CARTAGENA’S LETTER

Considerations on the Present and Future of Public Administration: The Contribution of LAGPA/IIAS based on a Regional Approach

Assembled in the heroic City of Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia, between October 5 and 6, 2015, the Latin American Group for Public Administration of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (LAGPA/IIAS) discussed three key topics: Entrepreneur Governments; Public Policies for Equity and Inclusion; and Digital Citizenship.

Gathered in roundtable meetings with three dozen experts in Public Policies and Administration, each panel featured three presentations. Such presentations promoted in-depth discussions among the group and inspired the creation of this document.

I. Introduction

The Latin America & Caribbean region has recently undergone several transformations, despite the resilience of known economic and social issues of the region. These are added to other situational issues, such as global economic downturns and the drop in commodity prices. A few examples of countries illustrating this scenario are detailed below.

Recent economic growth rates recorded by Chile, Colombia, Panama, Paraguay and Peru indicate a trending consolidation of these countries’ democracies and an increasing abatement of its social iniquities. In specific terms – which have positive impacts beyond the country –, the concrete prospects of successful peace negotiations in Colombia further expand the promising horizons outlined by the country’s current modernization process.
Similarly, recent economic and social developments witnessed in Panama, after the strengthening of its air and sea hub conditions – including the Panama Canal expansion project –, as well as the country’s positioning as a financial hub, inevitably resulted in major regional impacts.

In Argentina, the recent fierce electoral process pointed towards the realignment of political forces, based on the establishment of a new project to enhance the country’s competitiveness in the global market, in addition to tackling the challenges of this new scenario.

Fresh out of a highly-contested electoral process, post-election political debate in Brazil was steered by a phenomenon that has proven to be of the utmost importance in this new phase: the struggle against corruption. Despite the current economic and political crises, Brazil shows noteworthy institutional evolution among modern-day democracies, which promises to generate favorable political, economic and social impacts in the future.

In Bolivia, the further decentralization of local power and the resulting heightened sensitivity to indigenous policies have contributed towards recent progress regarding historical social and economic imbalances within the country.

Also marked by startling and historical social/economic disparities, increasing social and production investments implemented by the government of Ecuador have opened the doors to major breakthroughs, lowering delinquency rates and building the required infrastructure to leverage the country’s economic growth.

II. Entrepreneur Governments

Under several different perspectives in general – particularly regarding public management –, the issue of adjusting the Government’s role as an economic player remains under the limelight. Working against the excesses advocated by the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the more statist attitudes of the past, which
some historical leftovers, there is now a convergence of more qualified prospects, regardless of ideological idiosyncrasies and attitudes.

This includes expectations regarding the Government’s leading role in regulating, overseeing and promoting development, while enforcing due tax requirements to ensure macroeconomic balance. Its primary commitment towards the public interest – and, therefore, towards the promotion of well-being, inclusion, innovation, competitiveness, and integration among the social and private segments – separates the Government from other economic agents. The past experiences of Andean countries, such as Peru and Ecuador, evidence the importance of supplementing the market with social and economic interaction models designed to foster the inclusive and sustainable development of the region.

In Ecuador, public policies inspired by the indigenous concept of “good living” (Sumak Kawsay) seek to promote development based on a reasoning not exclusively focused on capital. Mindful of culture and multiculturalism, such policies encourage the breakdown of the Government/Society relationship, on the one hand seeking to recover planning capacity unrestricted by the oil economy, replacing imports and product diversification – still restricted to a few primary products –, and on the other hand prioritizing social investments, especially in public services such as education and health care.

In Peru, the Lima-Norte project spearheads an inclusive local development intervention through planning and action steered by constant dialog between the government, enterprises and civil society, which is paramount to unveil and strengthen a new identity among social players in the democratic game of diversity. Civil society, for example, proposes opportunities and ensures actions taking towards the common good, and monitors government activities without interfering. Validated by institutionalized mechanisms, ideas can democratically spawn efficient community initiatives and decisions regarding resources, both efficiently achieving its goals and effectively promoting inclusion. Under this model, the institutionalization of laboratories is paramount to cover common knowledge and information gaps among local governments based on the regional reality and territory.
Globalized production chains renew and reinforce the market’s efficiency in adequately assigning resources towards production, generation of wealth, and competitiveness innovations. However, regardless of the varied degree of complexity of wealth generation and distribution systems within the LA&C region, implemented in different scales by the market, the increasing interaction with public policies and entrepreneurial initiatives are constants. Thus, local, national, regional and global initiatives are widely implemented based on a market rationale. Despite additional requirements, this is somewhat imperative to ensure due inclusion and sustainability of regional development based on the already achieved global development milestones. These milestones help us establish an identity based on the rich and diversified mosaics created by cultural diversity - indigenous, European, African, Arabic, and Asian - which economically and socially identifies and defines us.

The entrepreneur Government’s support in paving the way and strengthening the insertion of regional economies in the global market has increasingly evidenced the importance of the Company-Education-Innovation triumvirate. Panama’s initiative to create the Ciudad del Saber (City of Knowledge) reflects such heightened awareness of the need to promote the dynamics of interrelationships between such elements under the aegis of competitiveness. Another similar example is the joint initiative between the Argentinean Government and the Inter-American Development Bank to promote the advanced training of engineering professionals in technology and science innovation management, through an international program along the same lines of Education without Borders.

Despite all commendable initiatives witnessed across several different countries in the region, only a handful have yielded relevant results. Resources dedicated to research activities are still limited to a low percentage of the GDPs, not to mention the massive chasm between academia, the corporate world, and society in general regarding the expression of their needs. Only a few strategic guidelines are firmly stablished to guide the synergy between public policies and corporate strategies in order to implement projects and programs supported by outlined plans and budgets, both in private business and public administration.
The outcome of such disconnected research support and development projects within the academic and corporate worlds are socially and economically ineffective, revealing low impacts and consequences, as well as a low commitment towards retribution and profitability of public funds. Beyond the prospects of typical promotion, regulation, supervision, and even contained production initiatives, to some extent, the entrepreneur Government must propose the solution of complex problems of public interest by enabling competent players and efficient institutional mechanisms, in order to overcome the obstacles preventing relevant economic and social impacts, such as the barriers between the government, the private sector, and society, within both the inter-institutional and inter-sector spheres.

III. Public Policies for Equity and Inclusion

Further discussion on public policies regarding equity and inclusion in the continent reveals the need to overcome significant hurdles. The increasing notion surrounding the need for “empowerment” of the society as a whole, and its communities in particular, in order to guarantee better results stemming from change processes, have spawned more sophisticated consultation and diagnosis methodologies, often supported by state-of-the-art technologies.

An example is the use of a geoprocessing tool for multivariable survey of social and economic data of a specific area, in the State of Rio de Janeiro, subject to strong changes in the urbanization pattern, featuring a gentrification trend, based on a massive chemical/oil industrial project that guided housing, sanitation, soil use and coverage programs. Notwithstanding the program’s efforts (entitled Conleste) to promote integrated initiatives, favored by the trending legal changes to improve the feasibility of such ventures, actions were mainly focused on building new houses. Despite such housing development of great social interest, the region witnessed an increase in precarious informal building structures.

The shy intervention of local governments and Conleste regarding current houses, the fragility and turnover of the program’s technical teams, which affected the seamless performance of initiatives, and the low efficiency of planning instruments and participation channels played a key role in mitigating the program’s results. However,
macro issues, such as the oil industry crisis and the current economic downturn in Brazil, ultimately brought the entire industrial project to a halt, and the local population was left with severe social issues and major frustrations.

The experience of inclusion via educational policies in Cuba has always been one of the highlights in the LA&C region, considering the wide range of positive results achieved. Focused both on Cuban and global realities, based on scientific and technological subjects, the initiative trains professionals to think and act according to the values and knowledge acquired this century, in order to solve heterogeneous problems. Initiatives such as the immediately successful National Literacy Campaign (1961) and the University Reform, for example, have always been related to key legal milestones and policies, such as the Agricultural Reform, the Family Code, and the Social Security Laws, enacted in 2009.

Establishing the Government as the entity responsible for defining policies, its main implementation structures in the area are the Department of Education and the Department of Higher Education. Education is free on all grades and mandatory until the ninth grade of secondary education. Despite its national quality, the educational policy promotes territorial and local adjustments across all education grades, covering studies and practical tasks, as well as special needs. The core values of Cuba’s educational policy are equity, broadness and inclusion, with no distinction of race, gender or belief.

However, it is not an easy task to harmonize national educational interests with those of young individuals rising to higher education in the region. The centralized planning system, strongly rooted in national, territorial and local development strategies, considers that the existing offer of careers limits the possibility of training young individuals to join the job market quickly and with no major difficulties. Despite its logic, this strategy is not aligned to the needs of young individuals reaching higher education. These individuals seek careers with faster economic return, such as careers in tourism and technical education. On the other hand, there are several careers available in which these young individuals are simply not interested. In part, this phenomenon includes the medical career, due to the great personal sacrifice required and the difficulty of finding good job positions.
Both the housing program in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro and the educational policy program in Cuba shed light on important questions and issues to be overcome in several other public policy areas, across all countries of the region that seek social equity and inclusion. These problems include how to adjust the will and actions of the Government, macro-institutional policies and issues, and the political and technical-bureaucratic interests and values regarding micro-community and common citizen needs. In this sense, government projections are not fulfilled and citizens’ needs are not properly covered.

There is a certain “methodology dictatorship”, which typically transcends specific political systems, either more or less statist in nature, but which paradoxically correspond to anachronistic authoritarian views, such as modern technocratic views. The need to integrate the local and community views along with the technical views of Government officials, the engagement with weak political commitments is justified by the adoption of methodologies to ascertain community perspectives, which ultimately legitimize the reasoning of administrators and the feeble accountability of politicians.

Communities ultimately adopt government models within a simulated pretense of social innovation capable of yielding community benefits, setting aside concrete interests and replacing them for small and ephemeral benefits for a while, while the social dynamics are unable to reach the roots of age-old problems or create new ones under different configurations. In such community cases, one may say that the people say what the government wants to hear, similarly to the conduct of politicians and bureaucrats towards the people. The growing – and sometimes terrifying – violence rates among underprivileged communities and territories subject to greater social iniquities is a common denominator hindering actions and compromising results and expectations in virtually all countries of the region, from Mexico to Argentina, through Haiti, Colombia, and other neighbors.

The public education policy must be translated into government plans and programs that seek to establish objectives and goals reflecting and inducing efforts to train and qualify professionals, based on current and future needs of the evolving production and social systems. In this sense, the convergence of corporate strategies and public policies is
paramount to adjust the professional quantitative and qualitative elements of educational efforts based on the developing market, through incentives such as scholarships or first-job programs. The region requires greater production diversification and efficient distribution of goods and services, as well as technological development (i.e. focused on technical skills and knowledge related to both new and established professions.)

Therefore, the “Entrepreneur Government” must consider the individual, creative and engaging individual, as the starting point for the establishment and development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which are extremely important to accelerate job and income growth in a more equitable manner. Regardless of specific formal knowledge and professions, either in service of the Government and major corporations or social entities, this individual requires a more flexible space, more open to changes and different positions, roles and careers, subject to unexpected surprises. In this sense, “competencies” such as skills and attitudes to adapt to routine and/or uncertainty; analytical and/or synthesis skills; and the development of a future career are far more important than any specific “know-how”.

In general, such competency requirements evade the technical-bureaucratic schedule and planning, regardless of political regimes, and are much more related to individual talent combined with welcoming and encouraging spaces, which has not been the case of universities in the region. These institutions are sluggish when it comes to constantly adapting curriculums and implementing new educational approaches, such as those supported by significant advances in neuroscience, among others.

In this sense, the job market favors the clash between micro and macro, in the case of education, since it no longer requires professionals with generic knowledge, but rather those who are qualified to carry out concrete tasks based on acquired knowledge. Disruptive changes are emerging in Cuba and other countries of the region, offering alternative paths to the job market, granting additional skill certificates; allowing students to choose contents of interest, aside from the mandatory content; allowing students to participate in curriculum development processes; establishing new requirements to enter universities, based not only on disciplinary knowledge, but also
proficiency regarding attitudes, experiences and maturity; increasing the number of self-learning activities; and reducing the time and workload of formal learning processes.

Regarding the local development project and housing program, two main aspects are still relevant when it comes to the empowerment of individuals and the community. Social housing of those transferred to the territory is eventually construed as a gift, rather than a right, as well as the fact that former residents seek out compensation for their losses, unlike in the European Community, in which other territories have civil society self-financing mechanisms in public areas.

Economic policies must grant autonomy to families, instead of making them even more dependent of public measures and the power of the Government. The Government must be pressured into reassigning tax budgets to the selective support of civil society institutions created to adequately represent such society, in attempt to mitigate inequalities among the Government and other groups with better conditions to impose their own interests above those of society in general. Countries in this region typically favor the infrastructure segment, often standing on the shoulders of strict standards to manage budgets, at the expense of budgets assigned to more important and pressing needs. The high level of resistance in congress hinders any possibility of change. An example is the Peruvian mining industry, which sheds light in the controversial and relevant subject of regulation regarding private funding of electoral campaigns, which has also been widely discussed in Brazil and other countries in the region.

Inclusion processes definitely require intermediary elements to promote the empowerment and legitimate engagement of society. Therein lies the issue of representative or direct democracy, if they are even possible or desirable nowadays. Therein also lies the issue of individual and collective consciousness, in which one must only participate in matters of his/her own need or concern. The power of the Government must be part of the dynamic interaction with the empowered society, as this is established as the conscious will and ability to instruct and influence the decisions of those in power.
Therefore, the macro and micro must band together in this endeavor. The Government must look towards the horizon, whereas society must identify the next steps towards changes.

IV. Digital Citizenship

The progressive and rampant use of communication and information technologies, as well as its constant development under new interconnectivity applications, has paved an important road towards developing the relationship between society and conventional political structures. Such development is particularly latent among generations that grew up under the effects and influences of such technological revolution, thus naturally internalizing its inherent potential for transformation.

A sign of such internalization and influence relates to the large-scale social manifestations witnessed in the past few years, leveraged by the unabridged use of such technologies. This attests not only to its empirical channeling and mobilizing potential, but especially to the current global context of the crisis of representativeness, fueled by the growing demand of citizens for participation, democracy, and social progress.

As this technological innovation process moves forward, Governments, political leaderships and public institutions tend to build bridges with society and its citizens, which are facilitated by the use of such communication and information technologies. Despite the clear underlying electoral interests, such trend promotes important democratic values, such as transparency, accountability, dialog and participation, paving the way to positive changes within political structures of the region. Eventual resistance regarding the use of such tools and the establishment of a direct line of communication with citizens has also risen the political costs of campaigns, constituting a severe fault in electoral strategies.

However, such bridges are not enough to build upon society’s ability to directly participate in the creation of public programs and policies. In this sense, the civil society must organize a way to create instruments based on the new generation of communication and information technologies to supplement the traditional instances of public engagement in the region, such as the Public Policy Councils and Themed
Forums, which enhance its ability to oversee and actively influence political decisions by channeling public demands.

On the one hand, similar mechanisms have been recurrently developed throughout the entire region, based on autonomous, independent and collaborative civil initiatives, designed to promote the sharing of information and the manifestation of opinions regarding certain the development and enactment of public programs and policies. In short, these mechanisms relate to the need to expand information channels and convey the positioning and demands of society to public representatives.

On the other hand, however, the advent of communication and information technologies also promotes the articulation and manifestation of radical anti-democracy groups. This is one of the side effects of these new tools, which could represent setbacks or obstacles against democracy in the region.

In this sense, the main challenge is to guarantee the coherent and productive use of these new communication and information technologies. Technological progress opens up a broad range of possibilities for governments and its citizens to work together to cooperate, innovate, promote transparency, citizenship, and accountability. However, it must be properly managed and harnessed in order to become a tool of positive cooperation and interaction, focused on adding public value, enforcing rights, and promoting constant dialog. In this sense, the public power plays a key role in cooperating with civil society to open these dialog channels, ensuring the legality, legitimacy, and formality of processes. The need for credibility in political representation channels must be supplemented by direct participation mechanisms, made possible by technology.

V. Recommendations

Based on the analysis of facts and circumstances brought to light during the 2015 Meeting of the Latin American Group for Public Administration of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (LAGPA/IIAS), the following recommendations to LA&C Governments are hereby listed:
The current turmoil of international changes and adjustments imposes major challenges to the region’s recent economic expansion, but also opens a new window of opportunities regarding the adoption of required reforms to steer the region into a new level of medium and long-term development.

The core issue relates to the establishment of a new development paradigm, suited to new scenarios and challenges, based on the continuous reassessment of the Government’s role as an economic player. This does not imply the return of the 1990s models based on neoliberal ideals or its consolidation as a promoter of economic activity. It implies the inception of a new paradigm, balancing economic and social dimensions based on superior technical quality, in order to promote the inclusion and competitiveness of regional economies in the global economy.

This establishes planning capacity as a high-profile aspect regarding the performance of duties of an entrepreneur Government, as well as the promotion of a virtuous circle of development, as in the Company-Education-Innovation triumvirate. In this sense, transparent governance must be strengthened and nourished, including intermediary elements to help promote authentic social engagement, increasing its ability to legitimately guide and influence public decisions.

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