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Building the Public Administration of Tomorrow with, for and around Users

It's an honour for me to address the Fifth European Quality Conference organised by the French Presidency of the EU.

Since the start of this process in 2000, the Quality Conference has become a major forum for improving public sector quality.

We are here to reflect on how to place the citizen at the centre of public quality, not only to improve services and policies, but also to increase his confidence in the State. This has long been the most important and complex element of the reforms undertaken in many OECD countries. I'd like to share with you the progress made by several countries, the difficulties encountered and the challenges they still have to face, especially in this turbulent period.

Trust in government is our most precious commodity. As we've seen in recent weeks with the collapse of financial markets, once trust evaporates, our complex economic systems falter. Our governments are having to deal with the most severe economic crisis in decades; including dysfunctional financial markets, plummeting housing prices, high and volatile energy and food prices, generalized economic slowdown and even some recessions.

Our governments are responding with short-term policy measures to restore confidence in financial markets so that lending to enterprises and households resumes.

But there is also a backdrop of longer-term global challenges, such as climate change, ageing, migration, or growing inequalities that require reforms in public policy areas such as health, education, social welfare or pensions, to name a few.

Our governments' capacity to reform is becoming a comparative advantage. Governments which are successful at reforming can empower their people to make the most out of globalisation, creating a favourable environment for business, for innovation and for sustainable development. And governments' capacity to reform will also contribute to strengthen citizen's trust.

To respond to today's economic pressures, most stakeholders now agree that our global financial system needs deep reforms. Once the immediate challenges are addressed, we will need to focus on the regulatory, supervisory and market failures that led to this outcome.

Pressures on public spending are intensifying, in particular as a consequence of ageing populations. Most OECD economies have very little room for raising taxes or debt to finance higher spending. In such a situation, reforms to curb the growth in public spending while raising its cost effectiveness are required. There is a need to enhance the efficiency of the budget process. Many OECD countries have introduced or strengthened fiscal rules, but they need to ensure that there is an efficient allocation of funds across different spending programmes. For many years, a Network of Senior Budget Officials from OECD countries is facilitating the sharing of good practices in this area.

Management practices have become results-oriented, focusing much more on defining outputs or objectives that managers or services have to deliver.

Introducing market oriented services is enhancing the effectiveness of public spending. More competition can help providers of publicly-funded goods to improve cost-efficiency while better responding to the citizens' needs. Benchmarking; subcontracting; open and transparent tendering; giving users the choice among alternative providers, are all useful, well proven tools. The first public management review done by the OECD in the case of Ireland shows the value of looking comprehensively at the public sector and its use of different tools to improve the performance of public services at large. Mexico has seen the Irish Study and has asked to do one for them.

Well-educated, better informed populations have high expectations about the services provided by government. People want services that are faster, more convenient, and responsive to their specific needs.

On speed citizens do not want to wait weeks or months to start up a business, or to obtain authorisations, permits, or other official documents.

They want the convenience of services that are delivered close to where they live. They also expect the same level and quality of services, regardless of where they live. (For example, broad-band internet). Also, citizens are increasingly aware of differences in the quality of schools and hospitals, and expect equal treatment, wherever they choose to live.

They want services that are adapted to their specific needs and circumstances. A student expects to find all the information on course applications, housing, grants, etc. in one place, adapted to his own particular situation. Governments are thus facing a huge diversification of demand in public services.

To respond to these changing and increasingly complex demands, governments are taking three avenues: First, they are using new technologies. In the back office, e-government enables the administration to better co-ordinate and customise services. In the front office, it makes services available to citizens 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Today, all OECD have web portals to ease access to online services. All over Europe, for example, citizens and businesses can file income tax returns on line. Increasingly, countries are moving towards individualising these services. This is a general trend that we have observed for many years through a series of e-government reviews of 10 countries.

Second, countries are shifting spending for service delivery towards the local level. In some countries this is coupled with decentralisation of competences to sub-national governments, such as Spain, Italy, and to a certain extent France. Others are opening local branches of central government offices. Countries like Greece and Portugal has for some years had physical "one-stop-shops" where citizens in one place can access a range of selected services.

Third, they are changing the way services are designed and delivered. In the past, services were designed by governments for citizens. Now, governments are moving towards services designed and delivered with and by citizens, a process known as "co-design" and "co-production" of services. An example of co-production is the "Villa Family" initiative introduced in a village in eastern France, where families share the task of caring for several elderly people. More and more, citizens are engaged in budget formulation, for example in France's Poitou-Charentes region, where high school students are involved in allocating a share of the regional budget for their schools.

But putting citizens at the centre of public services is a journey, not a destination. We are only at the beginning of this journey. More needs to be done.

We need better quality data on our activities. We must measure the effects of our decisions about designing and providing services. It remains very difficult to evaluate the impact of public participation in making policy and providing services. This type of information is nevertheless particularly important to help public officials reassign limited resources in a period of budgetary restraint. Moreover, being able to show the positive effects of measures taken to improve efficiency could contribute to strengthening confidence in the State.

We should enhance the skills and aptitudes of civil servants so that they are able to meet new requirements. We need trained and experienced personnel who have an overall view of the public sector and are capable of giving citizens the right information and making them share in the design and provision of services. We must also enhance the skills of civil servants at the local level.

If we really want to give citizens a leading role, we must give them more power. We must provide them with opportunities to express their concerns, to intervene in the political process, and to make a real contribution to planning and providing services and give them the means to do it (information, resources and knowledge). For example, almost all OECD countries have freedom of information laws.

Public services must reorganise. If citizens are to feel that they are dealing with a unique entity, the operation of the different administrative departments must be integrated and consistent, which implies using the same data, processes, and infrastructure so that the same language is spoken throughout the public sector.

A report will be published shortly: "Citizens at the centre: Public engagement for better policies and services". It reviews the progress made in the OECD and proposes steps to continue on this path. The OECD will continue to study these complex questions and encourage the exchange of best practices between countries to help them put citizens first.

I hope that the discussions over the coming days on the solutions for placing citizens at the centre of public services will be fruitful, constructive and open to all. The OECD will be listening to the conclusions which will be drawn.

Thank you.