



## Editorial

# Universal and contextualized public services: Digital public service innovation framework



## 1. Introduction

The rising social and economic inequalities make continuing provision of essential public services to all, i.e. independent of the social status or income levels, more important than ever. For example, in 2013, the richest 10% earned 9.6 times the income of the poorest 10%, compared to 7.2 times in the 1980s, and the profile of poverty has changed from pensioners in the 1980s to the youth and families with children today (OECD, 2015a). Furthermore, there is growing evidence of the “powerful and corrosive effects of inequality on economic growth, poverty reduction, social and economic stability and socially-sustainable development” (UNDESA, 2013). Universal public service provision is also considered a moral obligation and cases of “water, food, energy, income security, health services and other essential public goods and services” a human right (UNSTT, 2012). Recently, the quality and sustainability of such services are becoming a concern as well (UN, 2015).

However, the universality in public service provision is challenged by the variety of contexts where such services are delivered, included diverse social needs and unequal conditions for public service delivery existing within and across countries. For example, the failure of public service delivery in many developing countries is not just due to the scarcity of resources but also to the problems of incentives, accountability and governance that vary from one context to another (Global Development Network, 2009). Reconciling universality and contextualization in public service delivery requires various forms of innovations: joining together government agencies, businesses, non-profit organizations, universities, citizens and other actors that participate in the provision, consumption and intermediation in public service delivery; bringing services closer to the end-users through, e.g. the provision of multi-service centers and the use of diverse delivery channels; learning about public service provision locally and from around the world and adapting the knowledge to the local contexts; and digitizing public services, tailoring them to individual needs, and delivering them through various digital channels using new social and organizational innovation models (OECD, 2015b). The goal of this editorial is to explore how the simultaneous pursuit of universality and contextualization in public service provision can be advanced through innovation in digital public services.

Today, digital public services are routinely produced by the national, state or local governments and delivered to citizens, businesses and other entities under their jurisdictions. There are as many as 25 models to compare the maturity of such services and track their progress over time (Fath-allah, Cheikhi, Al-qutaish, & Idri, 2014), including the four-stage model that underpins the United Nations Global e-Government Survey. The survey tracks the progress in e-Government by all UN member states, including the provision of electronic public services according to the four stage-model – Emerging, Enhanced, Transactional

and Connected – which remained unchanged from the first edition of the survey in 2001 (UNDESA and ASPA, 2001) until the latest edition in 2014 (UNDESA, 2014), despite advances in digital technology and public service delivery. This single and rigid model is also unable to account for differences in requirements, conditions and development paths for delivering public services in different contexts.

The editorial starts from the premise that despite unequal progress in digital public service delivery by different UN member states, the four-stage UN maturity model measures what is now a standard, universal level for digital public services. However, the capabilities built at this level – for government agencies to disseminate one-way information to citizens (emerging), to engage citizens in two-way discrete interactions (enhanced), to engage citizens in linked interactions (transactional) and to coordinate internally between themselves (connected) are a foundation for innovation in digital public service delivery, and in particular for adapting such services to various local needs and contexts.

The editorial introduces seven innovations in digital public services: 1) Transparent – Citizens know about service decisions made by government; 2) Participatory – Citizens can participate in such government decisions; 3) Anticipatory – Government initiates service delivery to citizens; 4) Personalized – Citizens choose how they wish to receive services; 5) Co-created – Government and citizens engage in collaborative service delivery; 6) Context-aware – Service providers are aware of the service delivery context; and 7) Context-smart – Service providers utilize context awareness for better service delivery.

Unlike the four linear stages for delivering digital public services according to the UN model, digital public service innovations are conceived as open-ended – new innovations are expected to be continuously added over time, and generally non-linear – one innovation may or may not depend on another innovation. The editorial also presents some evidence of electronic public services delivered at the standard and innovative levels, and introduces some implications including policy recommendations for government and benchmark organizations that deliver and measure such services.

The remainder of this editorial is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a background to public sector innovation in general and to Digital Government as public sector innovation with digital technology in particular. Section 3 presents the original Digital Public Service Innovation Framework and Section 4 provides a set of case studies that validates this framework. The implications are outlined in Section 5 and the conclusions are provided in Section 6.

## 2. Background – public sector innovation

Public service innovation combines both the notion of innovation and what it means to innovate in the public sector. At its core, innovation

is the creation of something new – a practice, idea, service delivery approach, technology – in a way that creates value.

Schumpeter (Schumpeter, 1934; Schumpeter, 1942) studied innovation and posited that entrepreneurship was a critical motivating force in generating innovations that would change practice through “creative destruction”. In his work, (Schumpeter, 1951) emphasized two characteristics of the entrepreneurship-innovation relationship: 1) the recognition of the value of different components to a system – and that these components could be in some way reassembled to create something new and novel; and 2) the recognition that innovation and entrepreneurship could not only be the act of a single individual, but one that was social, cooperative, and co-created. In this view, innovation has three critical aspects: entrepreneurship, “creative destruction” that leads to novelty and value, and creation by an individual or collective that generates value. However, later studies argue that Schumpeter assumed customer needs as given, that in his approach the development follows an inside-out perspective (Snyder, Witell, Gustafsson, Fombelle, & Kristensson, 2016) and that his view of service innovation emphasized financial returns without accounting for customer value (Drejer, 2004).

(Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) extended the concept of innovation to the public sector through their book *Reinventing Government*. This, in turn, coincided with the emergence of New Public Management (Lane, 2000). New Public Management and *Reinventing Government* were in many ways two sides of a coin: *Reinventing Government* focused on entrepreneurship and innovation, while New Public Management focused on issues of accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and general performance of the public sector and its services (Hood, 1995).

A number of OECD countries adopted the New Public Management (NPM) focus as a means through which to reduce corruption and create a more accountable and efficient public service (Hood, 1995). Although these efforts introduced some changes, like customer-orientation, decentralized decision-making, and performance management, among others; they lacked the innovation component, and thus did not focus on rethinking what government actually did in terms of ideas, processes, engagement, or services. In the US, for example, the confluence of *Reinventing Government* and New Public Management yielded the National Performance Review initiative, led by then Vice President Gore, designed to focus on creating efficient and effective citizen-focused government services (Gore, 1993a). An added aspect of the National Performance Review included the leveraging of digital technology to facilitate innovation and efficient and effective government (Gore, 1993b).

Public sector innovation, however, is not the same as innovation in the private or non-profit sectors. Indeed, critics of both the *Reinventing Government* and New Public Management movements cite the lack of

placing innovation in the context of government – both philosophically and pragmatically (Thompson, 2000; Carroll, 1995; Mathiasen, 1999). Governments are often bureaucratic by design and thus incremental in their approach to change. To those who reinvent, this bureaucracy is an impediment to reform, creativity, and entrepreneurship (Bason, 2010). But to others, this deliberative and incremental approach is intended as a check designed to balance brash behavior that could have unintended negative consequences (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In addition, government operations are typically embedded in a legal, regulatory, and administrative sets of frameworks that would require policy changes to enact – through legislation, administrative code, or other mechanisms change and/or facilitate implementation. In summary, the question arises as to the extent that one can truly reinvent government, as opposed to reengineering government – which implies a more incremental and deliberative approach.

This does not mean that innovation is not possible within a public service context, but rather that public sector innovation may follow a different path than in the private sector. This is due to the different environment where the public sector operates – less autonomous, less flexible and exposed to political influences, its organizational structures continuously interact with citizens receiving services regardless of their wishes or interests, and its interest is both non-financial and qualitative (Lamb, 1987). Following (Windrum, 2008, page 8; Hartley, 2010; Bloch, 2011, page 14), Table 1 offers some innovation taxonomies and their applicability to the private and public sectors.

As (Windrum, 2008) notes, service, service delivery, and administrative and organizational innovation have direct private sector comparability. So too do conceptual, systematic, process, and communication innovation. Policy and governance innovation, however, are unique to public sector entities and need to be factored in when engaging in innovation efforts. Hartley's introduction of governance and rhetorical innovation and Bloch's introduction of process innovation further contextualize the public sector innovation sphere, while Bloch's addition of communication innovation factors in such innovations as social media. Together, the work of Windrum, Hartley, and Bloch demonstrates that the introduction of new ideas, processes, services, and/or products require consideration of the political, policy, governance, and institutional contexts of public service delivery.

Public sector innovation with digital technology results in Digital Government. In 23 years since the concept of Digital Government was first introduced by the National Performance Review (Gore, 1993b), the understanding and practice of Digital Government has evolved to “reflect how governments are trying to find innovative digital solutions to social, economic, political and other pressures, and how they

**Table 1**  
Types of public and private sector innovations.

Innovation	Definition	Application		Source
		Private sector	Public sector	
Service innovation	New service or significant improvement to an existing service	x	x	Windrum (2008)
Service delivery innovation	New or modified approach to providing a public service or services	x	x	Windrum (2008)
Organizational innovation	Changes in organizational structures and routines	x	x	Windrum (2008)
Conceptual innovation	Development of new ways of thinking that challenge assumptions that underlie processes, services and products	x	x	Windrum (2008)
Policy innovation	Changes to thoughts or behavioral intentions underlying policy development		x	Windrum (2008)
Systematic innovation	New or improved ways of interacting with other organizations and/or knowledge bases	x	x	Windrum (2008)
Governance innovation	New governance approaches like, e.g. participatory government, open government or public-private-people-partnerships		x	Hartley (2010)
Rhetorical innovation	New languages and concepts	x	x	Hartley (2010)
Administrative process innovation	Implementation of methods of production and provision of services and goods that is new or significantly improved compared to existing processes	x	x	Hartley (2010)
Communication innovation	Implementation of a new method of promoting the organization or its services and goods, or new methods to influence the behavior of individuals or others	x	x	Hartley (2010)

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