

Public Administration Reform: A Perspective on Theoretical Challenges

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Abstract

There has been increased attention paid to administrative reform globally. This has been shown in various ways and raises questions of theoretical challenges to administrative reform in countries. Depending on the context, these challenges have been met using different approaches and models. These may have not been appropriate in countries generally. This paper is an endeavour to look into these issues of theoretical challenges to administrative reform.

Keywords: Paradigm Shift, Administrative Reform, Good Governance, Globalisation, New Public Management (NPM)

Introduction: issues of theoretical challenges

The policies and programmes of governments in countries of the world with governance and administrative reform have displayed new orientations as paradigm shifts in public administration. From the later part of the twentieth century administrative reform agenda has included decentralisation and debureaucratisation, reorganisation of structure and functions, revitalisation of public management, privatisation of public enterprises (Caiden, 1988) and a series of structural and policy reforms towards good governance (Aminuzzaman, 1994). There have been many theoretical perspectives with models and approaches in the study of public administration which have been 'influenced by the New Right thinking and approached from economic and political points of view' (Zafarullah, 2011: 23). It is generally accepted the fact that administrative reform have brought poor results with limited degrees of success in countries especially in developing ones and has made the phenomenon futile (Zafarullah, 2011). This has led to theoretical as well as empirical challenges to the issue. Public administration in countries is responsible for implementing policies adopted by the government into action (Richardson and Baldwin, 1976). [V]irtually everything ever done in public administration must, in the nature of things, have a bearing on

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action (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973:166). Failure in policies has an impact on the cause of restricted success in implementation and puts the discipline to face theoretical as well as empirical challenges (Rees & Hossain, 2010).

This paper aims to deal with the theoretical challenges to administrative reform with reference to New Public Management (NPM) as a universal model for administrative reform. The following section depicts the contextual dilemma regarding theoretical issues, section three focuses on the necessity of the theoretical approaches and models in public administration reform, while the fourth section discusses the globalisation of reforming public administration with models and NPM. The paper concludes that contextualisation is most likely the key to face the challenges.

The Contextual Dilemma Concerning Theoretical Issues in Administrative Reform

Administrative reform is a complex and multifaceted issue. Despite its importance and necessity it is proving hard to carry out because it is indeed a difficult task (Islam, 2000). Changing structures and increased attention to performance criteria (Romzek, 2000:31) are central to the reform that accelerates good governance and overall national development. Decentralisation, restructuring of public services, cutting red-tape etc. are the strategies which have been widely adopted in this regard (Campbell, 1993; Romzek, 2000). They give public administration and management systems more dimensions than old procedures and rule-based approaches. However, public administration has been, through most of its history, a practical art than theory-based discipline (Olsen, 1991:126; Wilson, [1887] 1976). It is comprehended that the notion of public administration is an integrated field of practical art and academic research (Olsen, 1991). The locus of the issue - government, public administration, and public sector - shows an inherent tendency to rename itself (Bogason & Toonen, 1998). Though, in the study of public administration and administrative reform the explicit theoretical models have been less important than practical institution-specific knowledge (Olsen, 1991), they allow researchers and academics to break away from vested traditions and conventional interpretations of doing things (Bogason & Toonen, 1998). Since the 1970s, many notions developed by scholars in the field of public administration have had less than felicitous connotations (Brundey, Hebert, and Wright, 1999).

Many countries have, often with the help of the international donors, sought to promote good governance through reforms along the lines of the developed countries (Azizuddin, 2008). Indeed, administrative reform has proven among the most difficult of developmental reforms to sustain, and there is little evidence those nationally- or donor-sponsored reform

efforts with so called universal models have met with much success (Shepherd, 2003).

Theoretical Approaches and Models in Administrative Reform

During the last decades or so, the socio- economic realities in most countries in both developed and developing world have acted as a catalyst in the movement towards reforms in public administration. The current reform agenda covers a wide range of approaches such as liberalisation, deregulation, downsizing the public sector, privatization, debureaucratization, civil service reform, fiscal reform, performance measures, businesslike management practices, efficiency, accountability and transparency (Caiden, 1991).

The overall realization is the same subject matter may be addressed by using different labels, by both academics and the practitioners as well. The globalization of public administration throws together different approaches to the study of public administration into one box whether they like it or not: neo-managerial analysis, neo-Taylorism, new public management, neo-institutional and/or new institutional analysis (Bogason & Toonen, 1998:207) and new public administration and so on. The administrative reform efforts have been manifested in various ways with the intention of increasing administrative effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of administrative machinery. Depending upon the developed and developing nation context and the time and space relation as well, the reform efforts have gone under numerous labels with and without visibility. 'Reinventing Government' (RG) (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993), 'Business Process Reengineering' (BPR) (Hammer & Champy, 1993) and 'New Public Management' (NPM) (Hood, 1991; 1995) are all well-known in reforming public administration and management in developed countries (Ocampo, 1998). On the other hand, developing countries are not so much behind in reform activities. They are trying to do so either imitating the developed ones or/and mixing their own strategies in prescribed reform processes giving a version of reorganising the system of public administration in general.

RG involves empowering citizens, the promotion of mission driven entrepreneurial leadership in order to 'steer' the government and not 'row' it, to enhance competition in the public sector, deregulate government by cutting red tape, decentralise government, improve performance and budgeting (Osborn and Gaebler, 1992). BPR is the fundamental rethinking to turn back the industrial revolution and radical redesign of business process to achieve dramatic improvement in critical contemporary measures of performance (Hammer & Champy, 1993:32; Fowler, 1997:36-37) giving greater attention to the role of information technology (Ocampo, 1998:249). NPM is a contested term that has been used as the new paradigm that is replacing the classic bureaucratic or

Weberian paradigm of public administration (Gow & Dufour, 2000:573; Batchelder & Alexander, 2009). These have, sometimes, been used assortedly depending on the goal(s) and objective(s) of the reform programme in the country concerned.

Globalization of Reforming Public Administration, Models of Reform and New Public Management (NPM)

The contemporary paradigm shift in public administration has been precipitated from the 1980s due to the changes taking place in the international context (World Bank, 2000; 2002). Certain phenomena merit attention, which required readjustment by the state in conformity with the demands of currents and cross-currents in the international arena. The state had played the leading role in administration and development, a role tending towards the centralisation of power. In the new context the role of the state/ government has shifted from administrative state to welfare, with devolution of authority and decentralisation of power to increase its performance (Goodsell, 2006). There is now almost a worldwide consensus regarding public administration reform, which sees a close relationship between effective public administration, development and good governance. International awareness has induced the United Nations to discuss the matter separately and adopt a resolution. In the 50th session of its General Assembly held during 15 – 19 April, 1996, for example, the issues of public administration and its impact on development was discussed by the United Nations as a single subject, to underline the importance of the close link between public administration efficiency and the economic progress of a country. The member countries each identified changes being made in their public services irrespective of their position on the continuum of development. The resolution (Resolution 50/225) (UNGA, 1996) adopted by the General Assembly underscored the importance in improving the responsiveness of the governments in meeting people's basic needs and in achieving sustainable development. The resolution focused on strengthening government's 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, and the management of development programmes emphasizing the development of sustainable national state capacities (Rahman, 2001).

The globalization of public administration reform combines different approaches: neo-managerial analysis, neo-Taylorism, neo-institutional and/or new institutional analysis (Bogason & Toonen, 1998). The administrative reform efforts have been manifested in various ways, with varying degrees of openness, depending on the context. These changes go under various titles like NPM, RG, and BPR and so on with some differences in terms of emphasis on principles and ideas, but all aiming at

making governments more efficient, effective and economical (Ocumpo, 1998).

It may be imperative for a country to keep pace with administrative reforms in other countries, or risk increasing damage to their reputation and hence competitiveness. However, depending on the context, these challenges of reform have been met in different ways using various nomenclatures (Ocumpo, 1998). These models may have not been entirely appropriate in those countries such as Bangladesh, for example, whose level of development is relatively low (Atrya & Armstrong, 2002). ‘New Public Management’ as a principle of personnel and professional management is one thing (Hood, 1991; Common, 1999). Privatisation and reduction of the role of the administration to ‘commissioning’ services and monitoring them is another. Resistance to reform and change in such countries may be politically motivated or reflect corrupt or narrow group interests; or arise from a sense that some aspects of the reforms were not appropriate (World Bank, 2000).

NPM is a contested term (Common, 1999) that has been used as the new paradigm that is replacing the classic bureaucratic or Weberian paradigm of public administration in blended manner (Gow & Dufour, 2000; Cepiku & Mititelu, (2010); Læg Reid, 2011). It is ‘based on generic management ideas and institutional economics had spread through the Anglophone world in the 1980s and 1990s’ (Hughes, 2003; Cameron, 2009: 01). It too conjures up an image enmeshed with a minimal government, debureaucratisation, decentralisation, market orientation of public service, contracting out, privatisation, performance management and so on (Sarker, 2001:153). These ‘were part and parcel of what Hood (1991) termed New Public Management (NPM), Pollitt (1990) Managerialism, Lan and Rosenbloom (1992) Market-based Public Administration, and Osborn and Gaebler (1992) Entrepreneurial Government’ (Bissessar, 2002:137). In fact, there is strong evidence for a wave of reform in the public service originating in the UK, the USA and New Zealand, sweeping throughout the world from the 1980s onwards.

The current conceptual and ideological hegemony of the ideas has been buttressed by the advocacy of leading international development partners and donor agencies like OECD, the IMF and the World Bank. They have turned towards NPM as the only and most effective path to public sector modernization (Sahlin-Andersson, 2001; Wollmann, 2002). This has been considered as “*Market Model* for reforming government, which claims that private-sector methods are almost inherently superior for managing activities when compared to those of the traditional public sector” (Hossain and Helao, 2008). These ideas were put into practice in reforming public administration in the UK in the name of ‘Next Steps’, Australia, New Zealand – where arguably it has been more successful;

Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Malta. It is even espoused in a piecemeal way in the reform reports and recommendations of developing countries, including Bangladesh (Sarker, 2001; Atrya & Armstrong, 2002).

Indeed there is ever increasing attention being paid to public administration reform globally. Originally concerned with macro programmes for economic and social development, the donor agencies like the World Bank, the IMF, and the UNDP have gradually changed their orientation with an important part of that being their participation in the development of the new managerial thinking and therefore NPM is part of the repertoire of these organisations, even if now embedded in a broader discourse (Bislev, Salskov-Iversen & Hansen, 2001). The first generation reform programme that started in 1980s under the auspices of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the World Bank seemed in conformity with the ideas of NPM (Lienert & Modi, 1997; Atrya & Armstrong, 2002). Despite its theoretical inconsistency, relative incoherence, and variations in form from place to place, the elements of NPM do identifiably belong to a specific set of ideas current in global discourse (Hood, 1995; Bislev, Salskov-Iversen, & Hansen, 2001). The forces of globalisation and the mounting internationalization appear to be attaining a degree of external determinism in the face of divergent national structures (Thoeing, 2001). In the case of developing countries, weak governance systems (World Bank, 1997), a comparatively low standard of public service, and the mixed results of reform in the last two decades have now led to the inference that the solutions of developed countries cannot simply be a cure to the problems of developing ones, and the application of NPM reforms to them may be inappropriate (Atrya & Armstrong, 2002).

Contextuality is something which varies country to country, and this makes the conceptualization of general applicability of administrative reform models difficult. Although NPM was argued to be 'universal', there are others who believed that NPM is not universal and its applicability differs from one country to another (Vartola, 2011). Some countries, for example, those are in OECD, are concerned with orientation of state apparatus away from regulation towards greater service, whereas reforms in developing ones may be concerned with increasing the ever needful administrative capacities. Given the situation, how to bring about effective reforms and ensure good governance thus remains a research topic mired in some conceptual difficulty.

There have been calls for a changed perspective of the state. In making every state a more credible, effective and partner for development, it lays down a two-part strategy: matching the state's role to its capability, and to raise state capacity by reinforcing public institutions. The World Bank (2000) is somewhat in favour of NPM.

However, while admitting that there has been a recent convergence on NPM oriented reforms in public administration it is also well accepted the fact that 'there is no one best way' or that 'one size fits all' nor is there necessarily any 'best practice' approach for all reforms. What has been successful in one place may not succeed somewhere else. It is therefore argued that developing countries have been the victims of advice on policy decisions, which had very little relevance to the needs and situations in these countries (Zafarullah, Khan and Rahman, 2001) and confirmed that if reform is to be successful, it has to be home grown, and driven by the demand of the country from theory to practice (Atreya & Armstrong, 2002:11-12; UN, 2001a; UN, 2001b).

Conclusion: 'think globally and act locally' towards a people oriented approach to administrative reform for good governance

Administrative reform efforts are for 'crisis management' and 'national development' with short and long-term aims respectively in terms of goal achievement (Zafarullah, 1993; Ahmad & Azizuddin, 1995). However, the models mentioned earlier do not properly fit. This perhaps is not surprising, since they have emerged primarily in Euro-American contexts. Such models of reforming administration do not always accommodate the administrative needs of developmental and transitional states. They in fact are blamed for the failures of reforming administration because they are less adjustable to the realities of the countries. Historical differences, colonialism, dependence on foreign aid, and some other factors, like culture (Jamil, 1998) play an important role in shaping the administrative characteristic of developing democracies. Those are very important factors in understanding the present day administrative realities in countries. It is essential to take a contextual approach to reform to mitigate the effects of reproduction in public administration. The Western models need to be adjusted with local realities to make them work in non-Western societies. This does not mean these are redundant; rather, they raise questions of theoretical challenges to administrative reform.

Therefore, theoretical ideas of administrative reform should be closely linked to the geography, institutions, history and culture of a specific nation state (Olsen, 2004), taking a holistic rather than a reductionist view of the word, resulted in a paradigm shift in public administration (McGrath, 2003). This facilitates better implementation of the reform programmes. In order to ensure more transparent and better justified for institutions and policies to citizens otherwise called 'good administration' (Olsen, 2004) it is necessary that the administrative reform efforts should be 'tailor-made' with 'solid bedrock for nationalism' (Nizzo, 2001).

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