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“CHALLENGES TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS”

Presentation by Marta Oyhanarte:

CITIZEN –CENTRED PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

-How can the public administration secure the provision and expansion of public services under the conditions presented by the crisis and how can citizens be engaged to this aim?
-How can multilevel governance and decentralization contribute to better public service delivery at the local level?
-How realistic is it nowadays to increase the delivery of determined public services through ICT, in countries with diverse development levels?
What are key interventions to advance in this respect?

SCENARIO AFTER THE CRISIS

The international crisis which had taken shape by August 2007 spread rapidly. The inclusion of all countries in a global network expedited this process. One by one the pieces which held up the global financial system crumbled. What started as a financial crisis very quickly began to affect the real sector. The effects of the crisis, far from being confined to the more developed countries, spread to the emerging nations, although these were generally less severely affected. It is a global crisis in the widest sense of the term. No country can overcome it alone. The belief that deregulated markets can solve all has been proved false. Today regulation has been recognized as a public good. This does not mean the death of the market; it is indispensable for the allocation of resources and irreplaceable as the engine of economic growth, but it is vital to establish global rules of the game for a globalized world and to strengthen multilateralism both commercially and politically. In other words beyond the need for regulation of financial markets, it is essential to act multilaterally to deal with problems like the underdevelopment and extreme poverty prevailing in the greater part of the world, the widening of the gap between rich and poor (in the last 30 years the difference in income between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of the world population has increased from 30 to 60 times), the trades in drugs and arms, political, ethnic and religious conflicts, migration from poorer countries and climate change. Such challenges have no answers in the free operation of markets if there is not, at the same time, effective cooperation on the part of the international community.

Beyond the bewilderment of the world leadership and the prevailing uncertainty, the new global panorama demands a reexamination of the relationship between state, market and society. It would be desirable that this crisis is seen as an opportunity to:

- Develop a global view based on a culture of cooperation and solidarity.
- Rethink the role of the State in relation to both, local and trans-national phenomena.
- Extend the opportunities for participation in order that citizens find channels through which to demand of their governments minimum levels of social cohesion and integration.

That is to say, recover amongst us all the rationality to defend the common good and place citizens as the main beneficiaries of public policies.

There are no magic solutions. Daily efforts are required from the public and private sectors and the institutions of civil society to combine reflection, strategic thinking and action for change on all fronts of social and political life.

KNOWING HOW TO IMPLEMENT POLICIES

In any of the possible scenarios, if we wish to guarantee the provision and expansion of public services and ensure that their main beneficiaries are the citizens, special attention must be paid to the process of implementation within the framework designed by each nation. The subject of policy implementation, although growing in importance in academic circles and theoretical research is still not yet seen as an essential factor by policy makers. What do we understand by implementation? Simply to put into operation a basic political decision. It is vital to recognize that there are expectations and opportunities, timing and a multitude of stakeholders, interests and responsibilities which must be taken into account. A public policy takes time to design and when put into effect it must be recognized that organizations or social agents will react differently, the public officials or those responsible for applying it will behave differently and the groups the policy is aimed at will respond in different ways.

Implementation is inevitably a complicated even conflictive process, which requires knowledge to make possible a coordination which integrates differences and results in harmonious and effective collective action.

A change in the behaviour of a large number of people needs a conceptual framework and technical skills capable of adapting to diverse contexts, as well as encompassing a historical perspective. It is a complex process, involving collective construction and the re-creation of mutual confidence in which a set of formal and informal rules are established by which the relationships between social agents are governed.

A political culture cannot be changed from one day to the next. The participative practices essential for the success of this process are perfected and legitimized with use. Citizens must perceive their government to be democratic, honest and efficient and know how, where and why to participate. And the government must know that participation can mobilize many latent resources in the society.

A NEW APPROACH TO THE RE-INVENTION OF GOVERNMENT

The current challenges demand of the public administration a new approach: the call for the “reinvention of government” is heard world-wide.

However done, this must combine a movement from the top down with one from the bottom up.

Everything that surrounds us can be reinvented, not through sudden, sweeping action but by continually pushing the boundaries. Small institutional changes can have important practical effects.

“A fundamental yardstick to measure our capacity to come close to an ideal in politics is how successful we are in making change less dependent on crises. Change must be internal. The imagination does the work of the crisis without the crisis” (Roberto Mangabeira Unger. “The Self Awakened” Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2009)

Now, as never before, we must act with imagination, will and hope to encourage two basic principles: the recognition of citizen power and the deepening of democracy.

One aspect to bear in mind is the impact of the new information and communication technologies on politics, culture and people’s daily lives. For this reason, while recognizing underlying factors which limit the access of a large number of the population to these, no effort must be spared to extend their availability as they allow, amongst other things, access to information. The possibility of obtaining full, accurate and timely information from the three State powers is essential for the exercise of citizen participation.

GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL CITIZENS AS IMPORTANT STAKEHOLDERS

Thinking about democracy, thinking about development means thinking “from below”, not about a process which goes from the general to the particular but one which implies considering a region, a town, a municipality. In the last few years, the greatest participation that has come from outside political party channels has been associated with a trend towards strengthening discussion and decision- making at a local level. A new political culture can start here. Local governments are no longer just providers of services; they are highly complex systems which can play a central role in a globalized world, whether by regulating efficiently the existing system or by expanding the area’s opportunities by means of exchanges and agreements with others in similar situations. All the challenges of the world today are present in small communities and the closeness of the stakeholders makes change easier to achieve.

A sign of the times is the association and integrated opening-up of active conglomerates made up of simple units. The next step on from local development is regional integration within a country which, if carried out in a strategic direction and at the same time gradually, in depth and with participation by citizens, can counter the negative effects of globalization and promote human development enabling the enjoyment of a long, healthy and decent life. The process requires shared values and commitments from all the social stakeholders. For example, the setting in motion of processes of decentralization demands a dose of altruism from the highest levels of the central government because, as power is transferred from the those in charge in the central government to the municipal level, new leaders are being created who might one day compete with them. This is a point to bear in mind and often explains why in so many emerging nations the promotion of this type of reform comes from external organizations and not from the central governments themselves.

AN EXAMPLE OF INNOVATIVE PUBLIC POLICY

In Argentina in 2003, with the support of UNDP, an innovative public policy was set in motion in local governments: The Citizen's Audit, Quality of Democratic Practices in Municipalities.

The Citizen's Audit is a participative tool which, employing established methods of investigation, allows a community to evaluate itself and improve its democratic practices, linking politics with the everyday problems of the population. The project is aimed at citizens and their local governments, who starting from a chart of strengths and weaknesses, drawn up based on the discussions and opinions of the community, have the opportunity to develop skills which allow them to identify how to improve certain practices affecting the quality of democracy, or in other words, the quality of life.

"Democratic practices" are defined as the rules of the game which link the State and Society. Four of these have been selected as they are considered to be the foundations of the construction of better institutions: civic culture, citizen participation, the relationship with the citizen and accountability.

Civic culture is understood as the set of values, beliefs and knowledge of citizens about democracy and the exercise of the rights and duties which this involves.

Citizen participation describes the degree to which rules and public programmes create opportunities for citizens' intervention in the administration and the effective use which the citizens make of these.

Relationship with the citizen refers to the way public officials and citizens interact. It focuses on the training of public officials and mutual respect for a person's dignity.

Accountability is the way in which the behaviour of officials and the results of their administration are subjected to the scrutiny of citizens and the degree to which citizens demand this information.

The Citizen's Audit has an impact on the quality of democratic coexistence precisely because it is not an assessment made by technocrats and academics locked up in ivory towers. It is discussions by citizens about their democratic life and at the same time it is a process of social change based on strict academic principles.

The Citizen's Audit uses an easily transferable methodology due both to its local scale and because it is carried out in a series of steps which permit the adjustment of variables, error correction and the incorporation of lessons learnt from the evaluation of these.

The Citizen's Audit gives rise to a type of inter-relation which shifts the local government from its monopoly position in the sphere of public action and helps to bring in social organizations and the private sector as partners in the implementation of local public policies.

The Citizen's Audit represents a contribution to democratic governance, as it is supported by the attainment of virtuous circles which multiply as they spread through an area: "if the government is more transparent, the greater the confidence of the citizens in the institutions; the greater the degree of confidence, the better the leadership; the better the leadership, the more viable the construction of purposeful relationships among stakeholders; the better the relationship among stakeholders, the easier it is to get results and more participation; the greater the participation, the more sustainable the process".

(UNDP 2004 Agenda for the Strengthening of Local Governance in Latin America. Bogotá. Colombia)

The knowledge acquired during the six years the programme has been in operation has been organized into a manual. In the foreword Carlos Felipe Martínez, Resident Coordinator of the UNDP in Argentina wrote, “This knowledge is ready to be shared and transferred to all those governments in the region and the world who wish to carry out actions and analyses in order to strengthen local democratic practices” (Fruits of Democracy. Manual of the Implementation of the Citizen’s Audit of the Quality of Democratic Practices in Municipalities. 1st Edition, Buenos Aires, United Nations Development Programme 2009)

The municipalities are the foundation upon which to construct economic spaces and original policies. Of course, this cannot be an autarchic process, it must form part of the national processes. Even so, there remain two important issues to be dealt with: international co-operation- which must respond to the needs of each community- and the transfer of greater financial resources from central to local governments.