationships which are friendly and collegial; and fulfilment and fun, as many teachers know as they watch the achievements of students who learn for themselves, and many facilitators of PRA have found through the self-organising appraisals, analyses and actions of local people. To create the conditions for emergent self-organising systems can be deeply satisfying. In the long term the question is how far incentives of such forms of fulfilment from empowering others can help to outweigh losses in authority and rents

The second is that increasing income and wealth leads to greater personal wellbeing. For the very poor and deprived this may indeed often be so. For the wealthy, it is empirically questionable. In addition, altruism and generosity can be powerful, if often neglected, forces (for which see Uphoff 1992).

The radical agenda here is for transformative experiences. At this stage, let three actions suffice.

1. *immersion learning*. Under James Wolfensohn's leadership, senior World Bank staff are being required to spend a week in a village or slum as a learning experience. The early feedback that I have suggests that for some Bank staff at least, this is proving a formative experience.

2. *direct and democratic interaction*. Policy-makers can, through PRA, have direct experience of local conditions with unconstrained learning from poor people. Participatory poverty assessments have enabled those who are poor and marginalised to analyse their realities and express their priorities in ways which are credible to policy-makers. Officials and managers can take part in these or other participatory activities which bring them into direct and non-dominating contact with poor people. Health service managers have done this in the UK. Poor people have presented their PRA outputs to policy-makers and others in several countries in the South. As PPAs using PRA methods are increasingly carried out at subnational levels (e.g. in India, Tanzania and Uganda) the potentials here will multiply.

3. *behaviour and attitudes training*. With the rapid spread of PRA in Government organisations as well as NGOs, behaviour and attitudes have often been relatively neglected, leading to strong concerns (Absalom et al 1995; Mallik, Abu 1996). A robust package of relatively straightforward behaviour and attitudes exercises and facilitated experiences is being sought for use by trainers (Kumar 1996), in the hope that this will act as a benign virus.

Finally, let me not shy away, but end with bold assertions. For a pro-poor agenda for public service management for the 21st century:

- \* the personal dimension is the most important blind spot in development
- \* personal awareness, commitment and action are the key to almost every aspect of good change
- \* policy-makers, officials, and members of civil society including academics, should put the personal dimension centre stage
- \* the greatest methodological challenge we, humankind, face for the 21st century is how to tackle the personal dimension, enabling those who dominate to become democratic, and those with more power and wealth to be better off with less.

30 June 1997

Robert Chambers

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