



Reflections no. 3

Innovation in policy:  
allowing for creativity,  
social complexity and  
uncertainty in public  
governance

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# Innovation in policy: allowing for creativity, social complexity and uncertainty in public governance

Jesper Christiansen (MindLab)  
Laura Bunt (Nesta)

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## Abstract

Today's global financial and social crises demand innovation not only in public services, but within the whole bureaucratic, administrative system of public governance. In order to respond effectively to a changing context of complexity and uncertainty, governments and other public service organisations need to consider innovating the processes and practices of public policy itself. There is a consistent need for actively bringing creative processes into policymaking and focusing more on creating valuable outcomes for citizens than only on projected and programmed outputs. Yet innovation introduces a different way of knowing (or not knowing), exploring and planning into governance which create tensions with the status quo.

This paper aims to frame discussion between policymakers, researchers and practitioners around the dilemmas and challenges involved in developing policymaking practices that can respond productively to the current crisis, state of uncertainty and wicked character of public problems. This creates the need for exploring and establishing new principles of decision making inspired from digital technology, social sciences, scientific experimentation and the creative arts in order to frame different possibilities and expectations of what governments can and should achieve. We identify this as a part of an emerging paradigm in public governance that is still interacting uncomfortably with existing administrative systems. The question is what kind of processes that are needed in order to create synergy rather than conflict between existing and new approaches to public governance?

## Introduction

Whether you are a politician, civil servant, frontline worker or any other kind of decision maker taking active part in public governance you are frequently reminded of the current state of ‘crisis’. The crisis is not only perceived to be financial, but is in public sector contexts often connected to a growing pressure on governments to act differently in addressing public problems and in enabling economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Particularly, increasing unemployment rates, entrenched inequalities, persistent social needs and a rising demand for public services more in tune with the everyday lives of people are continuously questioning the existing ways that governments provide for citizens. The concept of innovation as a ‘necessity’ in the light of this current crisis has been a significant addition to the ‘instruments’ of public governance. By many, innovation is seen as a direct answer to the crisis itself. But rather than being a ‘quick fix’ to immediate problems, this paper emphasizes innovation as an approach that can help improving the capacity in the public sector to deal productively and continuously with public problems.

In this sense, it also represents a movement in Western societies, perhaps long underway, that has called for radically new ways of organising public service systems to deal with problems that might have been present and persistent all along. Thus, while there are varying views as to what the current crisis actually consists of, it is certainly raising important questions: are our public institutions, our ways of exercising authority and our dominant ideas of the social contract between the citizen and the state serving the purposes we want them to serve? Are they creating the outcomes we want them to create?

These questions have resonance in the context of other challenges. For example, how do we deal with a growing environmental crisis that fundamentally questions the sustainability of our way of life making us more aware of effects on social well-being, pollution and energy resources? Or how do we take the seriously the demographic situation and the challenge that it presents of dealing with a population with a much bigger elderly generation and far fewer hands and resources to take care of them? Both these questions are co-defining the current state of crisis. Both these questions seem to imply a ‘failure of agency’ among public institutions and organisations. In our view, this is the most important part in understanding the implications of a crisis seen from a public sector perspective: a crisis not only puts the existing and known modes of dealing with present circumstances into question, but involves a failure to act sufficiently to understand, handle and change its implications.

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough exploration of these issues, see Nesta (2012) Plan I: the case for innovation-led growth. London: Nesta

The recent financial crisis underlined this by showing the limited means of governments to control the global financial markets. However, as the financial crisis has also highlighted, ‘failure of agency’ is simply not an option for the public state. Its role as ‘the last resort’ was brought to bear by going beyond the traditional limits of state agency and saving private banks with public resources. In part, the financial crisis led to a blurring of boundaries between public and private sectors in how and where agency lies. But more than this, it illustrated the premises for the public state in a state of crisis; decisions have to be made despite acting in a context of overwhelming pressure, complexity and uncertainty. In many ways, public sectors around the world are facing a challenge of reinvention with very little knowledge about how to do it. The legitimacy of the public sector has thus become something that is ‘at stake’ and relying on the ability to act productively and responsibly in very complex and uncertain settings. What in particular should characterize public interventions under these circumstances where, at the same time, consistent budget cuts risk jeopardizing not only public productivity and positive policy outcomes, but also the general well-being and living standard of citizens?

This is not only a question of making productive use of public resources. This is also an emerging democratic problem (or crisis) where representative democracy increasingly seems to consist of more than casting a vote every four or five years. These challenges are becoming increasingly visible in the nature of many social problems and, in the UK at least, hint of civic unrest and suspicion of institutional systems – the banks, the media, and government.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, especially evident in Denmark, a perhaps ‘exaggerated’ controlling effort from the public sector to take responsibility of most social problems is increasingly creating a state of inaction in light of the current challenges.

Our argument is that the multitude of crises represents a pivot point in the fundamental system design of governance and public institutions. We need to reconsider the ways we are dealing with increasingly interconnected, cross-cutting and global issues, unspecified, unpredictable and ‘wicked’ problems, and increasingly localized values and interests of citizens and communities. While public managers and employees struggle to navigate the cross-pressures of budget cuts, the insoluble character of public problems has never been greater. These types of challenges and problems are illustrating the limits of welfare services bound within 20th century models, based on an assumption of the state delivering services to passive citizens or commissioning specified solutions to well-defined problems. A health system dominated by acute hospitals; prisons designed largely to contain not prevent crime; social care services increasingly stretched to provide standardised care to an ageing population; all this within an understanding of systems based on static formalism rather than building and sustaining systematic flexibility and dynamic relationships.

Therefore, we see this a decisive moment; a momentum for innovation and attempting to make public bureaucracy a better ‘instrument’ for political authorities in order to create better outcomes for populations while dealing with the consequences of crises in multitudes.<sup>3</sup> In short, ‘crisis’ seems to have significant implication for the way we govern our public institutions and organisations as well as for the dominating politics of administration themselves.

## Governing in complexity - building resilience for innovation

Many of the most pressing challenges faced by governments are those that confound traditional bureaucratic problem-solving-systems of problem definition, administration and resolution. Problems like environmental preservation, economic growth, unemployment, homeland security or health care are characterised by their complex nature, and necessarily cut across different policy domains, professional sectors, organisations and political and administrative jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup> Necessarily, the ‘wicked’ character of such public problems recognises the world in its social complexity, where public decision-making involves so much more than dealing with technicalities.<sup>5</sup> As John Dewey wrote almost a century ago, *“where the facts are most obscure, where precedence are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. These are public problems”*.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, some of the most urgent and costly challenges facing welfare systems are those that require an understanding of the personal, contextual and invariably multidimensional aspects of people’s real lives. In health, for example, supporting people living with long-term conditions such as diabetes, obesity or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) absorbed the majority of healthcare spending.<sup>7</sup> Designing effective interventions to help manage these conditions requires empathy towards individual and social experience in order to understand the life factors that might have an influence on a particular individual’s condition. At the same time, it involves commissioning types of services that are able to engage and collaborate more productively with a patient in order to practice self-management as well as building on individual and social assets to create fruitful change.

4 Donald Kettl (2002): *The Transformation of Governance: Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

5 John Camillus (2008): “Strategy as a Wicked Problem”, *Harvard Business Review*, (May 2008), pp. 98-106.

6 John Dewey (1927): “The Public and its Problems”, Ohio University Press, pp.121

7 Naylor, C., Parsonage, M., McDaid, D., Knapp, M., Fossey, M., and Galea A. (2012) *Long-term conditions and mental health: The cost of co-morbidities*. London: The King’s Fund

There are many other areas such as preventing long-term unemployment, helping older people to remain independent, reducing offending behaviour or family support programmes that demand empathy and attention to people's daily lives in designing policies and practices to respond.

Such 'complexity' can be identified in areas where:

- Issues where it is difficult to articulate, or even identify, causal relationships (or mechanisms) where causes are multi-dimensional and interconnected, requiring more integrated intervention across different service silos, such as in providing services for vulnerable families or in supporting individuals with multiple and complex needs;
- Issues are highly personalised or contingent on the lifestyle, circumstances or disposition of an individual and therefore are unfit for compartmentalized systems, such as in addressing obesity or in reversing long-term unemployment;
- Issues that are consistently evolving or without a clear 'end' point, and require open-ended intervention, such as in long-term condition management or in education.

These amount to a set of policy areas that highlight a need to plan and create systems for unpredictable outcomes, where the character of what is valuable needs to be explored rather than pre-defined. What does it mean to act productively as a state in addressing these sorts of challenges where it can be difficult even to know what the problem is?

In these contexts it becomes essential to build up the resilience for innovation – understood as an enduring power for transformation, renewal and recovery – and the ability to anticipate current problems and potential futures more productively. Innovation as a concept is vitalized by a desire to imagine the world in its possibility and to push current perceptions of what can be done. It is a way of anticipating the future in a (still) unimaginable and intangible state which makes concrete processes, knowledge, means and results something that constantly have to be reinvented and validated. In light of this, 'public innovation' suggests aiming for addressing problems in ways that are not yet known, but are available through exploring synergies between ideas, competences, actors, processes and investments. Innovation is not an end or an answer to challenges in itself. Rather, it is a way of coping with problems with no evident solutions.<sup>8</sup>

## Co-producing outcomes

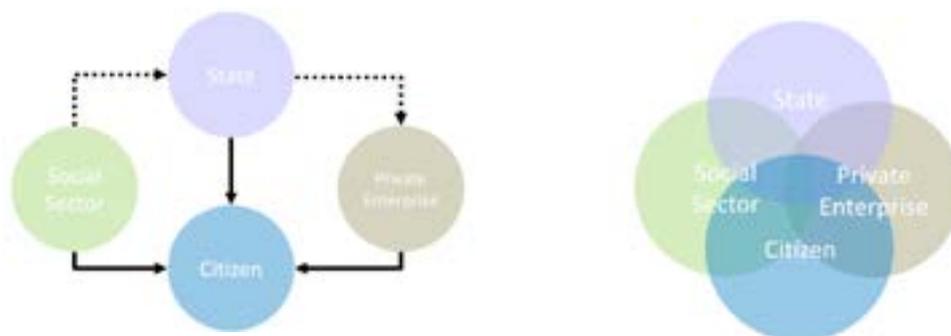
The complexity of these issues underlines the importance of understanding what outcomes matter from an individual or personal perspective, rather than on the basis of what the system provides. For example, for a family coping with many different issues such as a consequence of unemployment, poverty or poor educational attainment, developing their own abilities to cope and remain resilient to sudden changes in circumstance may be the most valuable and effective outcome from their relationship with welfare services. In short, the ambition of government becomes not the delivery of services, but the achievement of outcomes that are informed by local insight, evidence and context.

Particularly given the constraints on public finances, this capacity for innovation is not only about creating better productivity, policy outcomes, service experiences and strengthening democracy,<sup>9</sup> but is also deeply connected with an ability to draw productively and more broadly on society's resources. Many public and social innovation initiatives imply a blurring of boundaries between the public sector and other sectors, and require new means of collaboration whether between the state and citizens, private businesses, social enterprises or civil society organisations (see figure 1 below). Current policy reforms affecting the public sector imply a move away from centralised control and regulation towards decentralised, non-regulatory approaches and a stronger emphasis on the role for businesses, civil society and citizens in providing public services. Formal contractual relationships are replaced by a more organic and informal social system, that makes use of the resources of society in a much smarter and (in theory) more efficient way. This concept of 'coproduction' – working together to produce public outcomes – has had the awareness of governments for some time, but has shown to be very difficult for public organisations to facilitate and make a core part of their operations.<sup>10</sup>

9 Christian Bason (2011): 'Leading public sector innovation: co-creating for a better society'. Policy Press.

10 Boyle, D., and Harris, M. (2009) *The Challenge of Coproduction*. London: Nesta and nef

Figure 1: The changing relationships of government in delivering public outcomes



One reason why this agenda has not moved forward is that it presents an inherent contradiction to the mainstream approach to policy-making, understood as “*the rational guidance of human affairs*”.<sup>11</sup> It involves a change in the ‘technique of government’ from launching rigid programmes implemented from the top down, to establishing and facilitating networks as the primary capacity to solve problems, productively share resources and learn – an approach also often associated with ‘networked governance’.<sup>12</sup>

It also implies a significant loss of control for institutions and organisations responsible for public governance; at least compared to traditional perceptions of how control is understood and exercised. Coproduction involves new types of relationships and dynamics between various actors of society, in particular a new relationship between citizens and the public state. The oppositional relationship between the public state and citizens – the state as ‘deliverer’ and the citizen as ‘recipient’ or ‘consumer’ of services – has been a feature of the culture of public decision-making for some time. This model builds on the public sector maintaining control through delivering what it knows to be best for the citizen or legitimate in relation to current budgets and criteria for civil rights. Changing the focus to the creation of outcomes rather than delivering services is thus problematic because it introduces a new competitive landscape where the public sector is only one knowledgeable actor among many. ‘Control’ to a lesser degree comes through knowledge-based authorization based on ‘objective’ facts and is more a question of facilitating various productive collaborative efforts.

Useful knowledge, as well as the public itself, is thus something to be continuously discovered. This is critical since it requires a different engagement and perspective from the public sector in understanding the concerns, motives, values and everyday lives of the citizens, businesses and organisations of society.

11 Ian Sanderson (2009): ‘Intelligent Policy Making for a Complex World: pragmatism, evidence and learning. *Political Studies*, Volume 57, Number 4, December 2009, pp. 699-719

12 Jean Hartley’s (2005) analysis of the three dominating paradigms of public governance in which public innovation has been or is situated. Hartley argues that even though each paradigm can be linked to specific ideology and historical period, they should rather be seen as co-existing, competing paradigms that co-exist

## Potentiality rather than rigid planning

In light of this, we emphasize innovation and coproduction as inseparable themes; and a part of a movement we identify as a potential new paradigm of public governance. In this context of complexity and crisis, there is a need for public leaders and policy makers to be explorers of the possible and become experts in managing new types of relationships and interaction in contexts of complexity and uncertainty. This role has to be understood, explored and experimented with if innovation and coproduction shall move beyond theory in public sector contexts.

Currently, these new forms of governance “*do not replace the old but interact with them, often uncomfortably*”.<sup>13</sup> Even though public policymakers and practitioners are experiencing the limitations of existing administrative and governance approaches, what is left feels intangible within current frameworks of administration and governance. Consequently, public innovation practices seem to be caught in a curious middle-ground: on one hand they are produced and maintained within bureaucratically controlled organisations that need to be legitimised and validated using existing measures and standards of analysis. On the other hand, public innovation practices are inherently challenging the ‘default’ rather than reproducing it.

13 Janet Newman et al. (2004): ‘Public participation and collaborative governance’ (with Barnes, M., and Sullivan, H.) Journal of Social Policy, 33 (2): Pp.217

Although this crisis in a sense provides a mobilizing metaphor and a legitimate moment for changing the fundamental systems and managerial processes of the public sector, it does not offer clear direction in terms of specific actions, regulations, laws or changes in public administration, governance and service delivery. Instead, it emphasizes concepts that rely on their 'potentiality' ('innovation', 'networked', 'collaborative', 'co-production') as core in dealing with the crisis. The question is whether and how these potentialities will achieve the space, support and legitimacy to flourish within public sector contexts.

In the following we attempt to identify and characterize the principles involved in this process. We are particularly interested in exploring how these are or can become applicable in the development of public administrative systems and governance structures. What could be the useful process in exploring potentialities and negotiating different governance approaches in productive ways? We wonder how public interventions and initiatives can become more about creatively driving and facilitating explorative processes that uncover and make use of untapped potential rather than being devoted to mainly sustaining the status quo? The following section explores a set of principles that together might provide a more fertile ground for innovation when applied in settings for public governance and policymaking.

# Innovation in policy- new principles of decision making

## #1: Outcomes, not solutions

### Example: The Fredericia model

*In the municipality of Fredericia in Denmark, a change in perspective of a problem brought about significantly better outcomes for elderly citizens at a lower cost. This shift was going from silo-based service delivery based on perceptions of citizens' needs to a more human centred approach, facilitating various collaborative efforts based on their desires for their own future as well as building on their current physical and mental capability. Concretely, the initiative focused on support socks – an issue that is not only costly since it requires for home carers come home to the elderly citizen to both put them on the morning and take them off at night. It is also a service that creates a dependency and unwanted service relationship since the elderly citizen has to adapt her life to the schedule of the busy home carer. If the home carer comes at 7.15, this is when the elderly citizen has to get up.*

*In the new service idea initiated by Fredericia, citizens that apply for help get offered to participate in an intensive rehabilitation or training programme where the citizen in a period of 6 to 8 weeks is trained to take care of themselves. This includes investing in what has been called 'service overload' sessions where social workers, physiotherapists, nurses, doctors and other relevant public staff are engaging in collaborative sessions with the citizen in order to understand his or her desires and interests in relation to their physical ability. From this, they will plan a rehabilitation process that will get revised and updated every week to make sure that the right combination of professional expertise is involved to improve the physical health and individual service experience of the citizen.*

*It is not only at the frontline where the outcome-focus has been established. Before this initiative was able to take shape, Fredericia reorganized their municipal practice on both a political and governance level – creating innovation and investments board across political boundaries as well as sectors and professional boundaries. Early results from this initiative include significant monthly budget savings, better service experience for citizens as well as better frontline staff experience – now they are actually contributing to improving the lives of citizens rather than just delivering a service to maintain the status quo.<sup>14</sup>*

*They also had to realise the challenge in focusing on outcomes. Here, you are not solving a well-defined problem, but you are continuously addressing it by maintaining practices that are characterized by an empathic relationship to the concrete situation of the citizen. This not only poses a new logic in their way of working, budgeting and decision making, but it also become a new way of thinking about scaling and implementing this type of approach elsewhere. The latter has become an immediate issue since the ‘Fredericia model’, as it is now called, is now being the subject of national investment to scale the approach to municipalities across Denmark.*

## Addressing rather than solving problems

In traditional public governance, decisions are related to the development of a specific policy, regulation, law or guide for action. Sometimes the goal can be the decision itself being made through political mandate or professional expertise. This rather static way of dealing with problems conceals a not so hidden premise which points to the solution as an 'endpoint' of development, improvement or innovation through the right application of effort, knowledge and strategy. Public solutions are often understood to problems strictly defined by public institutions. Thus, efforts to 'solve' them are based on projects and programmes developed according to criteria that are applicable with current systems and procedures. In this way, 'silver bullet' solutions become possible because social reality gets squeezed into projects where an intended plan in its theoretical shape can be put into effect through concentrated efforts within a stable system.

But social reality does not pause for implementation just as public problems are not solvable in fixed terms. Whether they exist in order to secure civil rights, a well-functioning job market or a reliable tax regulation, public services are operating within a wider system of organisations, influences and interventions that in various ways affect these problems. In this sense, the goal is not some kind of redemption in relation to the public problem, but to search out potential ways to address the public problem productively. There is a need to make the best possible use of public resources to create better outcomes for the population rather than merely ensure 'service delivery'.

In addressing issues that are complex or where causation is unknown, identifying and having an impact on outcomes is part of a continuous practice of addressing and working with the problem with those for whom the outcome is intended. In this sense, public services are a matter of continuous facilitation rather than implementing 'solutions': their purpose, content, limits and outcomes have to be explored through creative and systematic iteration and adaptation. These practices develop over time and are reliant on numerous people, systems, organizations, institutions and stakeholders. The challenge in a public sector context is that these practices are never perfectly established as a solution to a problem, but needs to 'live' continuously and dynamically within a community of people in order to create value.

If one accepts this premise, it offers new criteria for success and new perceptions of what the effects of public innovation can or should be. In recognizing that finished solutions to stable problems do not exist in public sectors contexts and that 'best practices' are not scalable in a fixed way, the hard question thus becomes what we can transfer and scale? Diffusion and scaling are to a lesser degree about implementing 'best practice' and more about building the capacity to systematically facilitate local learning and experimentation processes to create intended outcomes. That does not mean that good ideas and concepts should not be subject to wide inspiration, copying or diffusion. It means that, with the deliberate spreading of any good service, we need to take the creative learning processes involved in integrating it in a unique local setting. Maybe it makes more sense to think of these processes, not as spreading 'solutions' or 'best practice', but as investments in 'localizing' useful ideas in various organizational contexts and authorizing environments.

In other words, there is a need for being open towards how the idea can materialize in the particular local context and we should thus focus on scaling certain approaches, principles or methods – the processes of understanding and developing service systems. This also has implications for measuring the impact of public intervention. Rather than assessing the efficacy of an approach as a 'fix all' solution, the primary goal of measurement and evaluation is to learn; to shape and adapt practice over time. Here, the challenge becomes how to institutionalize this adaptive capacity in public governance and explore how this approach affects performance measurement, evaluation and audit functions in government.

## #2: Experimentation as an approach to policymaking

### Example: Behavioural insights to inform policymaking

*How can governments use new behavioural insights to inform social policy and practice? As advances in behavioural science and psychology have shown, the way we act can be counter intuitive to the assumptions of traditional policy instruments. One example of this is a UK experiment to apply behavioural insights to reduce fraud, error and debt in tax collection. Based on hypotheses around what would motivate people to attend to deadlines, guidelines and criteria for tax administration – such as using more personalised language, highlighting social norms and local behaviour and rewarding desired behaviour – the Cabinet Office ‘Behavioural Insights Team’ worked together with relevant departments to design eight randomised control trials (RCTs) to test how these insights affect practice.*

*By making relatively minor changes to communication methods – using more personalised language in letters, including statistics of social norms such as others’ response times, adapting the layout of forms – the teams were able to test how useful these insights were in preventing fraud, error and default in the public sector. The results were impressive: one trial investigating whether informing people how many others in their area had already paid their tax could boost payment rate advanced £160 million of tax debts to the Exchequer over the six week period of the trial. Overall, the trials showed effect sizes of up to 30 per cent in preventing fraud, error and debt through better understanding of human behaviour.<sup>15</sup>*

*The experimental approach allowed the team to adapt and learn from their insights, making small adjustments to practice and monitoring their effect. Randomisation allowed the team to test whether the change in outcomes could be attributed to the change in intervention, as opposed to other contextual factors. Of course, experimentation as a basis for shaping policy for administering tax and payment systems is very different to using an experimental approach in education or children’s services, for example. But the principle of knowledge creation through experimentation based on deep understanding and empathy of human behaviour could – within the right boundaries – inform action in uncertain contexts.*

## Policymaking in a state of uncertainty

Governments always want to ensure that public intervention is as effective as it can be in positively changing public behaviour, and this is especially true in a time of constrained resources. Yet human behaviour is not rational and predictable. Our actions and responses are affected by our experience, our particular context, our social networks, social norms and personal beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

The main problem is that the cognitive mindset from which civil servants tend to act is linked to certain ideas of factual objectivity. This means that civil servants are compelled to put their knowledge to work in a way that, in the name of governance, has to assume that the public problem is and will remain addressable in a predictable way. If you want to redraw the map, or radically change public service systems, you cannot only use the existing known maps to inspire the process. As Bruno Latour phrases it: *“Whatever has been planned, there are always unwanted consequences for a reason that has nothing to do with the quality of the research or with the precision of the plan, but with the very nature of action. It has never the case that you first know and then act. You first act tentatively and then begin to know a bit more before attempting again”*.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the idea of experimentation in relation to public governance and policy development has connotations of risk. This is to a large extent understandable given the important responsibility to ensure public accountability and civil rights through trustworthy bureaucratic procedures and structures. Therefore innovation, in that its outcome is unknown and unpredictable, is seen as risky in contrast to known, predictable outcomes (and familiar failures) of current practices whether or not they are successful. As a consequence, much innovation still tends to be carried out outside of the core operations of public organisations.

But what if we could turn this on its head, and see informed experimentation as the responsible foundation for decision making in complex settings? That, given the current ‘state of uncertainty’, some of the legitimacy of public governance would come through policymaking as modelled on scientific experimentation and a process of discovery.<sup>18</sup> The experimental approach is necessary because innovation inherently destabilises existing operational, organisational and administrative structures; experimentation necessarily challenges existing knowledge and experience in order to make new discoveries, asking people to contend with a high degree of uncertainty. This is at odds with the dominant culture of public governance that wants to minimise risk, waste and failure.

16 Bakhshi, H., Freeman, A., and Potts, J. (2011) *State of Uncertainty: innovation policy through experimentation*. London: NESTA

17 Joakim Halse et. Al. (2011): ‘Rehearsing the future’. The Danish Design School Press.

18 Bennington, J., and Moore, M. ed. (2011) *Public Value: theory and practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

This is where structured methods such as foresight and prototyping can be applied to anticipate and 'rehearse the future' in a more active and productive way.<sup>18</sup> Using these methods to create a legitimate space for experimentation can be a way to contain and manage risk and expectation, and learn from (low cost) failure where the cause of a problem is unknown, or where practices still are evolving. This is different from running an initial pilot prior to launching a full programme which is often the way in which public policies are developed (and which has its own risks). When pilots hold profile, political capital and considerable investment, failure can have considerable costs. The expectation from experimentation is not necessarily success, but learning from practice.

The concept of 'beta' is relevant here. An established principle in technology development, beta versions are an early, prototype version of a platform, tool or web presence. They expect to be imperfect and exist as a 'working hypothesis' for future improvement. Beta is a powerful idea to apply to public policymaking. It changes expectations of performance and permanence of public services, given the signal of early stage development and on-going learning. Beta not only welcomes feedback, but pro-actively encourages challenges and critique from the public, potential users, colleagues, partners, experts and other relevant actors. It goes beyond static consultation into ongoing engagement, iteration, co-production and collaboration, seeking contributions and suggestions for how practices could be improved. In this way, failures and complaints become opportunities for innovation and learning since imperfection become a legitimate and even expected part of the processes devoted to the experimental search for the possible.

Thus, policies are and must be 'perfectible'. This does not mean that conducting experiments as a part of public governance in themselves are the goal or that experimentation should replace all other operational approaches. We wish to highlight their usability because, by the very nature of addressing public problems through policy and programmes, public sectors are already 'experimenting' anyway. The question is if we wish to continue believing in our ability to foresee how our plans will unfold in practice or if we instead wish to accept the unpredictable consequences that go with any attempt to intervene in complex social realities?

### #3: Exercising a new type of authority

#### Example: Guiding public-private innovation

*During the last five years, political, administrative and operational levels of government in Denmark have had an increasing awareness of 'Public-Private Innovation' (PPI) – dynamic and continuous collaboration between public and private sectors to innovate public services, lower the use of public resources and create opportunities for business growth. Despite multiple attempts in the form of various projects carried out in municipalities and regional organizations, the new welfare solutions are still to create any significant value.*

*In 2011, the Danish Business Agency (DBA) and MindLab were given the task of developing a guidance tool for PPI which would provide support for municipalities and other public organizations wanting to work with PPI. Yet given this mode of collaboration was a significant move away from current development practices, there was no blueprint for guiding practice either at the ministerial level (policy) or on regional or local levels (practical). This had created a situation where the different levels of the public sector interlocked each other in positions of inactivity. For this reason, the DBA and MindLab experimented with a new way of sharing responsibility and involve public employees from both local and regional levels awaiting the 'authoritative guidelines' and civil servants lacking the ability to give guidelines in a mutual process of learning and rehearsing future approaches of PPI. The DBA thus took on a new role of facilitator of an ongoing learning process, actively interacting with its stakeholders and users.*

*In this way, it involved a new type of authority for the DBA that not only refrained from postulating that the complex processes were to be known in absolute certainty, but also altered the typically oppositional relationship between the ministerial agencies and local public organizations. Now responsibility was shared and continuously co-constructed by governmental, regional or municipal organizations through their active involvement in co-creating new knowledge and experience used to define, frame and guide PPI practices. Instead of putting their authoritative stamp on particular decisions or actions, the DCA had to participate in continuous processes of dialogue and knowledge sharing and actively explore what 'authoritativeness' could be and who should be involved in establishing the environment where it had to 'work'.*

## Creating and facilitating authorizing environments

While public problems are increasingly understood in their complexity, accountability in public bureaucracies is still largely understood through traditional models of authority. The perception that it is possible to relieve the world of the particular problem completely is also reflected in an authority role that involves the public sector as an ‘all-knowing’ entity and, as such, has the ability to objectively sanction or validate certain decisions based on authorized knowledge. Consequently, the professional culture of public leaders, civil servants, managers and frontline workers is one that values certainty, conviction and technical competency, rather than openness to uncertainty. Changing this authority role therefore implies the development of different skills, relationships and working cultures as much as it requires different practices. In other words, another kind of authority role – one that focuses less on sanctioning knowledge and information, and more on how to facilitate and enable the generation of knowledge and effective action.

This role reflects a different way of taking responsibility and exploring how to act most appropriately as a public authority given the uncertain circumstances. Where the prompts for public problems are unknown, authority comes not just from having access to superior resources or formal powers, but in understanding the context and conditions that affect problems. For example, a doctor prescribing treatment is endowed with formal authority, but in managing long-term conditions or in public health issues that require behaviour change, the experiential knowledge and particular actions of patients and the public are important methods to use to ensure an effective outcome. Consequently, the public state becomes a facilitator or a network leader that manages risk, uncertainty and social complexity by facilitating ‘platforms’ of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

In light of this, we suggest that a key feature of decision-making in complex public innovation processes is a different perception of what is ‘authorised’. Intervention becomes about creating a new, productive ‘authorizing environment’ that is held up by various actors, different power relations and interconnected spaces of meaning and interpretation. The question is how we enable new approaches and practices in public service systems while simultaneously showing their actual public value and, at the same time, building the operational capacity and administrative capability to develop and govern them effectively.<sup>20</sup> It is a paradoxical challenge of enabling certain actions and decisions (in relation to innovation) within systems that both their administrative and operational capacity is still unfit to authorize them.

20 Bennington, J., and Moore, M. ed. (2011) Public Value: theory and practice. Palgrave Macmillan

We apply it here to open up for new type of public authority role. One that, rather than control or specify activity and outputs, to a larger degree has to distribute various efforts and resources in order to effectively address problems in search of valuable outcomes – the authority of the State is used to lever the collective capacity for better public outcomes.<sup>21</sup> One where the public state recognizes itself as one knowledgeable actor among many and therefore deliberately seeks to draw broadly on the knowledge and efforts of various actors of society as a whole. In short, public governance that is concerned with outcomes necessarily requires coproduction and collaboration and even creating new ‘publics’ and ‘authorizing environments’.

This does by no means rule out that public authorities at certain times do have to step in and validate or sanction certain procedures to address the particular problem. It is rather that in public innovation there is not necessarily a direct causality between authoritative knowledge and public interventions since the reasons and conditions for making decisions have to be explored and learned rather than be known fully or in advance. In this context, there is a role for policymakers to ensure openness and veracity of information, ensuring impartiality and acknowledging dispute. Advances in digital analytical and communication tools have potential here in organising information much more dynamically, with the state exercising its authority through facilitating shared decision making. In the past decades, governments have spent large amounts of resources on enabling market results. Now, the role of the public sector needs to involve enabling not only collaboration with private actors, but actively encouraging enabling and authorizing new types of environments for collaboration and co-production.

## #4: Re-thinking useful evidence

### Example: Away with the red tape

*Young people between 18 and 30 years of age in Denmark are the demographic group least likely to be capable to do their taxes online. This surprising insight made the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (DTCA) partner up with MindLab to get a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the citizens and their encounters with public sector bureaucracy. Under the headline “Away with the Red Tape”, the broad Danish government agenda was to deregulate and eliminate unnecessary rules and digitise and simplify complicated administrative procedures and processes. While deregulation often focused on seemingly objective criteria, such as time consumption and the number of rules, this project deliberately avoided predefining a rule or procedure as the ‘red tape’. Instead, the study examined citizens’ subjective experiences with public sector regulations, communication channels and service.*

*The initiatives that have been devised from the study stem from a design-driven process, which is characterised by systematic idea development and prioritisation, the development of concepts and the description of specific prototypes in direct dialogue with citizens. These processes were all driven from an informational base coming from conducting interviews to be able to sketch out the service journey and experience in concrete and illustrative ways. This information led to various initiatives under the heading ‘from digital access to digital self-reliance’ meaning that usability must be understood as more than just a technical solution. In this way, the DTCA and MindLab created a new kind of knowledge foundation that set out a course of addressing problems in a more human-centred way, creating taxation procedures more in tune with the lives of citizens. An important part of this was the use of audio clips and radio montage. These were used to make the experiences of the young citizens as vivid and illustrative as possible. This resulted in various audio representations of frustrated young citizens as they try to do their taxes online. Some of these audio clips became consistent parts of internal meetings and workshops in the DTCA in their development work. These in-depth representations were to create a new understanding to engage decision makers in new ways by drawing them closer to the everyday experiences of citizens and applying a very different kind of ‘knowledge’ about the citizens compared to what they are used to. The audio clips became a new way of collectively relate to the shared challenge by continuously activating ongoing professional empathy for citizens’ experience. In this way, they contributed to creating a renewed sense of purpose and made new and useful decisions possible.<sup>22</sup>*

## Validating innovation

The shift to new types of processes and effects (innovation) and different types of roles, functions, and activities (coproduction) have quite significant implications of the way we think about the production and application of knowledge and information. Particularly, it seems to involve a fundamental discussion about what we consider as legitimate and not least useful 'evidence' to work as foundation for actions and decisions. To some extent, new forms of knowing (or not-knowing) have become potential social assets to be explored in order to be able to enable productive decisions in the process of changing (or innovating) welfare services.

Here we are particularly highlighting the need for finding ways to introduce less calculated or tangible insights more formally into decision making processes. How can we for example make room for more outcome-focused initiatives when that typically will involve highly relational and localized processes which will make valuable evidence something that will depend on contextual factors rather than standardized criteria? Or how can we support the application of qualitative insights about citizens in relation to their actual life experience that might be of a more unfinished and less tangible character, but will often prove to be the source of innovative ideas?

Building innovation capability in public governance simply requires other kinds of illustrations and representations to help decision makers empathetically relate to the people and the problem at hand as well as see their purpose and possibilities in a new light. Creative methods building on ethnographic methodology, co-design approaches and social and interactive media provide opportunities to capture the experience and insights of citizens, to add legitimacy to interpretation and allow for processes of coproducing outcomes. This approach need not be at odds with more formal evaluation and evidence, as it provides a way to prompt the development of new hypotheses and questions for research and experimentation.

This also has to be seen in the light of the challenges involved in legitimising the practical and uncertain realities of public innovation projects. Often, public innovation project leaders are spending more time on legitimizing and gaining support for the project itself within the organisation. Taking into account the practical, contextual or temporal reality of innovation projects, the consequence is a substantial amount of resources going into managing expectations of the process while much fewer are spend on imaginative experimentation and learning from practice.

What is particularly challenging for policy makers in this context is that (innovation) policy not only invents new forms of thought and foundations for decisions, but also involves the invention of novel procedures of documentation, computation and evaluation.<sup>23</sup> In this light, you can certainly ask whether it is innovation projects that fail or whether they are failed by wider networks of support and validation.<sup>24</sup> At least, one significant challenge for policy makers seems to be to figure out how to support and validate public innovation initiatives within the existing frames of public legitimacy. What should or could characterize the formalizing processes themselves in respect to evidence? We wonder if not different levels or expectations of evidence as well as other types of systems and legitimizing processes can and should be applied within governance practices?<sup>25</sup>

23 Innovation Unit and Nesta (2012) *Transforming Early Years: better outcomes for families at lower cost*. London: Nesta; Goddard, C., and Temperley, J. (2011) *Transforming Early Years: different, better, lower cost services for children and their families*. London: Nesta

24 See Boyer, B., Cook, J., and Steinberg, M. (2011) *In Studio: Recipes for Systemic Change*. Helsinki: Sitra

25 Hallsworth, M. (2011) *System Stewardship: the future of policymaking?* London: Institute for Government

## #5: Designing for policy

### Example: Transforming early years

*Public interventions made in the early years of a child's life can have a profound impact on a person's life experiences, development and future opportunities. For a long time, policymakers, academics and practitioners have advocated for a much stronger emphasis on early intervention as a way to prevent social problems developing providing an important role for the welfare state. Yet the practice of early intervention and prevention still remains patchy in most areas of public service delivery.<sup>26</sup> Working with the Innovation Unit, Nesta set out to find local authorities who were up for taking an entirely different approach to providing services for families with young children, in order to develop new models of early intervention and support services that deliver outcomes families and children want.*

*The 'Transforming Early Years' programme worked with these areas to take a fresh look at their existing service offer and use an experimental method to design different, better and lower cost services for local families. Using a disciplined approach to innovation, the teams worked through a development process that drew on new insights as information to inform service design – including using ethnographic approaches to understand the needs and assets of local families – and then to prototype the new models with families themselves. Importantly, this work was presented as core to the operations of the local councils, using their core funds to test out new ways of working with families, drawing on their assets and adapting delivery to meet their needs.*

*In each locality, the prototype services – based on insights gathered around the particular challenges faced by the local community, and the full set of resources available to meet them – were very different to the existing types of support offered to families. For example, in Corby the team is working with a group of volunteer 'street champions' from the community who will work with whole families on a street-by-street basis, working alongside professionals to deliver a set of community-led services. In Reading, parent groups encouraged the teams to provide support to families in the early stages of pregnancy. The principles of more community based, peer supported and relationship focused support are fundamental to these new models, each demonstrating the value of a deeper partnership between professionals and service users born from understanding and empathy. Implementing these models has required tenacity and creativity on behalf of the teams, being prepared to learn quickly, test and iterate their approaches until they work for the families.<sup>27</sup>*

26 Allen, G. (2011) Early Intervention: the next steps. London: HM Government

27 Innovation Unit and Nesta (2012) Transforming Early Years: better outcomes for families at lower cost. London: Nesta; Goddard, C., and Temperley, J. (2011) Transforming Early Years: different, better, lower cost services for children and their families. London, Nesta

## Re-thinking the practice of policy

Experimental and explorative approaches to public governance challenge the desire among civil servants to apply policy instrumentally by creating pre-established, instructive guidelines for development and implementation. Policy in its instrumental form aspires to show direct causalities between the projected plan, decisions made, actions carried out and the particular outcomes and results achieved. The concept of innovation introduces a new way of anticipating the future in still unimaginable and intangible states which make concrete processes, knowledge, means and outcomes something that continuously have to be reinvented and validated. Innovation constantly sets up new horizons, directions and incentives for decision-making. Here, the basic foundation for policy is not the production of authoritative knowledge illustrating tangible paths or routes to implementation. Instead, policy for innovation seems to be unfolding more as an ideology of progress; a ‘mobilizing metaphor’ dynamically maintaining itself in systems of representation.

In this sense, policy for innovation rests on a paradox. Innovation policy seems simultaneously to subvert instrumental logics of policy while remaining within traditional frameworks of policy making. To some extent, it is meant to open up for the ‘agentive powers’ and imaginative capabilities of the people involved. The question is whether and how it is possible to understand policy as a dynamic concept is responsive to the practical realities of how innovation initiatives take shape.

The concept of design is useful in this regard since it takes this dynamic relationship as the premise in development processes. Unlike the traditional understanding of policymaking and governance as the rational development of models, design is predisposed to more iterative creation and stewardship, closing the gap between development of the model and its implementation. Rather than formulating a plan that sits distinct from practical application, it is in the testing and iteration that the plan truly comes to life. The consistent emphasis on understanding and using the ‘architecture’ of the problem as a driver in exploring possible ways of addressing it will inherently build questions of implementation and systemic implication into the design process. Policy, in this sense, can no longer be seen in its own right, but only makes sense when seen in relation its practical outlook and consequences.<sup>28</sup>

Design as a discipline is also more comfortable with complexity and uncertainty, and is therefore commonly used as an innovation method. Though over-simplified, a core strength of a design approach is that it starts from understanding the architecture of the problem; both focusing on the concrete causes and consequences involved as well as the interconnected systems and networks involved in dealing with it. Taking on different perspectives, asking new questions, reframing challenges can introduce innovation into thought or action processes by creating a tension with common interpretation. In asking different questions, a design approach can point to different trajectories for addressing the problem.

In addition, in design formation and implementation are iterative. This means that design is comfortable being open ended or uncertain, using a set of bounded, disciplined techniques to test, learn and revise throughout the creative process. Prototyping, sketching, blueprints are the building blocks of design processes, using these 'objects' to reflect on and develop an approach. And the association with design as a creative practice is useful in this context, as it provides the legitimacy for experimentation, innovation and imperfection that working with complex outcomes demands. To view policy as experiments in progress, as the design approach does, remains an untapped opportunity in relation to policy and decision making in creating better outcomes through public governance and development.

## Implications for public governance - where to begin?

What does this practically mean for those engaged in trying to develop public policy? What developments in current policymaking practice can come to better embody these principles? Where are the most appropriate places to start if trying to introduce innovation into government and public sector contexts requires a different approach to decision making?

### Signs of new principles in practice?

There is a live opportunity to reflect on the value of these principles given the changing shape of the public sector in both the UK and Denmark – two countries facing a common crisis in providing a welfare system that can remain sustainable in light of rising demand and shrinking resource. In both settings, there has been considerable change and upheaval in the functions and structures of government and public services that have opened up debate as to the roles and responsibilities of public servants in delivering public outcomes. This is alongside a number of efforts that aim to develop new strategies of public innovation, design, digitalization, intelligent demand and commissioning. These strategies have a huge potential in driving, not only a change in tools and methodologies, but a fundamental and principal change in the approach of public development and governance as well as shedding new light on what kind of performance and effects that innovation driven by the public sector can introduce.

In the UK, recent policy shifts towards more localised, decentralised contexts for decision-making, commissioning and governance is in part with a view to encouraging more innovation in local settings that can respond to particular context. Shifts in commissioning practice towards commissioning on the basis of outcomes,<sup>29</sup> paying providers for results rather than paying on the basis of activity, and financing innovation through alternative sources of (social) investment in theory creates an opportunity for innovation with a focus on impact rather than outputs or activity. Governance that is concerned with outcomes applies different principles, leading civil servants, commissioners and policymakers to reflect on the most productive role for them to play in stewarding or 'assuring' public outcomes. This also means government being able to work more effectively in partnership with other sectors to deliver outcomes, and draw on resources from private and commercial fields to finance the creation of public value.

In Denmark, there is wide recognition of the need for creating the capacity for driving public innovation. The increasing amount of 'labs' in local and regional settings, within government departments and research institutions are signs of this recognition. Also, powerful narratives like the 'Fredericia model' and other local innovation successes do inspire public organisations to seriously consider and rethink the development processes as well as the organisational and governance structures towards in better ways supporting more outcomes-focused initiatives. This awareness does also exist on a political level where new strategies and reform work are put to work for better supporting local, practice-driven ideas and initiatives. For example, there are experiments with 'free' councils at a local level to encourage more experimentation and potential innovation. However, as with previous innovation programmes and strategies, there are significant risks of not significantly acknowledging the deep challenges of introducing innovation practices present to mainstream bureaucracy and public governance. Innovation processes do not necessarily thrive by only increasing deregulation or introducing innovation process models. It involves a change in perspective and mentality that is still interacting uncomfortably with existing decision making structures.

### Change through evolution, not revolution

But even in the contexts of these developments, we are not suggesting that innovation and the practices there implied should be the default approach to policymaking everywhere all of the time. Though the implications of these principles for public governance are profound and widespread, there may be some areas of public policy where a more experimental, open-ended approach to developing policy is not (or not yet) appropriate, or socially acceptable. How much experimentation should we expect or hope for in areas of social policies? What sorts of problems lend themselves to a more experimental approach?

The question of where to start is thus largely an empirical one, as it is an empirical question whether variables cannot be meaningfully defined and measured. Where there is a relatively robust relationship between defined problem and effective intervention, a more traditional approach may apply. Where there is more uncertainty and complexity, these principles might more usefully apply. These principles may therefore be worth considering in areas where:

- There is currently little on offer, either due to under-developed offerings or the emergence of new or newly identified need, such as in family support services;
- What is currently on offer is not working, either from a lack of take-up or lack of impact;
- There is little evidence of what works in terms of tackling a particular issues, such as in some areas of public health;
- The system needs to shift towards a more preventative approach, such as in reducing reoffending or in preventing the development of long-term health conditions;
- Commissioners are facing substantial cuts or changes to their commissioning context, requiring imagination and ingenuity in how to respond to local demand.

### Valuing a different kind of leadership

Realising and actioning these principles requires a new kind of leadership. For leaders within all varieties of public and social contexts, leading innovation can feel like a struggle against the wider bureaucratic system in order to create the legitimacy, space and flexibility for innovation. Applying the principles explored in this paper demands as much tenacity and foresight as developing a new tool, service design or product. Systemic and strategic innovation demands strong leadership as well.

Ensuring outcomes, facilitation and stewardship, openness to experimentation and comfort with uncertainty all require as much strength in vision in leadership as more traditional approaches to developing and implementing public policy. Yet leadership in these contexts might look very different to authority achieved through conviction and certainty. It is perhaps, therefore, not just a consequence of dominant processes and practices that work against innovation in public governance, but the skills, leadership qualities and competencies that tend to be recognised as bringing authority and assurance to those in positions of responsibility. From the examples mentioned here such as the teams working with communities to identify outcomes in Transforming Early Years, or in Fredericia basing decisions on the aspirations and capabilities of service users, it is evident that it requires leadership from assuming a different worldview and openness to an alternative set of values. The legitimacy of decisions and actions are here coming from seeing the world in its potentiality and a consistent motivation to explore new opportunities and synergies rather than relying on current ways of understanding problems and challenges.

Further to this, does realising these principles of a new authority role and collaboration warrant a more distributed approach from government where the roles of the public sector are more focused on coordination, knowledge accreditation and stewardship than delivery or control? And if this is the case, how can government begin to evaluate the efficacy of their interventions through more distributed and more 'networked' approaches? Finally, to ask a fundamental question, what does this mean for politics – for the campaign promises and adversarial nature of political leadership?

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored a number of principles that characterise a different way of acting in order to embed more innovation in decision-making and governance. We argue that these imply different way of thinking about the goals, means and authority of the public sector and government in responding to complex problems through innovation. Bringing innovation into these settings requires a change in the way in which the public sector itself operates. This change involves much more than merely relying on new concepts to integrate naturally into existing governance models and structures. A central question in this respect becomes how we go from building 'innovation units' working separately from the core operations of public institutions and organisations to building the resilience and capacity for innovation broadly in operational competencies and mindsets.

In this sense, this paper can be seen as a deliberate attempt to reframe the concept and practice of public policy. We see the application and adaption of the five principles mentioned here as a way to not only become more effective and constructive in creating better outcomes for citizens, but also as a way of increasing the legitimacy of public interventions. We suggest that policy and implementation should be understood as parts of explorative creative processes that deal with the world in its unpredictability and potentiality. The question is what kind of processes that are needed in order to productively incorporate this approach in public governance and where to start in productively building a new culture of decision-making.

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