

LOOKING AHEAD: HOW "SMART" CAN PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION GET THROUGH SOCIAL INNOVATION?

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Abstract

21st century public administration faces numerous challenges that make its activities difficult to organize and coordinate and be at the same time in synchronicity with the increasing needs of its citizens.

The only way public administration can address these challenges has to be its will and vision to adapt to harsh conditions of environment and the pressure to perform better with less. In order to become more efficient, public administration has to get ahead these problems and become „smarter”. In an age when social innovation appears to be the response at hand, it seems equally easy for public administration to go forward by using it.

The present article explores concepts such as „smart public administration”, „social innovation”, digitalization and „smart” public service.

The methods of research used are the qualitative evaluation of various sources of specialized research and literature in the field.

Keywords: smart public administration, smart public service, social innovation, digitalization.

1. Introduction

Public administration has worked under great pressure in the last decades, because of various multidimensional phenomena that have appeared and taken centre stage at a global level. Governments around the world have had a hard time at finding solutions to the “wicked problems” they have been confronted with and that will impact and transform patterns of thinking and modes of governance on the long run. The current crisis triggered by the pandemic had only increased this struggle and emphasized the necessity of finding solutions and expressing solidarity at a global level, because our societies are and have always been, in fact, closely connected. In other words, the ongoing predicament that humankind is still facing, “... is likely to be the biggest test of global solidarity that we have ever faced.” (Gurria, 2020, p. 3).

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Our article sets out to focus upon the analysis of ways and actions that governments try to find in order to make public administration, and public services included, more responsive to citizens and more inclusive, therefore “smart”. To reach this objective, governments seem to have chosen to renew their commitment of achieving the “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) and integrating them in all public policies to ensure equality of treatment for all citizens and particularly for the most at risk ones. Our article explores the sphere of smart administration and smart public services, from the perspective of the main “cross-cutting challenges” (OECD, 2018) that governments have to address and ultimately solve in order to offer better public services to people and protect those at risk of social exclusion.

The nature and accelerated rhythm of these cross-cutting matters, such as ageing population, perpetuation of gender and economic inequalities, increased migration, ever-growing use of digital technologies and menacing climate changes, force political decision makers to adopt innovation as an instrument of action. In order to build smarter public services and more inclusive and resilient societies for all citizens, governments have to resort to innovative modes of thinking and creation of services in all sectors to reduce economic, social and gender gaps. In addition, the pandemic has brutally brought to our attention the necessity of building a real capacity to better respond to crises and shocks in the future. This endeavour certainly requires a multi-dimensional and innovative approach and an arduous work in the years ahead, but despite of all difficulties, it has to be carried out.

The methodology of research is a mixed one, combining qualitative methods and quantitative ones, to offer a better insight into very intricate phenomena related to public administration’s efforts to reshape its future and consolidate new ways of coping with crises.

2. Everything “smart”: government, administration, services and so on...

“Smart”, as a concept attached to various notions in the field of public administration, has begun to conquer the centre of attention towards the end of the last century (Suarez, 2020, p. 277-278), when many developments took place in public administration and services related to new demands from the citizens and the accelerated spread of information and communication technologies. Although, the concept has been discussed and analysed number of times, and consequently there is a rich literature dedicated to it, much too little has been studied in relation to its limitations and its capacity to cover all societal problems. Only recently, various scholars attempted to call attention to the fact that a smart public administration and its smart

public services have to become even smarter to avoid exclusion of the most vulnerable citizens and make sure these categories are not further discriminated because of their lack of access to the new services and policies set in place.

There is also a clear evolution of this concept from covering innovative features referring to the use of technologies in public administration, sometimes called “technocratic conceptualization” (Wirtz, Müller & Schmidt, 2020) to a more “citizen-centric” or “human-centric” approach (European Commission 2019, 2020; Misuraca, Barcevičius, Codagnone, 2020) prompted by a more profound understanding of the need to respond to and consider, first and foremost, the human being, the individual experiencing a problem or several problems, rather than being interested in the use of technologies. Integrating this perspective of a better and closer look at the individual, the concept has gained new meanings and made a proper adjustment to the necessity of putting technologies at the service of people. In other words, putting people first means an assessment of their needs and “tailoring” or designing services according to these needs.

Associated with government, (public) services, public administration and the administrative units where people live and work daily, especially cities, the term “smart” referred initially to the integration of technologies in all activities across administrative organizations and structures, with the main objective of increasing efficiency and performance. According to the European Commission, “Smart public services, also known as digital public services or eGovernment, refer to the use of technology to provide services to the citizens at local, regional and national levels” (European Commission, 2021a).

A gradual change of perspective emphasized that digital technologies are only a means to be applied in order to increase the quality of public services required by citizens. This change has been illustrated by various documents of the European Commission, as well as speciality research in this field, all of which propose strategies and measures to be adopted so as to enhance the potential of digital technologies to serve all citizens in a sustainable manner that includes everyone.

As proved by an abundant and continuously increasing scientific literature, one of the most known and prominent spheres of activity and representing the closest level to the citizen is the city. The city aims and claims to become “smart”, hence the ubiquitous expression of “smart city”. More and more researchers consider that the digitalization and use of basic technologies in urban services may be considered smart, only when citizens are placed at the center of this process and take active part in the “co-creation/co-production” of the services they ask for (Wirtz, Müller & Schmidt, 2020, p. 301; Abella, Ortiz-de-Urbina-Criado & De-Pablos-

Hereadero, 2019). So much so that, studies in this domain are classified or divided according to the perspective they embrace in the analysis of the smart city, namely the “technology-oriented” or “the people-oriented” point of view (Wirtz, Müller & Schmidt, 2020, p. 301; Luterek, 2020). In its turn, a McKinsey Report from 2020 highlights this dimension, bringing motives to sustain the idea that “*Smart cities* technologies translate digital technologies into better public services for citizens, better use of resources and less impact on the environment” (McKinsey, 2020, p. 11).

The human-centric approach is also used by the current *Smart City Index 2021* (SCI) and is considered to be a feature that ensures the “uniqueness” of the study. The analysis and the detailed information that make the content of SCI 2021 are based “first and foremost on the perceptions of those who live and work in the cities” (SCI, 2021). According to this index a “smart city” is “an urban setting that applies technology to enhance the benefits and diminish the shortcomings of urbanization for its citizens” (Bris, Koon Hean, Lanvin, 2021, p. 3).

The European Union has also intensified its work in the field of public administration reform, proposing and elaborating new legal documents and strategies, as well as programs to make public services smart and fit for the new era. In its vision, “A smart city uses innovative technologies to support traditional networks and services. Both citizens and businesses benefit from smart cities” (European Commission, 2021b). The European Commission has embarked upon creating a smart city administration that is “more interactive and more responsive” (European Commission, 2021b) to the call of those that are most vulnerable, like the elderly and those with disabilities. To accomplish its multidimensional project, the Commission has launched “Join, Boost, Sustain”, a movement that was set up after a declaration signed by representatives and mayors of local administrative collectivities, mainly regions and cities. At the same time the EU policy on cities has made a first step through its “European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities” (EIP SCC) (European Commission, 2021c). It has also proposed a mission named “Climate Neutral and Smart Cities” within the vast program *Horizon Europe* which also addresses the digital transition through *Digital Europe* (European Commission, 2021c). In this way, the Commission wants to address the multiple dimensions of a smart administration based on an integrated approach that associates the use of innovation and digital technologies in order to modernize services to make them citizen or human-centric, whereas respecting the principles of sustainable development and climate neutrality.

3. Vulnerable categories: the *"live no one behind"* approach

Estimations show that until 2050, approximately two thirds of the global population will live in cities, a fact which translates into a growing pressure on urban services, urban administration and on resources (European Commission, 2021b). With this prospect in mind and considering all the other "cross-cutting issues" (previously mentioned) looming on the horizon, the smart use of resources and the innovative design and provision of services must be permanent objectives on the agenda of local authorities. The tone and pace has already been established by the European Commission who aims to create a "smart city digital ecosystem" (European Commission, 2021b).

This vision of the ecosystem is a recent one and is based on parallels between natural ecosystems and the urban anthropic one, to sustain the idea of various elements of the ecosystem supporting each other. The main premise is that only an increasing collaboration between different stakeholders across sectors, from public, to private, to scientific community and citizens, determined to work together, may result in innovative solutions that are at the same time sustainable and inclusive.

These solutions are even more needed because of the challenges or issues that are throwing public administration out of balance and posing serious threats to the health and, sometimes, to the life of citizens. Current society has seen a growing number of aging persons and an increasing disparity between people able to work and those who have no longer the ability to continue working, and this global phenomenon is urging public administration at all levels, national, regional, the city and rural communities, to find solutions. There is also a rise of other vulnerable categories, such as people with disabilities or a huge number of displaced people, either because of violent events taking place in their native countries, or because of climate change. Added to it, the overwhelming use of digital technologies accentuates the divide between the skilled ones who also have technologies at their disposal, and those who cannot use this advantage, either because they do not have the abilities or the access to these technologies.

Another important category that has to be placed at the core of public policies are those "at risk of poverty or social exclusion - AROPE", a group including "persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity" (Eurostat, 2021). According to Eurostat, the AROPE rate is the main indicator to accomplish the Europe 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat, 2021).

Unfortunately, increasing inequalities within and between countries, at a European level and worldwide, have a negative impact on social environments and contribute to more exclusion and discrimination. In its analysis on discrimination factors, OECD sustains that marginalisation and vulnerability are magnified by nine factors: disability, age, socio-economic status, ethnic origin, geographic location, sexual orientation and religious and political beliefs (2018a, p. 241). As a general tendency, these factors that augment inequalities reinforce each other when they overlap (OECD, 2018a, p. 241). The World Inequality Lab has shown that because of disparities existing at a global level, less than 9% of the global income is distributed to the poorest 50% of the world's people and that 27% of humanity will be forced to live in "fragile contexts" by 2030, because of violent extremism, forced displacement, pandemics or famine (OECD, 2018a, p. 3).

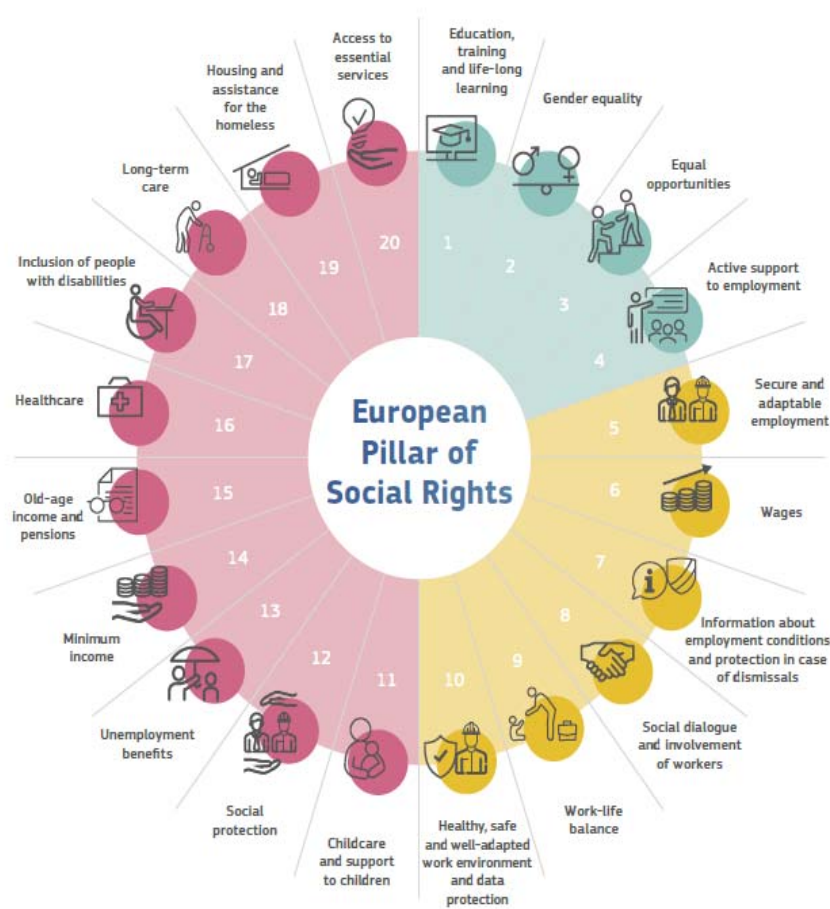
To address inequality of treatment that affect marginalised categories, the UN's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) and the *Agenda for Humanity*, adopted in 2016, have included the principle "leave no one behind" as a line of action and development to be pursued by all programs and strategies. All countries taking part in these agreements have made a promise to promote inclusion as a way of ensuring access without restrictions to fundamental rights and services to the most vulnerable people (OECD, 2018a, p. 241). OECD made its own contribution by launching an innovative initiative, namely *Opportunities for All: A Policy Framework for Action on Inclusive Growth* (2018b) to offer governments a guide for their efforts at attaining the sustainable development goals.

The EU has established inclusion and all sustainable development goals as permanent values of its legal framework and political agenda. In the last decades, European public services have undergone a complex reform process and are still going through transformation to achieve the digital transition. In order to "shape Europe's digital future", a *Digital Compass* (European Commission, COM/2021/118 final) that focuses also on creating smart services for all citizens has been set in place. Innovative principles such as "digital by default", "once only" or "interoperability" are meant to grant access to services across frontiers to citizens all over Europe. EU's most recent projects envision the solving of most pressing issues through a "mission"- oriented approach that implies establishing integrated measures and programs to solve challenges in key-areas, also termed "themes". One of these new missions is "Climate Neutral and Smart Cities" whose target is to support cities in achieving their digital and green transition in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

A fundamental document that guides EU's action in accomplishing its commitment to leave no one behind is the European Pillar of Social Rights, announced by the European Parliament, the Council and the

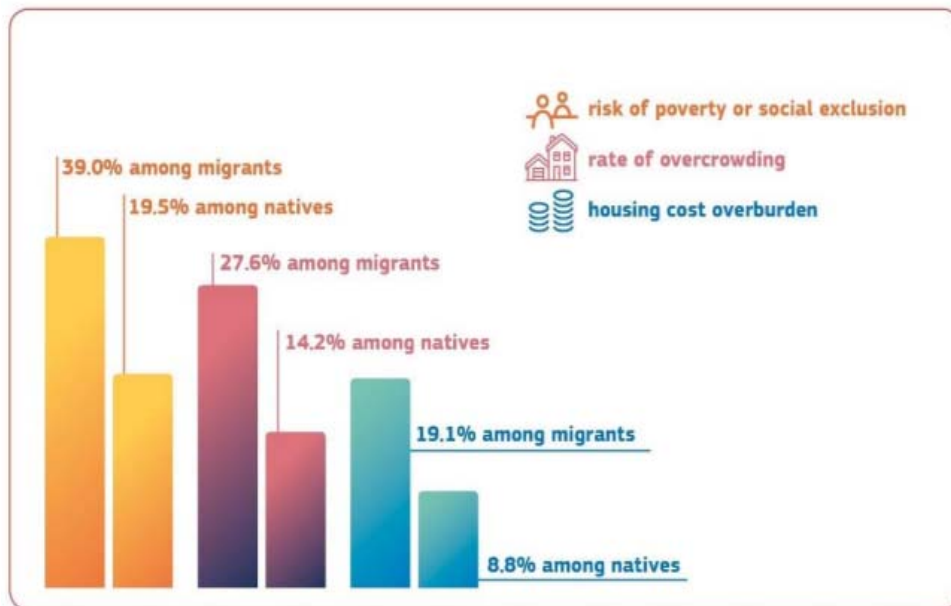
European Commission in 2017. This document represents a “social rulebook” that ensures and consolidates the social dimension of all EU policies and legislation. The European Pillar establishes twenty principles to cover all spheres of activity where measures have to be applied.

Figure 1 – Diagram of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights



Source: European Commission. (2021e).
European Pillar of Social Rights. Action Plan, p. 3

According to the Action Plan on 2021, there are still “persisting challenges” in several important domains, such as education, employment, access to basic services and inclusion of migrants, as we can see from the figure below.



Source: European Commission. (2020). COM(2020) 758 final, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, p. 4

In these domains, additional measures have to be taken. The European institutions have many times highlighted that any advancement on the way towards a fair and inclusive Europe can be realised only through a “strong” and “shared commitment” to the UN 2030 Agenda goals and to the implementation of the all principles and rights enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, 2020).

Prompted to respond to all these emergencies and in agreement with strategies and actions carried out by the EU and other international organizations (UN, OECD), governments around the world have resorted to innovation and tried to integrate it in their strategies. As these problems are (often labelled) “cross-cutting”, because they have multiple aspects related to all areas of development, their resolution must be tried out by a holistic or “cross-cutting” approach. In its reports, OECD refers to the ways in which problems or themes such as gender equality, environment, youth, migration, air pollution and climate change have to be addressed through “sustained action across all management areas” (OECD, 2018, p. 218). This approach requires an extensive and profound process of reform across many organizations and structures of government in order to change relations and models of work, patterns of thinking and behaviours, and build a new organization culture based on innovation and transformative management that promotes collaboration and closer communication with all stakeholders and citizens. Although in many countries, social and public services have

been the subject of reforms, the results have not been the expected ones. The pandemic has negatively influenced these reforms, and will certainly influence the course of action for many years to come. The digitalisation of public services seems a solution to many failures of administration to effectively respond to citizens' needs, but it has to be applied into practice as part of a holistic vision that ensures that no further discrimination will be generated for the already discriminated.

Conclusions

The benefits of smart services that grant fair access to all people and effectively take into consideration the needs of the most disadvantaged are certainly great and the current phenomena will throw them into an even greater focus. The use of technologies to create smart public lighting, smart carbon neutral buildings, smart water and transport infrastructure, to name but a few of the basic public utilities needed and used on a daily basis, is the way towards the smart city of the future. In this city, people, no matter their age, gender, social status, physical abilities, are all treated in a manner that responds and contributes efficiently to the fulfilment of their needs and aspirations which enhances their health and wellbeing and, as a result, enhances their taking an active part in the life of the community. Building stronger and more solidary communities, around shared values and interests, certainly requires multi-dimensional actions that cut across multiple domains and involve stakeholders in all sectors: public, private, not-for-profit, academic and civil society. Innovation based on previous and newer generation technologies have to be a pervasive component of the ecosystem set up and developed continuously by public administrations around the world to create, or co-create with their citizens, public services that are more responsive and better performing. In addition to hard working, vision, perseverance and the will to commit to the sustainable goals, among which inclusiveness and fighting against climate change should be top priorities, would make a difference when they would become habitual behaviour across all structures of public administration. A profound change of patterns of thinking and ways of approaching working models to make space for innovation and collaboration beyond the boundaries of various organisations in the public sector would pave the way towards the so much needed transformation of the public service, changing it from an old, obsolete and rigid instrument of the bureaucratic system into the slender, friendly, highly adaptable, hence smart tool in the hands of the citizen.

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