Over the past 60 years, the discourse concerning the role of the State in economic and social development has substantially changed. This change can be noted in multiple trends reflecting the political, economic and social developments in several groups of countries at different points in time. One broad trend in many industrialized countries is from the “maximalist” State at the aftermath of the Second World War to the “minimalist” State of the 1980s, shifting to a new understanding that signifies the importance of both the State and the market in performing invaluable functions in society. Another broad trend that can be noted in many developing countries is the changing role of the State to adjust periodically to the growth of market forces and the urgent and increasing needs of growing underprivileged groups. Yet another trend that can be noted in many current and formerly socialist countries is the gradual modification of the all-embracing role of the State to accommodate expanding market forces, growing pluralist democracies, and strengthening of an embryonic civil society. These changes in the role of the State have led to corresponding changes in State machineries that, over time, have evolved from applying new public management techniques to eventually a broader concept of governance.¹ This shift is divided into several periods.

**The heyday of public administration: 1948-1970**

From 1948 until approximately 1970, the State was widely perceived as the necessary engine of socio-economic development, and effective administration was viewed as the primary agent in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes. At the same time, deficiencies in organization and management mechanisms at all levels of government were noted as major obstacles to progress in fulfilling national aspirations. It was during this period, mostly in the 1950s, that many developing countries gained independence from colonialism and looked upon the newly independent State as the main vehicle for delivering the benefits of political and economic freedom to their people. In many cases, States embraced socialist organization. Expansion of public administration machinery and personnel was undertaken as the State assumed and accelerated development tasks, focusing on achieving results but not on minimizing related costs and thus achieving efficiency.

However, disappointing results in the implementation of planned activities were increasingly recognized and often attributed to insufficient or inappropri-
ate administrative arrangements. In response, such techniques as administrative reforms, training programmes, information and monitoring systems and programme evaluation were undertaken to build and strengthen the capacity of public administration. These improvements were often undertaken with the technical assistance and support of bilateral donors and international development agencies. It was believed that improved administrative capability of the State machinery would be an important contributing factor in development processes, within a centralized planning framework and industrial development policies. This was evident in the expanding role of government and the thinking that a society could take on an overall approach to problems of national development and deal with them in a coherent manner only through the State apparatus.

**From public administration to public management: 1970-1990**

By the 1970s, experts began to perceive weaknesses in the strong-State central planning model. First, industrialized democracies and then developing ones began to face the growing inefficiencies of an expanded public sector and the beginnings of fiscal crisis. There was an increasing realization of the need for a conceptual shift from administering public regulation to managed public services and national and community development, often borrowing principles and practices from the private and corporate sectors. Emphasis was placed on utilizing and reforming existing structures and systems rather than building new ones. Management improvements for achieving results were developed, often in cooperation with private and community organizations. Gradually, the focus and drivers of technical cooperation supported this shift.

During this period, a policy consensus favouring privatization, deregulation, de-bureaucratization and decentralization often went hand in hand with criticism of the State’s role and a campaign to reverse the growth of government machineries. Major systematic cutbacks in public administration were undertaken in several Western democracies in the early 1980s. This cutback process was later employed in many developing countries as an integral part of “structural adjustment” programmes, which were undertaken under the aegis of international financial and development institutions. The State, which in the previous 20 years had been widely perceived as a necessary engine of socio-economic development, was now portrayed in negative terms and condemned for interfering in market forces. Despite changes that reoriented public administration through improved management approaches and increased collaboration with private and community sectors, the mystique of the dominant State machinery successfully leading development could not be restored.
A dramatic shift began to appear in late 1980s and early 1990s when, due to fiscal crises and inefficiencies in the public sector and the introduction of various structural adjustment measures, the State stopped being regarded as the sole engine of economic growth and social development and eventually began to be seen as an impediment to prosperity. Instead, market forces came to be seen as the vehicle for solving most development problems. This idea was crystallized in the “Washington Consensus” in 1995 when it was generally accepted by major donors and international development agencies that trade, not aid, and private investment, not State money, would be more effective in bringing about sustainable development in less developed countries. In line with these new ideas, the involvement of the State in economic and social development was to be reduced, and government was to operate according to market-like mechanisms wherever possible.

Much of the new thinking originated in the developed countries, and was filtered down to developing countries through technical assistance and structural adjustment programmes. Experiencing rising debt levels and an inability to meet their international obligations, most developing countries acceded to reducing the role of the State. The fall of the former Soviet Union and the democratizing trends that followed also reinforced the move towards more market-based economic systems. Along with this change, there was also a growing acceptance of the fact that different cultural and political circumstances required different approaches in lieu of the notorious “one size fits all” solution.

However, while this reliance on market forces was being practised in many countries, there was evidence that market therapy, both shock and gradual, led to some economic dysfunctions and much social misery. Apparently, there might be a role for the State after all, if only to moderate the negative social consequences of the unregulated market. After decades of debate on the mutually exclusive roles of the State and the market, it became clear that there are as many complementarities as oppositions in the roles of these two partners. During the past few years, there has been a discernible though gradual move away from extreme market or government solutions. Market forces alone do not seem to lead to economic productivity and social progress. Apparently, markets and civil societies will not thrive without a strong and competent public administration.

In this changed context, the role of State machinery is viewed in the larger perspective of governance. Beyond conventional bureaucratic public administration, Governments now incorporate legal and policy frameworks for proper
policy environments, and appropriate measures to promote participatory systems for civil society to engage in policy formulation and programme implementation, as well as contribute to an effective and transparent process for control and accountability of government actions. Nonetheless, public administration remains the pre-eminent locus and responsible guarantor of the public interest and a vital player within public management and governance. To support the role of the State and ensure that its goals are fulfilled, public administration continues to evolve, absorbing new methods and adapting practices according to social and technological progress, internal and external pressures and cultural and contextual challenges. As public administration continues to provide the foundation for maintaining confidence in the stability and continuity of the State, efforts to enhance its professionalism and integrity and to buttress its impartiality, legality and transparency are critical to the fulfilment of the State’s overarching goals.

From left to right: Mr. Guido Bertucci, Director of the Division for Public Administration and Development Management; the Honourable Léo Mérorès, President of the Economic and Social Council and Permanent Representative of Haiti to the United Nations; the Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon, President Emeritus of the Canada School of Public Service and Chairperson of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration; and Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, on the occasion of the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations Programme on Public Administration, 16 April 2008, United Nations Headquarters, New York.
This new role of public administration in improving overall governance is carried out in the context of and in response to local, national, regional and global pressures, as well as challenges for survival, development and change. These pressures—globalization, restoring faith in government, accelerated economic development with equity, and environmental protection—affect countries to different degrees and the countries’ responses are reflected in the variations of policy packages and reform initiatives. The big challenge for governance in the years ahead is to reinvent a framework for society that transcends the government structure, and moves towards a more inclusive and organic linkage of the roles of government, business and civil society.

The United Nations Programme on Public Administration has been a promoter of the adoption of new and improved practices of public administration, and numerous paradigm shifts. Along the way, the Programme has been an important element in the policy and implementation network that has woven the web of discourse and paradigm shifts, because the United Nations Programme on Public Administration has made concrete the mandate of Member States to promote sound public administration. A list of General Assembly and Economic and Social Council resolutions will show how intergovernmental bodies, supported by the work of the Secretariat, have highlighted the Programme paradigm changes. General Assembly resolution 50/225 of 19 April 1996, adopted on the occasion of its resumed fiftieth session, was a pivotal document in highlighting the new role and scope of public administration.²