

INNOVATION AS MECHANISM TO RESTORE CITIZEN'S ENGAGEMENT AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Hendri Kroukamp¹

Abstract

Citizen engagement and trust in government deteriorated due to corruption and poor service delivery. The situation was complicated by the 4IR and the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to a lack of trust particular fiscal and political risks were presented which negatively impacted on the compact between government and the citizens. In this article it is argued that through innovative measures can citizen engagement and trust in government be restored. It, however, necessitates the implementation of inter alia people-orientated development, community empowerment, ICT innovation and leadership, thus improving service delivery, modernizing existing organizations and promoting environmental custodianship.

Points for practitioners

Apart from the guidelines discussed in this paper to enhance citizen's engagement and trust in government, should government undertake more efforts to make the country more lucrative for foreign and local investments by enhancing responsible management practices. This will ensure that the socio-political-economic-environmental conditions of all citizens can be improved through improved service delivery. More can be done in terms of deregulation and should legislation and regulations which inhibit a free economy be investigated. Politicians and public servants should undergo leadership training infused with values such as integrity, transparency, sustainability and instill in them the largely unteachable values of empathy, consciousness, and appreciation for diversity. The private sector furthermore represents the source of work creation and tax income accruing to the state. Without employers, trade unions will not be able to exist and should the private sector be involved in the creation and implementation of *inter alia* economic policy as envisaged in the South African National Development Plan 2030 to ensure responsible management leading to improved services in the South African public sector.

Key words: Innovation, trust, citizen engagement, leadership, business plan

Introduction

Public administration reform and transformation implies an outcome of an efficient public service which is vital to a well-functioning country that maximises its developmental potential and the welfare of its citizens. Change and reform in the public sector is not a new phenomenon but these reforms have tended to focus on bureaucratic

¹ Dean: Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, Republic of South Africa

efficiency and results. In many respects the pursuit of the bureaucratic perfection, where it succeeded, meant that government information management kept information more or less closed in, restructuring made different government units work in silos, and in general the government bureaucracy remained highly hierarchical. Public sector reforms in especially developing countries, despite many resources being spent on the reform programmes, did not make significant improvements. South Africa is no exception and although having been a democracy for 27 years, does the country remain a highly unequal society especially taking cognisance of the recent recorded cases of corruption in government and service protests on specifically local government level. The outcome of these actions is that citizen's trust in government deteriorated.

In South Africa the public service is unfortunately rapidly gaining a reputation for inefficiency and incompetence as governmental institutions routinely receive qualified audits, thereby undermining, rather than maximising, the developmental potential of the country. The situation has been complicated by various factors such as the global financial crisis experienced since September 2008, the 4th Industrial Revolution phenomenon, the effects of globalization and lately the COVID-19 pandemic.

To counter the situation and restore trust in government, certain innovative activities, seen as a solution to user-led demand for better services, coordination problems, increasing effectiveness and broader societal challenges, are mooted. These do not necessarily imply the implementation of new technological advancements but the reforms need to look at the context of *inter alia* how work is been done in the public sector, the openness in terms of participation of citizens and the role of the private sector.

From the South African government's side an array of legislative and organizational measures were put in place for example a comprehensive local government turnaround strategy (LGTAS) based on five strategic objectives, the 'District Development Model', the government's new flagship municipal support programme in 2019, and the National Development Plan 2030 to ensure that government will play their meaningful role as envisaged in the 1996 Constitution. The focus should, however, be on mechanisms to minimize or prevent corrupt activities taking place and make recommendations regarding prerequisites for an effective decentralized system of governance which will ensure that trust can be restored in government. These actions will not only attract cooperation from citizens to the agreed policies and programmes of government, but also to ensure that stability, peace and development can be attained. In this paper, these aspects will be addressed to ensure that international lessons are shared to benchmark best practices in respect of innovative governance in the public sector to restore trust in government.

Regarding the research method, a literature study of appropriate primary sources containing authoritative publications, books, journals, the internet and official documents such as departmental policies will be conducted to gather information, while the field operations include focus group interviews with practitioners and academics in the field of public administration and management.

Public Administration under siege

Phenomena such as globalization, the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) and currently the COVID-19 pandemic are putting extreme pressure on the public sector to continue delivering excellent services whilst dealing with the effects thereof. These phenomena increased *inter alia* economic disparity and contributed to the worsening of the environmental crisis. This in turn contributed to the fact that democracy has stalled as democracy's basic tenants, ie guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of press, and the rule of law, are under siege, according to Abramowitz (2019). Opposition to for example globalization has surged. In this regard are China and the United States of America (USA) on the opposite ends of the debate. In the 2017 Trust Barometer released by public relations firm Edelman (2017) only 38% of Chinese respondents indicated that they believed that 'globalization is taking us in the wrong direction'. In contrast at 59%, the USA has the fourth highest share of globalization skeptics behind Italy, France and Spain. A high correlation exists between the rate of change in the Human Development Index (HDI) and the support for globalization. The former (HDI) combines indicators of a country's education levels, economic performance and population health (Bach 2019:20). In countries where the HDI growth had slowed or stagnated people were skeptical of globalization. Where HDI growth remained robust and the quality of life improved, support for globalization was strong, even if absolute levels of education, prosperity and health were low. Sachs (2020:39) opines that throughout history, it has been important to understand the threats arising from globalization (disease, conquest, war, financial crises, and others) and to face them head on, not by ending the benefits of globalization, but by using the means of international cooperation to control the negative consequences of global-scale interconnectedness. The author continues by emphasizing that with all the threats experienced, one should reckon the balance sheet of all the phenomenon impacting on the public sector and the policy challenges thereof by promoting the positive sides while limiting the negative consequences.

As in the case with the decline in support for globalization, together with the effects of the other mentioned phenomena, did the overall trust in government institutions collapsed as well. Edelman (2017) called attention to the 'implosion of trust' across developed countries. It was found that more than two thirds of the surveyed countries were distrusters, ie those in which fewer than half of the respondents trust the mainstream institutions of government, media and NGO's to do the right thing. Edelman (2017) opines that trust is the deciding factor to determine whether a society can function. As trust erodes, the basic assumptions of fairness, shared values and equal opportunity traditionally upheld by the system are no longer taken for granted. A further analysis of trust will consequently be addressed.

Trust in government conceptualized

Trust has been identified as one of the most frequently examined constructs in contemporary organizational literature and a myriad of definitions of trust have arisen. Depending on the nature of the research, trust has been identified as a trait (been described as an individual difference called propensity to trust), as an emergent state (referring to cognitive, motivational or affective states that are dynamic and vary as a function of contextual factors as well as inputs, processes and outputs), and as a process through which other behaviours, attitudes and relationships are either weakened or bolstered (Burke, Sims, Lazara & Salas 2007:609). Trust not

only varies in terms of these three forms, but can also exist at a variety of levels within and outside an organization. It can exist at the team, leadership, organizational and inter-organizational level. Seeing that trust is strengthened or weakened due to the experiences, interactions, and context within which the relationship exists, trust is likely to develop differently in relation to team members, team leaders and towards the organization as a whole (Schoorman, Mayer & Davis 2007:348). In this context trust is thus seen as operating on a single dimension with distrust, where a greater level of trust, and hence lower levels of distrust, is associated with improved organizational performance. Burton (2015:2) is, however, of the opinion that trust and distrust are independent attitudes, such that an individual's distrust in an organization may impact on his or her performance in a way that is quite different to the impact of trust. For purposes of this paper trust/distrust will be discussed in line with the former distinction. Hardin (2003:11) is of the opinion that distrust, and not trust, motivates citizen participation in government. Citizens are motivated to act because they believe that government may be oppressive, self-serving, or unable to administer the particular needs of individuals or groups. Limited resources, a lack of information by government and open communication channels to service these needs can on the one hand cause dissatisfaction, disgruntlement and no-confidence. On the other hand complete trust in government may dampen citizen participation if it leads to apathy and indifference. This type of trust may express itself in resignation, disinterest, or uncritical acceptance, leading to an uninformed and misguided government which will also cause dissatisfaction, disgruntlement and distrust.

The lack of trust is furthermore associated with particular risks, that is

- Service delivery risks with the implications that
 - Staff do not get paid – and so refuse to work;
 - Bulk services do not get paid for – so services could be cut;
 - Contractors and suppliers do not get paid; and
 - Repairs and maintenance is invariably among the first expenditures cut, placing service delivery – as well as future revenues – at risk.
- Fiscal risks culminating in
 - Poor financial management processes and systems expose the government to corruption;
 - Government is failing to properly utilise the resources available to them by failing to collect available revenues; and
 - Poor financial management increases the cost of borrowing.
- Political interventions with the following consequences:
 - Some government constituencies have established top-heavy “political offices” which have proven to be unaffordable. Often these offices provide political advice on administrative matters, thereby undermining and duplicating the role of the chief financial officers and senior managers.
 - Political interference in administrative decision-making processes compromises governmental finances, including supply chain management. The interference in some government entities impedes revenue collection. This is related to the fact that the political electorate do not want for example to antagonise their voting communities (Local Government Briefing 2014:18).

Trust is the nexus of the compact between government and their citizens. Public trust emanates from a socially-centered government that is responsive and capable of articulating public needs through pro-poor policies and delivering necessary services in a transparent and accountable manner. This synergy acts as both a precondition and a result of good governance. Public trust in government is key to achieve stability, peace and development in each nation. Trust enhances confidence in institutions and attracts the cooperation of citizens to the agreed policies and programmes of government. As was indicated earlier did trust in government experienced a downward trend, affecting governments in both developing and developed regions (Klein 2008:3 & LG Briefing 2014:3). Factors playing a role in this regard are poverty, human rights abuses, inequality, environment, HIV/AIDS (developmental related issues), drugs and crime and peace and safety (governance related issues). Global statistics backing these claims are as follows:

- almost one billion people continue to remain poor;
- 5% of the world rich earns 114 times more than the 5% of the world's poor;
- daily more than 30 000 children die of preventable diseases;
- global warming has increased the spectra of natural disasters and altered the world ecology;
- 61 countries do not have free press;
- 106 countries restrict important civil and political liberties;
- there is no-confidence in how governments allocate and spend public resources and see corruption as a rising scourge – 90% of countries do not meet transparency and accountability criteria in budget preparation and more than a third of these countries provide minimal or no budget information to their citizens (Sachs 2015:2).

The impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the overall handling of the pandemic is a further factor contributing to the abovementioned.

In general, failure to *inter alia* achieve equitable development and the absence of accountability and transparency in public governance continues to dent public trust in governments. In the midst is thus the relationship of government with citizens. Bernardi (2018:74) identifies five goals of citizen participation in order of increasing level of public impact and trust, ie to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. The relationship is not built on citizen participation alone, but also to address particular perceptions about government in South Africa. The latter is unfortunately perceived as being characterised by, for example,

- inequitable distribution of public services, especially in rural areas;
- lack of access to services;
- lack of transparency and openness and consultation on the required service standards;
- lack of accurate and simple information on services and the standards at which they are rendered; and
- lack of responsiveness and insensitiveness towards citizens' complaints and discourteous staff.

These perceptions, which are frequently reflected in the media reporting of public service activities, are also shared by the focus group interviews that were conducted. To rectify these perceptions and dissatisfactions with the rendering of public services, is it of utmost importance that the Batho Pele Principles, introduced by the post-1994 government to address improved service delivery by looking at service standards, providing more and

better information, increasing openness and transparency, remedying mistakes and failures, and getting the best value for money, be revisited and re-implemented in an efficient and effective way to restore the trust between the government and the citizens (Meuleman 2020:6).

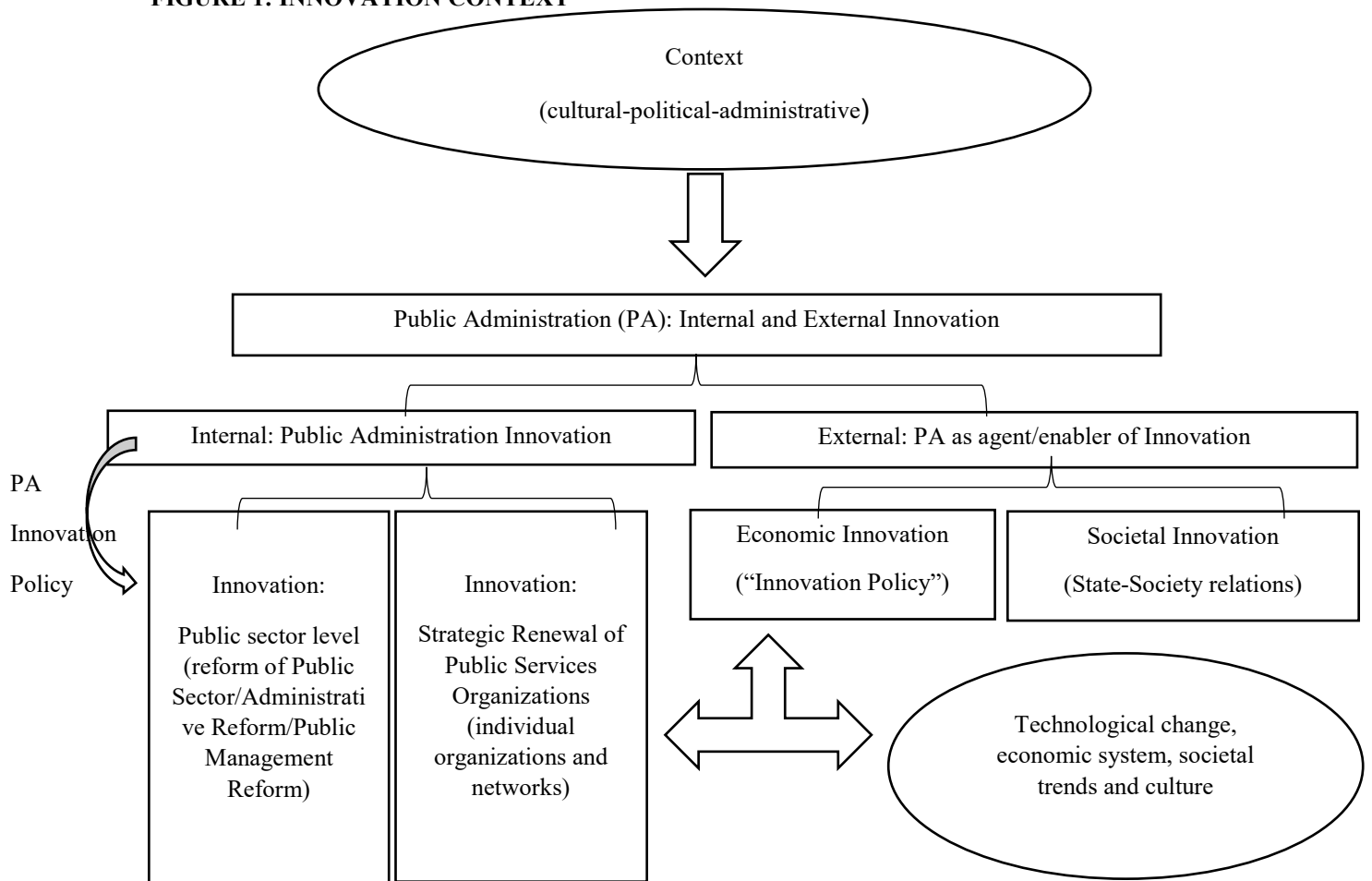
To ensure further meaningful change, the following preconditions should be taken into consideration for the effective application of citizen participation, namely changing attitudes and behaviour knowledge of and sensitivity to intercultural relations between the diversity of cultures that exist; understanding transformation in respect of where accessibility to the management system may, as has been pointed out, result in administrative delays and public managers should be innovative in finding acceptable and workable ways by which government structures can be made accessible for citizen participation without lowering the quality of service delivery; the importance of communication as citizen participation can lead to resistance to change which might range from feelings of loss, insecurity, powerlessness and a tendency towards introversion and self-analysis to feelings of anger and rebellion. One should understand that change should be managed and that it would require some good teamwork; cherishing educational opportunities in terms of conventional schooling, the traditional tertiary institutions, programmes for adult education and literacy classes as this is crucial to increasing productivity, more emphasis on problem-solving skills in order to teach employees/citizens about the nuts and bolts of work-related problems, and the introduction of vocational training at tertiary institutions where specific productive skills are taught (Merichova, Svidronova & Nemeč 2016:17). From the abovementioned it is quite clear that it cannot just be 'business-as-usual' from government's side to address the distrust that citizen exhibit in government and that innovative ideas should be applied to regain trust in government.

Innovation in governance

Innovation is a complex construct analysed from several perspectives on multiple levels and studies in a variety of academic disciplines. Innovation may be defined as a form of deliberate, or at least managed, socially purposeful change aimed at attaining something that otherwise would not be achieved, by leveraging on the possibility to do new and different things or to do the same things in a different way (Bouckaert 2019:3). According to Lampe (2017:709) several innovation typologies have been advanced, including the differentiation between product and process, technical and administrative and incremental and radical innovations. On the organizational level, innovation is generally defined as the generation/development and/or adoption of new behaviours or ideas. The concept may be distinguished into the process of innovation and the outcomes of this process. The process of innovation may further be differentiated into innovation-adoption and innovation-generation activities. Innovation-adoption activities on the one hand include the identification, acquisition and implementation of new external developed new services, products and processes. Innovation-generation activities on the other hand involve internal development of novel ideas and their development into new services, products and processes. Innovations might further be distinguished between product and process innovations. In Public Administration product innovation refers to *inter alia* the delivering of new services or policies, whereas process innovation refers to how a service is rendered ie in the case of public management reform to deliver 'more (of the same) with less (resources)' thus referring to the organisation or governance issues (Walker 2014: 27 and Ongaro & Ferlie 2019:6). Both product and process innovation take place on a

micro and macro level with an internal and external orientation within a cultural, political, administrative context (see Figure 1 – Adapted: Bouckaert 2019).

FIGURE 1: INNOVATION CONTEXT



Dzanzi and Arko-Achemfuor (2016:147) see innovation as part of entrepreneurial behaviours, with the latter extended to the use of technology, risk taking, maximum utilisation of resources, flexibility, and informal networking. The authors furthermore link entrepreneurial success to behaviour such as tolerance of ambiguity and internal locus of control, self-efficacy, commitment, self-reliance, persistence, achievement, needs-orientation, and problem-solving abilities. For purposes of this paper entrepreneurial and innovative thinking will be seen as synonyms. Applying innovation in the South African public sector to enhance trust in government, will subsequently be discussed.

Innovation in the South African public sector context

The basis of innovative thinking in the public sector of South Africa is highlighted in the 2019 White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI), approved by the South African Cabinet on 13 March 2019. The adoption of the White Paper was necessary because the previous White Paper on Science and Technology had been adopted in 1996 and global technological change and the development of "megatrends" since then had required an updated policy (Rust 2019). Further differences are that in 1996 there had been a focus on

developing the National System of Innovation (NSI), whilst in 2019 the focus is on increasing the impact of STI on the country's national priorities, including economic growth as envisaged by the NDP 2030. The 1996 White Paper was concerned with science and technology, whereas the 2019 White Paper broadened its concerns to science, technology and innovation -- including the development of an innovation culture, a whole-of-society approach and a Government Innovation Compact (which would align STI with other Government policies, such as trade). The 2019 White Paper also has a much stronger focus on partnerships, encompassing government, business, civil society and academia (Rust 2019).

It was imperative that a research prioritisation process had to be institutionalised with the necessary funding. The Government wanted South Africa's gross expenditure on research and development to reach 1.5% of the Gross Domestic Product in the next ten years, but this could not be done by the Government alone. The creation of a Sovereign Innovation Fund had been agreed in principle, but the details are still being worked out. Alternative funding sources, including crowd funding, would also be examined. There would also be a focus on encouraging STI-focused foreign direct investment (Mtembu 2019:7).

When implementing any innovative project, particular aspects should be taken into consideration (The Hope Institute 2017:261):

- People-oriented development: local problems need to be solved by the citizens themselves;
- Community empowerment, in two forms: through local projects for slum upgrading and community rebuilding activities, and through implementing self-reliant local economic ecosystems;
- ICT-based innovation: information communication and technologies are used to strengthen citizen participation in the democratic process and the dissemination of opinions and ideas. According to Brail (2018:55) these activities led to a profit-seeking activity instead of with a profound impact on local regions.
- Public sector leadership and local governance: governments are recognizing the necessity to collaborate with the civic sector, therefore they are gradually expanding the support for civil society organizations and social enterprises, and developing policies and other institutional support for these organizations;
- Social entrepreneurship: social entrepreneurs have emerged to provide solutions to the issues that neither the state nor the market have been able to solve by themselves, filling the gaps in the state social welfare system;
- Intermediary organizations: they provide financial and policy support, helping to create the environment for social innovation and playing a fundamental role in encouraging, promoting and facilitating linkages between local governments and other organizations (such as NGOs, community and civic groups, academic institutions, and private corporations);
- Cross-sectoral partnership: the involvement and collaboration of more sectors is crucial because the government alone often lacks strong governance, while the civic or non-profit sector is not strong enough to lead the partnership. Hence the active role of informal participants and their contributions to cross-sectoral collaboration become fundamental. Galvin (2019:132) refers to this as multi-level collaborative governance.

From the focus group feedback it became clear that once projects have been implemented innovation has the potential to:

- Improve public service delivery and decision making for public policy;
- increase competitiveness of existing organisations;
- form technology-based organisations;
- renew and modernize existing organisations;
- develop new and emerging organisations;
- improve the quality of life of South Africans; and
- promote environmental custodianship (compare Rust 2019).

From the aforementioned it is evident that substantial efforts have gone into the national level of innovation. The importance of increasing these efforts on regional and local government level are therefore evident and will subsequent attention be focused on the local government level. This is especially applicable to improve service delivery and the quality of life of South Africans taking cognisance of the most recent Auditor General's report indicating that only 18 out of 257 local authorities received clean audits in the 2017/2018 financial year as well as against the background of the ongoing service delivery protests in South Africa (Makwetu 2019:5). Plaatjies (2019:7) opines that none of the projects will be successful if the government does not show the political will to support such endeavours. Recommendations from organizations such as the Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) should be acknowledged taking cognisance of the Auditor General's Report on the increasing collapse of leadership, governance and management of municipalities. It is furthermore imperative that any innovative activity should be linked to a sound business plan – especially when working with the private sector in a collaborative manner to for instance improve service delivery; responsibilities for the driving, implementing, maintaining and resourcing the strategy should be allocated; and regular monitoring its successes should be undertaken.

Conclusion

From the abovementioned discussion it is clear that the South African government concentrated ample attention to innovative activities on central government level and encourages alternative funding sources, including crowd funding as well as a focus on encouraging STI-focused foreign direct investment. A concerted effort should, however, be focused on the regional and local spheres of government as it directly impacts on the services rendered to citizens.

It can furthermore be deducted that most of the projects on public sector innovation paid attention primarily to crucial factors such as leadership, learning, managerial autonomy, performance systems, organisational culture and to sustain and develop innovation in public administration over time, but that the political, administrative and cultural contexts as enabler/hinderer of innovation tends to be excluded. To address this, cognisance should be taken that with the implementation of innovative projects, different sectors and many diverse actors are involved (cross-sectoral); new social relationships and capabilities emerge; alternative production systems emerge which are more open, collaborative and experimental; boundaries between producers and consumers become weak; grassroots and bottom-up initiatives take place; mutual dependence becomes a core value to

achieve both individual and collective well-being; latent social assets and resources gain new values; and participatory approaches enable beneficiaries to meet their needs over the longer term. Particular prerequisites for the successful implementation of innovative projects are therefore proposed, for example, there should be a sound business plan; responsibilities for the driving, implementing, maintaining and resourcing the strategy should be allocated; and regular monitoring its successes should be undertaken. Without the latter, trust, being the nexus of the compact between government and their citizens, will then not be strengthened as all activities by government will be perceived to be futile and not lead to improved performance.

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