

Professional Developments

Public Administration and Development: Resumed 50th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

The Resumed 50th Session of the United Nations was devoted to issues of public administration and their impact on development around the world—the first time that the General Assembly has been convened for any one single subject. The Session was addressed by 72 countries who shared their own experiences in making their public administrations more efficient and effective. Thirty-three were represented at either the ministerial or cabinet level and two observers were present as well. The special Session concluded on 19 April 1996 with the vote, and adoption by consensus, of Resolution 50/225.

The Resolution adopted by the GA recommends that the role of the United Nations activities and programmes in public administration is to assist governments in improving their responsiveness in meeting people's basic needs and to achieve sustainable development.

The Resolution confirms the importance of the UN programmes on public administration and development, calls for their enhancement and effectiveness and stresses the importance of an increased cooperation between United Nations funds and programmes, the specialized agencies, the United Nations Secretariat and the Bretton Woods institutions. All this is needed to ensure that the substantive and technical capacity of the UN system is optimized.

Resolution 50/225 stated that the UN system should focus its activities on the following areas: strengthening government capacity for policy development, administrative restructuring, civil service reform, human resources development, and public administration training; improving performance in the public sector; financial management; public-private interaction; social development; developing infrastructure and protecting the environment; government legal capacity; post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of government machinery, and management of development programmes. In the statements made, there was an emphasis on the need to focus assistance on the building of *sustainable national capacity*. The prioritization of needs and the coordination of assistance was agreed to be a Government responsibility.

General Assembly Debate

Reform of public administration and governance issues, generally, are proving to be key items on the development agenda of the 1990's. In the debate, it was striking that all the speakers described changes, often fundamental changes, being made in their public services, irrespective of the position of their countries on the continuum of

development. Equally, all countries seem to be looking for the right balance between their public sector and other sectors—without the disabling notion that the public sector can do nothing right and that the private sector can do nothing wrong.

Countries, are reacting to a number of driving forces, among which are the globalization of the economy, democratization, environmental pressures, corruption, national fiscal and external deficits, pressures for social justice, the information revolution, and the emergence of the private sector and civil society as alternative suppliers and financiers of a range of public services.

These major trends have increased the complexity of governments at a time when faith in governments' ability to govern is at a low. There are strong pressures on governments to reduce their expenditures, particularly by reducing the scope of their activities and transferring their productive functions to the private sector where they are subject to the competitive pressures of the market place. The phrase 'steering, not rowing' was used to describe the new paradigm of government which is more 'government-like', rather than business-like.

- greater *transparency* and *accountability* for decisions made and resources used;
- greater *responsiveness* and *effectiveness* in meeting public needs;
- greater emphasis on *results* and *efficiency* in the use of resources;
- *decentralization* of decision-making and accountability to lower levels of government;
- greater use of *information technology*;
- greater use of *partnerships* with non-government organizations and private firms in the delivery of services.

It was agreed by all speakers that decisions on the appropriate scope of government activity, the drawing of the public-private boundary, and the modalities of operation of public services, are contingent on the history, culture and institutional arrangements of each country. There was a retreat from the concept of 'ideal practices' or that 'one model fits all'. No country claimed to be model for others to follow. On the other hand, some delegates had interesting accounts of reform, and they were very willing to listen to others share their countries' experiences. Speakers from all countries desired to join in international and regional exchanges of information and experience, on the basis of mutual respect.

It was also universally acknowledged that responsibility for public administration and governance rests exclusively with each Government, while recognizing the transnational impacts of national policies, and the need for collaborative efforts to face transnational challenges.

International Technical Forum

The International Technical Forum was organized by the United Nations DDSMS as part of the preparations for the Resumed 50th Session of the General Assembly. Approximately 300 participants from institutions, associations and organizations of public administration attended from around the world. The three primary sessions were the Private Sector Colloquium, the Professional Colloquium and the Internet Exposition. A summary of final recommendations from each is included below:

Private Sector Colloquium

For any public-private partnership to exist, there must be expectation of social gain on the part of the government, and expectation of private gain on the part of the private partner. These expectations are expressed in contracts, such as out sourcing contracts, turnkey contracts, management contracts, leases, concessions, BOT contracts, contracts of sale in the case of privatization by disinvestment, etc. Many governments do not have the capacity to envision the potential for such partnerships; they may not have the technical capacity to structure and negotiate the contracts to apportion risks or make valuations, nor the capacity to monitor and enforce them.

In view of the significant potential for such partnerships, the participants called on the United Nations and the international community to provide increased technical assistance to governments and non-governmental organizations to build on the existing management capacity in both the public and private sectors and strengthen their contracting and project management expertise to promote mutually beneficial partnerships.

In transitional economies where entrepreneurial activities have only recently been decriminalized, and even in mixed economy developing countries, entrepreneurs still face negative attitudes from society and from the civil service. Governments need to lead the re-education of the public, and particularly their own civil services, on the social value of entrepreneurship.

Professional Colloquium

Efficient and effective public administration is the foundation for developing a strong civil society and strong markets. For every country seeking to advance these aspects of its society, public management will require transformations of varying scale and scope.

The United Nations is urged to directly support the efforts of inter-governmental and international, regional and national institutions as an efficient way of collaborating in the critical areas of public service training, research and exchange of information and experiences. This is an effective way of enhancing institutional capacities within the relevant context.

In addition the UN is urged to build its capacity in the area of providing technical support to public administration reforms, so that it can better assist capacity building for governance when requested by Member States.

Internet Exposition

The first ever Internet Exposition organized in conjunction with World 2 World Media, Inc., an International Internet Development firm, was held during the International Technical Forum and the General Assembly Resumed Session. The exposition demonstrated how the use of Internet can improve efficiency, accessibility, and communication within public administration. Representatives from World 2 World were available to teach participants how to access Internet.

Further Information

Brief summaries of the conclusions and recommendations of primary documents of the Resumed Session have been prepared and are available. In addition, copies of the Report of the Secretary General on Public Administration and Development (A/50/847), the Report of the Group of Experts on Public Administration and Finance (A/50/525), the six Regional Meetings (social development, Stockholm 1995; economic reform, Berlin 1996; infrastructure development and environmental protection, Rio 1996; restoring government machinery in situation of conflict, Rome 1996; economic development, Manila 1996; and moving from structural adjustment to improved efficiency in government, Windhock 1996), and the final reports of both the Private Sector Colloquium and the Professional Colloquium are available.

Please contact: Guido Bertucci, Director, Public Administration and Development Management, UN Department of Support and Management Services, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, USA. Tel: 212-963-5761. Fax: 212-963-9681.

Copyright of Public Administration & Development is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. / Business and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.