United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Meeting of Experts on

"Approaches and methodologies for the assessment and transfer of best practices in governance and public administration"

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, I wish to thank you all for taking part in this Experts Meeting and for accepting to explore and discuss with us the approaches and methodologies that are appropriate for the transfer and/or adaptation of successful innovations in governance and public administration within, and across, countries and regions. Your contribution to this debate is extremely important as one of the key objectives of this meeting is to provide inputs for the preparation of guidelines and recommendations on how to assess and replicate best practices. This is not only an academic endeavour, but a practical one as well since the recommendations that will emerge from these two days of work will be used to assist interested Governments in adapting innovations from other countries and/or from the local/national levels within a country itself. I hope that this meeting will also contribute to:

1) Enhance the knowledge of the concept of best practice and innovation in public administration;
2) Strengthen knowledge of North-South and South-South cooperation in replicating best practices;
3) Receive feed-back on how the United Nations can provide more effective assistance to governments in the area of sharing and replication of best practices; and
4) Provide inputs for the preparation of a publication containing useful information for countries wishing to replicate best practices and innovation.

As you all know, several governments around the world, including countries in the Mediterranean region, have introduced or are introducing innovations in public administration in different areas. I wish to underscore that innovation in public administration should not be considered as a fashion or as a “special benefit” of countries with developed administrative systems. As shown by the increasing number of applications received by UNDESA for the United Nations Public Service Awards, many of these reforms are initiated in developing countries and become widely known as “best practices”. Innovation in governance and public administration is today a necessity of every government that wishes to keep up with the many demands of its citizens and with the emerging regional and international challenges. Striking a balance in the public sector between stability and

continuity on the one hand and innovation on the other is also a critical issue. Perhaps this item might be further explored over the next two days.

In light of the above, sharing information and transferring knowledge on best practices is a very important tool in stimulating and inspiring governments to introduce innovative practices and provides a fertile environment for the replication of successful reforms. Moreover, focusing on best practices rather than on failures is a way to provide positive incentives for reform efforts and encourage a positive outlook on development. It affords the opportunity to shift our attention from “what” public administration and the State should do to “how” it should do it, i.e. how it should solve the many challenges it is presented with on a daily basis.

Therefore, the United Nations is dedicated to promoting the exchange of experiences, ideas and best practices concerning innovations in governance and public administration in order to contribute to social and economic development. The General Assembly itself has reiterated, in resolution 57/277 that particular emphasis should be given to the exchange of experience related to the role of public administration in the implementation of internationally agreed goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. In resolution 50/225, it also underlined the importance of enhancing international cooperation in the field of public administration, including South-South and interregional cooperation.

Sharing of information *per se* is, however, not always sufficient at the implementation level. In fact, best practices are usually documented by example, resulting in only limited transfer of knowledge and ideas between countries and a tendency to "reinvent the wheel". In order to maximize the benefit of sharing best practices among countries and to provide more effective assistance to interested Governments in replicating specific innovations in public administration, it is necessary to develop a set of tools and methodologies to identify the validity and transferability of national practices and experiences, as well as the steps and requirements of the implementation process.

To assess whether a country can benefit from the innovative experiences of other countries, it is necessary to evaluate: a) whether that particular experience is indeed successful; b) whether it is transferable to another country; c) whether the country on the receiving end has the capacity to implement such practice. Therefore it is critical to identify the approaches

and methodologies through which the information and best practices can be assessed, shared and transferred where necessary.

Since replicating best practices/innovations is about transferring and adapting knowledge, as well as about policies and implementation processes, the discussion will revolve around four main themes, which I would like to briefly touch upon.

1. Best practices and innovation in government: perspectives, challenges and potential (or what is a best practice?)

Documenting and sharing best practices in public administration have become one of the preferred approaches to fostering innovation in government and promoting development. There can be different types of innovations in public administration, including: (a) institutional innovations which focus on the renewal of established institutions and/or the establishment of new institutions; (b) organizational innovation, including the introduction of new working procedures or management techniques in public administration; (c) process innovation which focuses on the improvement of the quality of public service delivery; and (d) conceptual innovation, which focuses on the introduction of new forms of governance (interactive policy-making; engaged governance; people's budget reforms; horizontal networks, etc.). The areas of innovation are also varied, including human resources development and management; public service delivery; ICT applications in government operations; decentralization; etc.

In the case of human resources management there are successful examples aimed at enhancing the quality of leadership through new institutional frameworks and incentives. In the area of public service delivery, there are several innovations including the availability of government services at times and in ways that are more convenient to the public, speedy processing of applications or claims, reduction in the amount of paperwork and other activities citizens must perform in order to demonstrate compliance or clearly written government regulations. ICT applications have also been introduced to upgrade service delivery in terms of wider access to services, enhanced efficiency and timeliness, a more "citizen-centred" approach to services, and greater effectiveness, relevance and quality of services. The application of ICT in local government operations has enabled a local

government – policy makers and public officials – to better interact with the public, particularly individual citizens. This enhanced interaction may support government legitimacy, responsiveness and relevancy by allowing citizens to better express their needs, participate in and influence policy- making, comment on policy implementation, provide feedback on government services (on and off-line services), and file complaints, among other activities.

Despite the wealth of good examples around the world, the challenge is to distinguish between cases that are indeed "best practices" and cases that do not fall under this category. In other words, not always what is presented as a best practice is a successful experience in the long-term and can be transferred to other countries. In order to assist countries who are interested in replicating best practices, this Meeting intends to identify the characteristics of a best practice as well as what is meant by innovation in government since this concept is intertwined with the first one.

One of the definitions of best practice is "a superior method or innovative practice that contributes to the improved performance of an organization, usually recognized as "best" by other peer organizations. Indeed, there are many definitions of innovation. Innovation is understood as a creative idea and implementation which is different from invention. It can be understood as the act of conceiving and implementing a new way of achieving a result and/or performing work. An innovation may involve the incorporation of new elements, a new combination of existing elements or a significant change or departure from the traditional way of doing things. Public sector management innovation may also be defined as the development of new policy designs and new standard operating procedures by public organizations to address public policy problems.

The concept of "best practices" is widely used to distinguish exemplary or improved performance in organizations. It has been defined as an activity or procedure that has produced outstanding results and could be adapted to improve effectiveness, efficiency, ecology, and/or innovativeness in another situation. It has also been defined as the winning strategies, approaches, and processes that produce superior performance in an organization. A best practice is a by-product of a successful end-result (www.portal-step.com/90.1Glossary.htm) For UNAIDS, best practice means accumulating and applying

knowledge about what is working and not working in different situations and contexts. In other words, it is both the lessons learned and the continuing process of learning, feedback, reflection and analysis (what works, how and why, etc.).

The best practice approach and research has been defined as "the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of management"[1]. The focus of analysis is on "success stories" in order to discover the chain of practices, ways of doing things that achieve results.

Within this framework, some of the topics that could be discussed include the following:

- What is a best practice?
- What are the main characteristics of a best practice?
- What is an innovation in public administration?
- When and why are best practices introduced in government and what makes them "best practices"?
- How can general principles and theories of management be learned from best practices?
- Is the term "best practice" still relevant in the development discourse or should we refer to them as "successful experiences" or use another term altogether?
- In what sense are these cases "best" or "successful"?
- What are the criteria to measure the success of a government reform?
- In order to be considered as a best practice, should the innovation be an isolated reform effort or should it have the capacity to create a positive environment for reforms in other areas leading to the attainment of national long term development goals?

2. Transferability of best practices/innovations

Although an innovation in government may be in relative terms a "best practice" within a specific country, it might not lend itself to being replicated in other parts of the world due to the unique specificities of the case. It could be that a particular innovation has been implemented to respond to a very specific need within a certain administration and that the same needs are not felt in other administrations. Or it could be that because of the very

1 Katarobo, James (1998), "The Study of Best Practice in Civil Service reforms", MDGD/BDP/UNDP

peculiar characteristics of a central or local government administration the "best practice" is not transferable. In other words, in order to successfully replicate a best practice it is not sufficient to define the case as a best practice, but also to assess whether it responds to universal needs so that it may be purposefully replicated in other national contexts. Transferring best practices is about knowledge transfer. It implies transferring ideas, know-how, skills and lessons learned in the implementation process of an innovation.

Within this framework, the following issues could be discussed: What are the characteristics that make a best practice transferable to other contexts and countries? What are the variables that allow for transferability? What is the role of culture?

3. Endogenous capacity to absorb and implement a best practice

Innovation requires processes of adaptation, anticipation and openness to change. It is change that provides the opportunity to achieve new and different approaches. In order to replicate a best practice one of the pre-conditions is that the government who is implementing the best practice has the necessary capacity to do so. This implies, among other things, the right policy environment; support from leadership, involvement of stakeholders, adequate funding and an appropriate transfer plan. It also implies the capacity of the organization to constantly adapt to changing circumstances both internal and external, i.e. to operate as a learning organization.

It should be noted that successful innovation is often "incremental and small scale because the factors conditioning the success of innovative practices vary according to the organization's internal capacity, external environment and goals or mission. Each organization is different and faces varied situations at particular points in time. The techniques required to promote organizational innovation must therefore be situationally determined. Furthermore, the stability of the organization's environment changes over time, requiring various degrees of innovation. Finally, the internal social structure and capacity of an organization to support and carry out changed standard operating procedures will also vary". (Cohen and Eimicke, 1996, p. 2)2. In other words, one size does not fit all.

2 See "Cohen Steven and William Eimicke, Understanding and Applying Innovation Strategies in the Public Sector", Paper prepared for presentation to the 57 Annual National Conference of the American Society for Public Administration, June 29-July 3 1996, Atlanta, Georgia.

In order to adapt a best practice there a number of steps which should be followed, including: 1) Ensure that the information about the best practice, both in terms of its components and expected outcomes, is disseminated among those that will be responsible for its implementation as well as those who will benefit from the innovation; 2) Put in place teams to replicate the practice; 3) formulate a clear adoption policy and process; 4) Measure and report progress on the implementation process to assess sustainability.

Within this framework, the following topics could be discussed in the next two days:

- What are the pre-conditions, in terms of institutional capacity, knowledge mobilization and management, human resources, etc. for the effective adaptation and implementation of a best practice?
- What are the elements of a successful transfer plan?
- What are the criteria that should be met in order to ensure sustainability of the reform at hand?
- How can the challenges encountered in adapting a best practice be overcome?
- What is the impact of organizational culture in terms of absorption capacity?
- What is the role of leadership in implementing a good practice?

4. Approaches and methodologies for the replication of best practices

In order to facilitate the replication of a best practice in a specific national context, and once all of the above criteria have been satisfied, it is very important to identify a set of measures that can assist in practical terms interested governments in the transfer process and plan. It is not enough to provide guidelines about how to assess whether a best practice is such, whether it is transferable and whether the recipient country has the needed capacities to adapt that practice, but it is also necessary to provide instruments that can help public administration systems to use the acquired knowledge and put into practice. Facilitating the understanding of the approaches and methodologies that best support assessing and transferring successful innovations where feasible is very important in avoiding duplication of efforts in the search for better ways of governing the development process.

Therefore, one of the challenges of our meeting will be to suggest concrete methods and approaches to successfully transfer best practices, particularly in the context of developing countries. In this respect, key issues to be discussed include the following:

- Are transfer guidelines or training materials sufficient in order to replicate a best practice? Would study tours be more fruitful?
- What forms of collaboration and partnership among countries and/or experts can be established to reach the above-mentioned goal?
- Could networks of innovators be helpful in this respect, and if so, what could their role be? Is there only one approach or would a combination of approaches be more useful?

I am confident that your deliberations will greatly enrich our knowledge of these critical issues and provide support to our efforts in assisting Governments around the world to adapt successful solutions to common challenges of governance and public administration, particularly in developing countries.

Thank you.