Civil Services in Modern Societies: Concept and Roles

The civil service or public service is a service intended to serve all members of a community. Public services include services provided by a government to people living within its jurisdiction, either directly through public sector agencies or by financing provision of services by private businesses or voluntary organizations (or even by family households, though terminology may differ depending on context).

According to UN- "Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is recognized by SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda also recognized that governments have the primary responsibility for implementing the SDGs and ensuring follow-up and review over the coming 15 years, at the national, regional and global levels. One of the first steps governments take to implement the Agenda is often to shape the institutional arrangements for steering the implementation of the SDGs and reviewing progress.

Public administration - the cornerstone of governments' work- plays an essential and critical role in improving people's lives. Reinventing public administration is a positive and necessary way forward. Without public administration modernization and transformation to adapt to today's needs, realizing a better future for all will be impossible. Where capable administrations are lacking, governments are incapacitated; and where governments are incapacitated, sustainable development falls short.

From frontline healthcare workers and public health officials to teachers, sanitation workers, social welfare officers and more, the humble public servant has been thrust into the spotlight, helping elevate awareness and understanding of the critical role public servants play in everyday life, and in particular during times of severe crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic."

Role of Civil Services in COVID-19

--United Nations

In the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic however, public servants are working under life-threatening circumstances. In all COVID-19 pandemic affected countries they are both expected to deliver services despite the pandemic while at the same time suffering its impact, either by being directly infected or having family members who are. Moreover, the pandemic hit the world at a time when, according to World Health Organization (WHO), the world needs six million more nurses and midwives to achieve global health targets within the SDGs. These critical workers are confronting a dangerous highly infectious virus but they in insufficient numbers. The following are some of the roles public servants have played, are playing and must continue to play in the pandemic response:

Ensuring continuity of public services

By threatening disruption of public service delivery, the COVID-19 pandemic touched a cardinal principle of public service, that of continuity. In a show of courageous response however, in many countries, public servants have been quick to adapt and re-adjust the way in which services are

delivered so as to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities. For example, as many schools, including colleges and universities, were suddenly closed as a result of nationwide lockdowns, teachers and education professionals rushed to provide at home learning solutions via online platforms and e-materials, where there was infrastructure to support such approaches. Similarly, in many places where medical facilities have been overwhelmed by high numbers of COVID-19 patients, online tools, such as telemedicine and telehealth, have been set up or enhanced to provide non-emergency medical services so as to not disrupt the delivery of health services to people with other ailments. Courts are hearing and judging cases through video conferencing, while in some places virtual marriages have been legalized. In these cases, and others, public servants have demonstrated versatility in service delivery that has benefitted service users amidst challenges caused by the pandemic.

Service before self: courage and humanness in practice

Many public servants have put their lives at risk in order to continue serving the public throughout the pandemic. Sadly, many have subsequently been infected and an alarming number have lost their lives. For example, in the UK at least 100 medical and health workers have died as a result of COVID-19. In China it was reported that within the first 3 months of fighting the virus some 3000 healthcare workers had been infected. In the USA, although the exact figure is unknown, an estimated 5,000 healthcare workers have been infected, while in New York City 1000 of the city's police officers accounted for some of the 40, 000 people in that city who tested positive for the infection by April 2020. The numbers are likely much higher, given not all public servants have been tested for COVID-19 and many may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus.

One reason for such high infection rates amongst public servants, particularly frontline public servants like healthcare workers, has been a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Most countries have struggled to ensure enough medical masks, N-95 respirators, surgical gowns and other protective gear, forcing many to improvise, including using bin liners for gowns and home-made masks. It is tragic and regrettable that many public servants have been working under such dangerous conditions. Their heroic self-sacrifice and extraordinary humanness have saved many lives. In recognition of this, governments should work towards developing and/or enhancing preparedness and contingency plans for future such crises so that public servants always have access to the protective gear that both their profession and safety demands.

Quick thinking, creativity and innovation

In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic public service and public servants, many who were used to operating in routine, predictable and regulated systems had to deploy quick thinking, instant creativity and innovation to counter the destruction caused by the pandemic in service delivery, particularly in critical areas such as healthcare. For example, at the onset of the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, the Chinese military took only 10 days to construct a makeshift two storied hospital which could hold up to 1000 patients and included several isolation wards and 30 intensive care units. COVID-19 responses have seen innovation in the public service flourish. From the development of drive-thru testing sites and contact tracing apps in the Republic of Korea, to the use of robots to carry out medical tasks such as temperature taking so as to minimize contact

between infected patients and healthcare workers in Rwanda, public servants have leveraged innovation and creativity, often on a shoestring budget, to come up with unique and quick responses to the crisis.

Reliable information and awareness as a critical service

One of the most needed and lifesaving services during the pandemic has been accurate and reliable information about the virus, including on its spread, prevention, recognition of symptoms and importantly, on debunking myths and misinformation around it.

In the early days of its spread, a lack of or inadequate knowledge and awareness about the virus helped it to penetrate communities before government authorities realized its seriousness. Public servants in the health sector, including frontline doctors and nurses, virologists, epidemiologists and other health experts, were some of the first to document this new infection, getting the word out that a new and highly contagious virus was gaining ground. As information about the virus started filtering through, public health officials, the news media, and research institutions started giving information to both the public and authorities which progressively proved vital in the fight against the spread of the virus.

However false or misleading information about the virus, including conspiracy theories surrounding its origins and unproven cures, have greatly hampered efforts to ensure the circulation of reliable information. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, notes that "As the world fights the deadly COVID-19 pandemic—the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War—we are also seeing another epidemic, a dangerous epidemic of misinformation."

Strategic thinking and planning amidst chaos

Many public servants have been strategizing and planning amidst the chaos about how to beat the pandemic, save lives, ensure social protection, and sustain economies. National taskforces have been formed incorporating representatives of a cross-section of the public service to plan and coordinate efforts to fight the spread and impact of the pandemic. In a whole of government and whole of society approach they brought on board scientists and experts in public health, to ensure the effectiveness, coordination, coherence and integration of the strategies and plans aimed at stopping the spread of the virus and managing the broader impacts of the pandemic.

These taskforces and the lessons learned from their work will develop or enhance institutional mechanisms with capacities to deal more effectively with such crises in the future. If leveraged, these taskforces could provide a foundational building block for enhancing government preparedness and crisis response.

Sustaining resilience and building a more effective and responsive public service

The world has experienced global pandemics before and COVID-19 will not be the last. Therefore, one of the critical roles the public service must play is to prepare the service to be more resilient for any future crisis. Public servants must turn the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic

into an opportunity for devising strategies for strengthening the resilience, effectiveness and responsiveness of the public service and the services they deliver, so as to be better prepared in future. It should be every government's strategy to have in place institutional arrangements, policies, systems, infrastructure, plans, including contingency plans, and resources to foresee, identify and quickly respond to pandemics and other crises.

Building and enhancing state legitimacy, government credibility and people's trust

Public servants who deliver services responsively, equitably and with humanness help enhance the credibility of the government, and as a consequence, foster trust amongst the people. The determination of public servants to continue providing services in the face of the dangers the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to their own lives has contributed greatly to the government being seen as critical in and caring for the lives of the people. The ongoing work of public servants, therefore, has in many places elevated a sense of trust in government. The sustainability of this trust, however, will be heavily dependent on the extent to which the struggle against the pandemic succeeds.

Resource allocation and distributive accountability

Crises that emerge abruptly, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, catch governments' budgets by surprise, presenting a big challenge to the public servants who are responsible for preparing and implementing them. The way in which resources are allocated and utilized determines whether systems, practices institutional arrangements meant to protect societies against pandemics of this nature, get put in place and become operational or not. In many countries public servants have had to quickly review available resources, mobilize others and deploy them quickly in tackling the pandemic and all the challenges it has caused. About US$130 billion in budget support has been pledged2 or is under consideration by governments around the world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resource allocation and distributive accountability is a critical role that public servants have played during the pandemic and one which has had great bearing on trust in government, delivery of critical services, minimizing of inequality and the saving of lives.

Collaborative and networked leadership

In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that collaborative and networked leadership is critical when it comes to dealing with complex challenges and problems. The need for resolved people-focused, calm, credible, trusted leadership is critical in times of crisis. Public servants played their roles in a collaborative way to ensure a coordinated and successful response in containing the spread of the virus and mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

At the global level too, collaborative leadership is essential. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided opportunities for public services in different countries to learn from each other's successes and failures in their ability to identify and respond to pandemics. Multilateral institutions, such WHO provide a critical platform for this type of collaboration and for the sharing

of public health data and information. Public servants must be facilitated to network, collaborate, and share to enhance co-learning at local, national and international levels.

Profile of a public servant who can work effectively in crisis

Considering all the above roles public servants have played, we can derive that an effective public servant has the following profile: self-sacrificing, trustworthy, risk-taking, transparent, accountable versatile, adaptable, creative, innovative, knowledgeable and skilled, persistent, empathetic, collaborative, and competent in the use of technology. Above all, they have a high dose of humanness in their personality which makes them work for others even at the risk of their own lives. This profile should be part of the guide in training public servants to enable them serve in crisis.

Role of civil services in a democracy

Pracin Jain Academy

DEC 24, 2020. Times of India

The greatness associated with "performing a public service utilizing public fund" reflects power, aspirations of achieving this power, and a consistent hope or ambition of achieving through this power!

Today, the people who suffer from deprivation are at least, if not less than, as many as the population we had in 1947 after independence. We still find this chronic poverty a legacy of colonial rule. When funds, laws, and people are yours, what sense does it hold to blame something that happened over 7 decades ago and much before that time? There can't be any excuse for poverty those who have should try to live like the poor, but not in the poverty-driven fleeting environment.

The civil servants by virtue of their knowledge, experience, and understanding of public affairs assist the ministers in formulating policy and are responsible for implementing these policies wherein ministers are accountable to parliament and civil servants are accountable to ministers. Though we are a democracy and power is vested in the people, neither politicians nor civil servants are directly and meaningfully accountable to the public.

This lack of accountability has mirrored political and administrative passivity, non-intervention, and negligence. We call this image 'the system'. This system prevents the poor from accessing basic necessities and resources, and a place giving permanent protection. This system characterizes many discreditable practices, habitual decisions for which accountability is not necessary, work culture where people sometimes habitually look uninterested and unorganized, overlapping of tasks and half-baked results, since the concept of 'optimization' has not found its place in this work culture yet.

Any system is a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network. In a democracy, the core things of a system are connected through legislation. A civil

servant can change the official or accepted way of doing something, but he can't change legislation-related input present in it. There are multiple parts in the system even if you better or replace one part, it distorts the working of other parts. In a country as diverse as India, these parts at different levels are uncountable, unless a major reformative decision at a parliamentary level is made, the current system will continue to work in a presentable manner. In this situation, a civil servant can control the work flow, but he can't set that work to its optimization if it is a part of the interconnecting network.

We have seen various poverty alleviation programs, but some underperformed and their successes looked irregular and unpredictable. Some of them lacked economic rationale or another practical purpose. Had these programs been successful, we would have freed ourselves from poverty long back. Our bureaucratic mechanisms need to comprise holistic approaches and solutions. They monitored and moved to achieve short-term arbitrary outcomes whose consequences could be terrible and had long-term counter-productive effects.

One such consequence was that poverty in India was normalized through its credentials in various statistical projects. Normalizing here means we start taking something a standard condition or state. As we normalized poverty, it became a characteristic of the population, consequently, serious hardships from poverty were no longer seen as violations of law, justice, ethics, or the constitution, so it doesn't matter if it continues to exist.

Now the legislators whom we call politicians to see their success in terms of improved public relations. A public relations exercise eats up a lot of time. Policymaking is the ultimate responsibility of a minister, but they hardly get time to study something in-depth. They don't have real field work experience in device policies. In this case, a civil servant renders policy advice to the minister. Usually, politicians work on those combinations which are more beneficial to them than the public. But these policies do carry the inputs of civil servants despite this, these policies have failed to eradicate poverty.

A person becomes a civil servant after passing one of the toughest exams in the world. It is said so. But there is hardly any examination that can check a person's commitment to work and his work potential. A person becomes a decision-maker after becoming a civil servant. This level of poverty can't be eradicated through decision-making processes rather 'individual's originality related to work' is a prerequisite that no exam can ensure. Is it possible or has it ever been thought of – that a bureaucrat himself/herself has earned at the grassroots level through inventing his/her original model, and under this model, he/she has devised schemes and implemented them, so that grassroots level people can practice them to earn their livelihoods and also get the scope to upgrade their skill levels? If schemes get formulated in this manner, they will definitely be successful and sustainable. We are heaven away from this kind of system. There is nothing great about "performing a public service utilizing public funds", since earning according to what is morally right or fair is many times more difficult than spending.

The real work which can generate revenues, consequently employment and vice versa, has yet to see its dawn, the real commitment is unobserved, the real change looks near but it is more like a horizon. What should we do to experience real work, commitment, and change? One possible

course of action can be the appointment of 'village administrators' through an entrance examination. There are more or less 638,000 villages in India. Every year the government could recruit 25,000 village administrators. A village administrator, after understanding the requirements of the village, will conceive a consolidated plan to address the problems related to livelihoods, education, society, infrastructure, drainage system, and so on. Those who get successful in changing the destiny of their villages will be promoted to a civil servant grade. There will be two benefits to this system. First, villages will see real development and growth. Second, 'individual's originality related to work' will become a sole criterion to select civil servants.

The present system showcases conspicuous limitations. The limitations limit the scope of real development. In fact, a person who is working to bring real change at the grassroots level without being part of the government service is serving people in a better and sustainable manner. There is no need to become a civil servant to serve people. They can be served better by those who are not part of this system. People are not served through power, they are served through prowess, not that of decision making, but of the original exertions which have undeclared true potential for 'the mass eradication and mass extinction of poverty'.

The world has failed to realize that poverty has become a species that adjusted long ago to survive on prosperity and by itself.