

THE NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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SERVING A PUBLIC PURPOSE

There is more to the role of the State than to make laws and enforce them through coercive measures. There is more to the role of government than to collect taxes, spend and go to war. And there is more to the role of public servants than to manage publicly funded programmes and provide public services. Public institutions, public organisations and public servants serve a public purpose.⁴ At the most fundamental level, this is what makes the public sector unique and most valuable for society and what gives meaning to government decisions and actions.

The articulation of the broad public purpose changes over time and takes on different meanings depending on the mission, the desired public outcomes and the context prevailing at the time. At the most macro level, the role of public institutions and government is to steer society towards a better future and improve human conditions in a manner that accounts for the interests of present and future generations.

The public sector is exclusively dedicated to serving the collective interest. This provides a *distinctively public sector perspective* to the role of public institutions, public organisations and public servants.⁵ This has a number of implications, including the fact that governments bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the interrelationships between the public, private and civic spheres serve the overall interest of society.

The private sector contributes to advancing society, but does not bear the responsibility for ensuring the overall well-being of society or improving human conditions. The primary responsibility of the private sector lays elsewhere. It plays an essential role in generating growth and contributing to the economic prosperity of society. Companies and enterprises are expected to act legally and responsibly in pursuing growth opportunities and generating profits. Many enterprises take their social responsibilities seriously and act as good corporate citizens. That said, the market may be a source of wealth creation and innovation but it is not self-regulating. Government is responsible for regulating and setting the conditions to ensure that the pursuit of individual interests is not detrimental to the overall interests of society.

In the same vein, civil society plays an essential role in building vibrant, resilient and innovative societies by encouraging solidarity and community actions. Civil society is a source of renewal and social innovation. That said,

civil society does not bear the responsibility for generating public goods that benefit society as a whole or that we consume collectively. Nor is it accountable for generating the conditions for the functioning of modern societies. This responsibility rests with government.

The private, public and civic sectors are unique and irreplaceable, each one in its own way. It is this uniqueness that makes them valuable for society. Serving a public purpose and steering society through an ongoing process of transformation that will ultimately serve the overall interest of society is the fundamental role of public institutions, public organisations and government. This role can be fulfilled in many different ways but it *cannot be surrendered nor delegated*. The State must be able to get things done and government must be able to govern in the interest of society as a whole. This is the starting point of the NS Framework.

The NS Initiative has put forward a conceptual framework of public administration that is the result of the contribution of thought leaders and senior practitioners over several years. The NS Framework is not a model that generates an easily replicable set of answers. In fact, it does not provide answers but helps practitioners challenge underlying assumptions and bring coherence to a diversity of ideas, perspectives, actions and possible government interventions.

The NS fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2015, involved 1,000 practitioners from different countries. In the laboratories and workshops conducted over that period, practitioners used the NS Framework to frame issues and explore possibilities to generate more desirable outcomes for society.⁶ The decisions about what to do and how to proceed are contextual and can only be made in practice.

One of the key findings of the fieldwork to date is that in spite of diversity of missions, contexts, cultures, governance systems or circumstances, the *same lines of inquiries* proved relevant to guide practitioners' search for solutions to the issues they were facing.

A BROADER MENTAL MAP

The NS Framework provides a dynamic view of the role of government, standing in sharp contrast to a more conventional view of public administration that encourages a government-centric perspective focussing primarily on public agency results and the inner-workings of government.

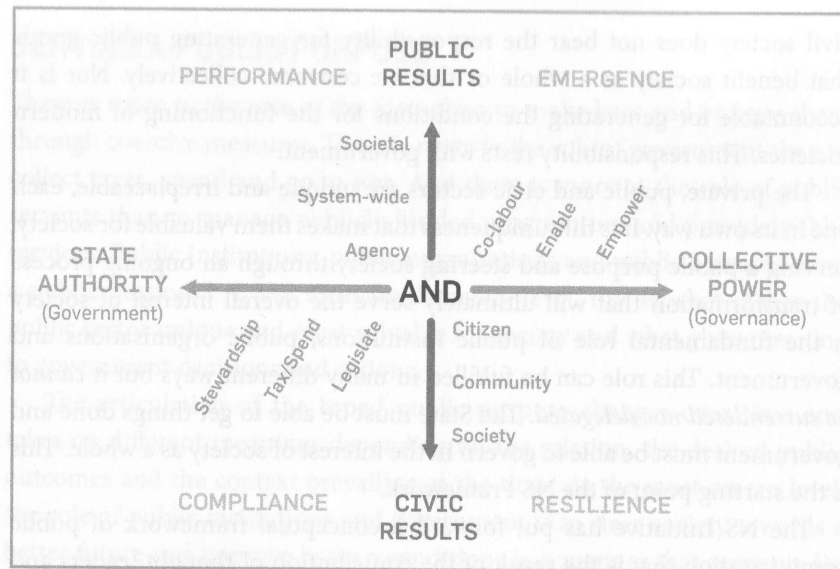


Figure 3.1: The New Synthesis Framework

The NS Framework is depicted in Figure 3.1. It is framed around four vectors that interact dynamically with each other.

Serving a public purpose is realised by generating *public and civic results*. Governments must generate results of value for society but they must also find ways to fulfil their public mission in a manner that builds the capacity of society to solve problems and generate better public results over time. The public sector has a special responsibility for building the *civic capacity* for collective problem solving.

Traditionally, public and civic results were seen as one and the same. In fact, they are quite different and there are significant trade-offs involved in balancing a drive for achieving better public results with a commitment to building the capacity of society to play a greater role in solving problems of public interest. Exploring the tensions and trade-offs between achieving better public results and improving civic results helps reconcile the need to make progress in the short term with the need to build the collective capacity for generating viable solutions over time. It reveals how a different sharing of responsibility between government, citizens and communities may eventually yield better results at a lower overall cost for society.

Public results provide a sense of direction, and *civic results* contribute to collective capacity building. Together, they provide a foundation of trust and build the resilience of society to absorb shocks and disturbances, and invent solutions to emerging challenges.⁷

Public Results

Public results provide a measure of society's overall progress.⁸ These results run through a continuum from agency results, toward system-wide outcomes and societal impacts.

Conventional public administration focuses on the performance of individual programmes and services provided by particular public entities. These entities may be a division, branch, agency, department or large ministry, as the case may be. The results generated are monitored along hierarchical chains of delegated authority. This provides a basis for accountability for the use of taxpayers' money and the exercise of delegated authority, but it also encourages an *agency-centric* focus. Public policies and programmes are instruments used to serve a broader public purpose and generate desirable societal results. Agency or programme results are important in so far as they contribute to generating better societal results, but they only tell part of the story.

Framing an issue in societal terms has a direct and sometimes dramatic impact on the approach that will be selected and the solutions that will be found. A focus on societal results makes it possible to explore the interrelationships between agency, government-wide, system-wide and societal results. It helps gain an appreciation of the ripple effects of government actions across vast systems. It reveals the multidimensional nature of complex issues and the need for co-operation across multiple agencies, with other governments, the private sector and civil society. Public organisations must position their contribution in the broader context of government-wide actions to optimise the production of societal results. A focus on agency results leads to sub-optimal results.

A broader mental map helps to reveal the deficiencies of existing practices such as agency-centric performance measurement systems, the lack of accounting systems to encourage collaboration across agencies, the absence of accountability systems for shared responsibility across vast networks and the weaknesses of systems used to monitor the societal impact of government actions. A focus on agency results obscures the

results that matter most for society. At the most macro level, societal results include economic prosperity, well-being, improved human conditions and intergenerational fairness. A focus on societal results encourages greater *clarity of purpose* and improves the coherence of government actions.

Civic Results

Civic results provide the foundation of a society where people are able and willing to share and build a better future together. Public administration is not separate from people, communities and society. Civic results bring together the role of government, its relationship with citizens and the contribution of people as public value creators.

Civic results include but are not limited to an active citizenry, resilient communities, civic capacity for problem solving and a civic spirit that infuses every aspect of life in society by encouraging collective action.⁹

Civic capacity endows a society with the energy and capabilities needed to address complex issues and adapt to unforeseen circumstances.¹⁰ Civic results emerge when there is a will to deploy social capital and the capacity for collective problem solving. Civic results play a key role in building well performing and governable societies.¹¹

Societies with well performing institutions and people able to collaborate and overcome their differences are better positioned to take risks, innovate and overcome the challenges brought about by an uncertain environment. A civic capacity for collective problem solving explains why similar reforms lead to very different results in different countries and why some countries are able to overcome difficulties and prosper in the face of adversity, while others flounder. It has a significant impact on the ability of government to initiate an ambitious agenda and achieve results that require the active contribution of citizens because it reduces the cost of frictions and improves the likelihood of success of collective efforts.

At the most fundamental level, civic results make societies governable. The relationship that binds the State, citizens and society is at the very heart of public administration.¹² This relationship reflects values and principles that have been forged over time but are also constantly changing. People are not born citizens but become citizens as they accept the constraints and take on the responsibilities that stem from being members of a broader human community.¹³ As citizens, people can rise above their differences because some of their most fundamental interests can only be fulfilled as members

of a larger community. This is the case for people's quest for a peaceful life and personal safety, their aspiration for a good life or for ensuring the well-being of their children.

One of the most fundamental roles of the State is to transform people into citizens.¹⁴ The State produces citizens in several ways, through education, a common judicial system, economic and social policies as well as common rules and norms.¹⁵ Public institutions contribute to building societies where people live under a common rule to resolve their differences peacefully and voluntarily accept not to take justice into their own hands. The State gives meaning to a concept of citizenship that becomes real in practice. It plays an important role in creating a broader community and mediating differences of views among citizens in increasingly pluralistic societies.

Globalisation, mass migration, new public threats, rising inequalities and many other factors are transforming the relationship between government and citizens. In many countries, there are increasing signs of malaise such as growing cynicism about politics, declining electoral turnout, deterioration of public discourse and the rise of entrenched positions. This signals the need to re-think and re-frame the relationship between citizens and government in contemporary terms.

In the public administration of the 20th century, people were credited with limited ability to solve public problems. They were voters, taxpayers with obligations under the law, users of public services, beneficiaries or obligates as the case may be. Governments were the providers of services to citizens who had no or limited involvement in the development of public policies or the design of public services. This view was a dominant tenet of the public administration of the industrial age. This has a number of perverse consequences. For one, it crowds out the contribution of citizens in solving collective problems.¹⁶ Second, public policies and programmes that make poor use of people's assets reduce the range of options available to government and impose a higher cost than necessary on society.

In reality, citizens are the main public value creators in an increasing number of domains, ranging from public health or literacy to environmental protection. Communities are the drivers of viable solutions to encourage public safety, reduce energy consumption or initiate corrective actions to mitigate the impact of climatic changes. No country, even with deep pockets, can achieve these results through legislative and coercive measures alone. These results require an active role by government, the collective will

and civic capacity of citizens to act as problem solvers, and communities as agents of change.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the best results in such areas are not achieved by countries with the highest spending level as a percent of GDP but by countries that successfully enrol the active contribution of citizens as public value creators. People build societies worth living in by the decisions they make and the actions they take with others. Their contribution is the real “Wealth of Nations”.¹⁸ People’s investment in building well performing societies far outweighs all other forms of investment, be they public or private.

The NS Framework brings a *citizen-centric perspective* to public policy making and service delivery. This helps explore how a different relationship between government, citizens and community, based on mutuality and shared responsibilities, may yield better public and civic results.

Governing in a period of high uncertainty and finding solutions to complex problems require a broader mental map to optimise societal results and a different relationship between government and citizens to bring about viable and sustainable solutions.

Focussing on public and civic results ensures that public sector leaders are grounded in the fundamental principles of public administration. Public results bring a societal perspective and civic results bring a citizen-centric perspective to the role of public institutions and the choices open to government. For public sector leaders, public purpose and citizens come first.¹⁹

AN EXPANDED VIEW OF THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

An increasing number of challenges are beyond the reach of government working alone. Governing in the 21st century extends beyond governments’ own reach and requires incorporating what can be achieved by enrolling the contribution of others. The solutions to a number of contemporary problems require pooling resources, knowledge and capabilities wherever they may reside, across government or beyond.

There will always be cases where it is necessary for government to take action on its own. Governments must know when to act alone and when results can only be achieved by enrolling the contribution of others. Working across multiple boundaries and interfaces is a defining characteristic of modern governance.²⁰ This in turn has implications for

public administration: the more dispersed the exercise of power in society, the more important the stewardship role of the State.²¹ This includes the capacity to monitor and detect emerging issues and opportunities, and introduce corrective or mitigating actions in a timely way to improve the likelihood of generating a more favourable outcome for society.

The Authority of the State

In most countries, a small group of people have the legal right to use the authority of the State to produce results. This includes the authority to make laws and enforce them, use coercive measures, tax and spend public funds. They owe this privilege to the position they hold. People become public office holders in various ways depending on the governance system in place in their country. In democratic societies, public office holders include elected officials and professional public servants appointed through some form of a meritorious system.

The authority of the State rests with public institutions. The separation between institutions and public office holders is an important principle of public administration. Loyalty is owed to the institutions – that is the positions of Prime Minister or President, Cabinet Ministers, or other positions of public office rather than to the incumbents.²² This separation makes it possible to ensure the continuity of the State while encouraging renewal and orderly political transitions.

The ultimate responsibility of public office holders is to exercise the authority of the State to promote the collective interest.²³ What constitutes the collective interest does not begin or end with the government in office. The laws that govern society today reflect democratic choices that were mediated through political debates over long periods of time. They form part of today’s governance system and are the democratic expression of prior democratic choices. Not everything is changing and not every choice needs to be renegotiated after each election.

Public office holders simultaneously administer programmes and services inherited from the past, transform existing systems and practices to adapt to changing circumstances, and introduce new initiatives aimed at addressing contemporary problems in a way that reflects the priorities of the government in office.

Public office holders must ensure the continuity of the State while at the same time generating solutions to new and emerging public challenges. The

stability provided by public institutions is a necessary condition for public, private and civic innovation.

Governing is a delicate process of constructive deconstruction where the authority of the State is used to ensure stability and initiate actions to transform society.

The Collective Power of Society

While the authority of the State is exercised by a relatively small number of public office holders, the power to change the course of events in society is vastly distributed. Multiple agents in the private sphere, civic organisations, other governments, international and multi-lateral organisations, and media and interest groups bring about changes that transform the economic, technological, environmental and socio-political environment.²⁴ These changes transform society, the role of government and the approaches needed for problem solving. From this perspective, governing is a search for a delicate balance that is never entirely achieved and where all elements are interacting with each other and perpetually changing.

In today's world, governments are facing issues that span multiple dimensions. The economic, social, political, technological and environmental dimensions of complex issues are intertwined. Complex issues do not and will not fit within the boundaries of any single organisation, a single government or even a single country. Governments cannot re-organise themselves out of this dilemma; instead re-organisation simply creates new boundaries that need to be overcome.

Viable solutions require a mix of interventions, some by the public sector and many by other agents in society. They require public organisations with the capacity to work collaboratively across a web of interrelationships, across government and across sectors in order to generate practical solutions by making the best possible use of existing resources, means and capabilities.

One key finding of the NS fieldwork to date is that there are always enough resources around to make progress if we are smart enough to leverage the power of others. Building on the strength of others requires a dynamic view of the role of government, where government interventions form part of long chains of intermediate results and where the actions of multiple agents must converge. Addressing systemic challenges such as poverty reduction, public security or public health requires the active contribution of multiple

agents in society. In all these cases, *the authority of the State is used as a lever* to elicit the contribution of others and to transform behaviours.

Public results shift the focus of attention from an agency-centric perspective to a societal perspective. *Civic results* encourage a citizen-centric perspective to public administration that opens up avenues for a different sharing of responsibilities between government and citizens.

The *authority of the State* is the lever used to harness the *collective power* of society. This shifts the focus of attention from a government-centric perspective (what government can do) to a governance perspective (what can we do collectively) to ensure the well-being of society.

A DYNAMIC GOVERNING SYSTEM

At the crossroads of these vectors there are tensions to manage, conflicts to resolve and an infinite number of possible permutations.²⁵ A dynamic exploration of such an expanding space of possibilities helps to uncover pathways with a greater potential to generate better futures.

The NS Framework is far from the mechanistic view of public administration inherited from the industrial age. There is not one right way nor even one option, but a broad range of possible choices to invent solutions to the problems that stem from living in a post-industrial era.

Government is an actor like no other but it is not the only one able to influence the course of events. Government actions, decisions and interventions are deliberately designed to modify behaviours and transform the interactions between the public, private and civic spheres. Governments are meta-system designers. Their actions influence interacting systems that in turn shape life in society. Public organisations and institutions are mandated to shape the environment to achieve desirable public outcomes.

Some desirable results can be produced by government actions through public agencies. Other requires the pooling of capacity across government. Other still require the coming together of multiple agents from other levels of government, the private or civic sectors working as one to generate the desired public outcomes. Some of the most important public results can only be produced with the active support and contribution of citizens, families

and communities. Governing and building a well performing society result from multiple interactions that transform the environment and the behaviour of people operating within it.

A compliance function: Well performing societies depend on public institutions able to govern, make laws and enforce them to prevent lawlessness. These functions contribute to stability and reduce uncertainties. This ensures that a society is governed by the rule of law. It provides a normative frame of reference based on the constitution, rules, norms and conventions that govern how we live in society and define how a society governs itself. Well performing societies require a compliance function. This requires institutional capacity.

A performance function: Well performing public organisations must be able to produce results of high public value by using public means and public resources. They must display a concern for efficiency, productivity as well as a concern for the wellbeing of citizens, users or obligates of public services. They must display respect for democracy, integrity and accountability. In contemporary terms, they must also have the capacity to work across multiple boundaries both inside government and in collaboration with the private and civic sectors or other levels of government. A performance function transform government priorities and public policy ideas into reality. This requires a high level of organisational capacity.

An emergence function: Well performing governments need the capacity to detect and anticipate emerging issues and phenomena and to proactively intervene to mitigate risks and improve the likelihood of more favourable outcomes. Well performing societies need strong inventive and innovative capacity. Government can create an environment that encourages collaboration, collective problem solving and public innovation. This helps ensure that the private, civic and public spheres work in a synergistic way. These interrelationships and the resulting ecosystem contribute to building the innovative capacity of society. The emergence function improves the capacity of government and society and lays the basis to invent solutions to the problems of life in society.

A resilience function: Resilience is the ultimate reality check of a well performing society that benefits from skilful government stewardship. This includes the capacity to adapt to changing needs and circumstances and to generate sustainable futures. It is manifest in the capacity to adapt, absorb disturbances and prosper even in the face of unforeseen or unpredictable

circumstances. Resilience requires well developed civic capabilities and the civic will to deploy these capabilities to advance the collective interest. Government is and remains the steward of the collective interest in all circumstances whether or not it is actively involved.

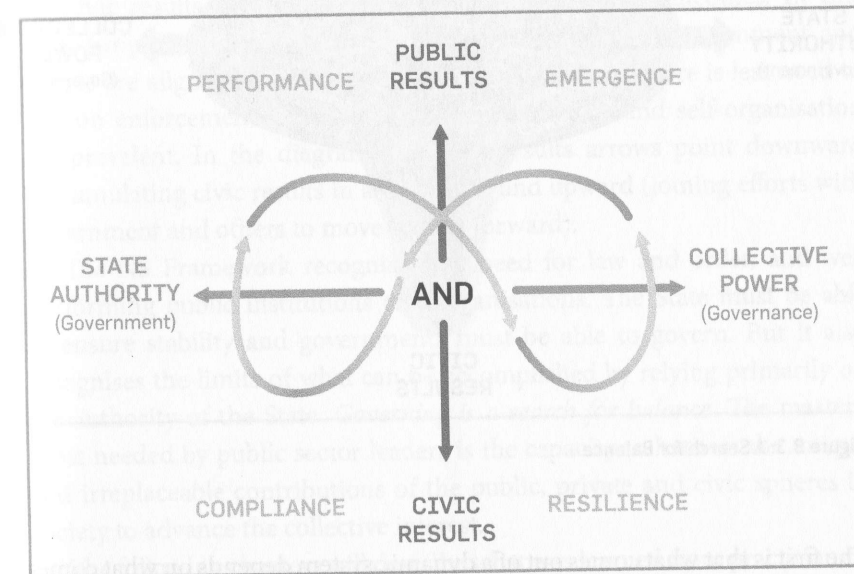


Figure 3.2: A Dynamic System of Governance

Taken together these functions map out an open, dynamic interactive system of governance where an infinite number of choices and permutations are possible. The challenge is to ensure that the overall balance serves the collective interest, generates solutions, encourages collective problem solving and propels society towards a better future.

The participants in NS workshops have over the years generated many visual representations of the NS interacting elements and functions. For reason of simplicity, a diagram in two dimensions is used while in fact there are dynamic interactions evolving over time. This diagram does not capture the dynamic nature of the NS Framework.

The following picture goes some distance in capturing aspects of the dynamic at play. It has the merit of illustrating several key aspects.

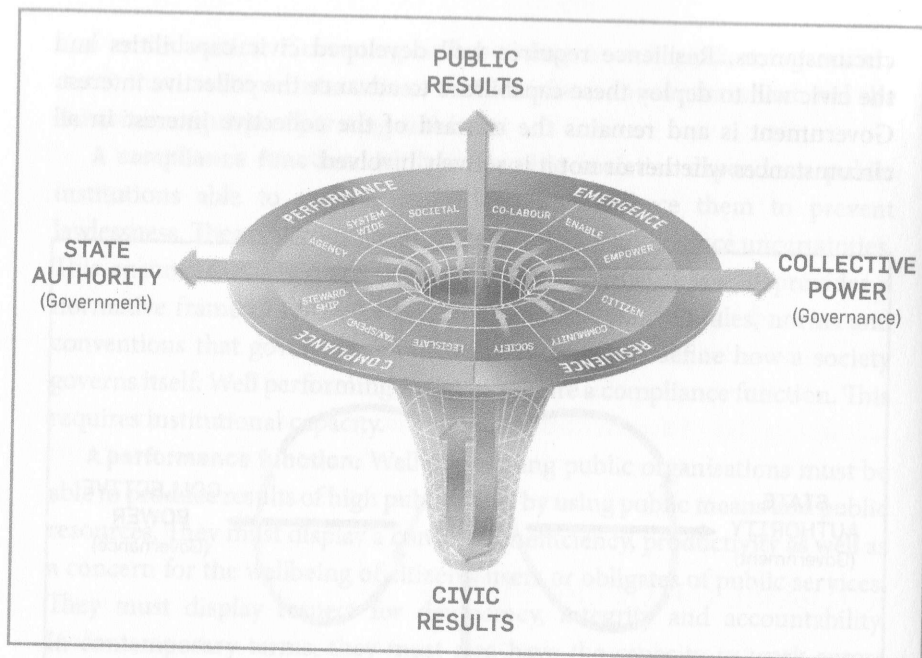


Figure 3.3: A Search for Balance

The first is that what comes out of a dynamic system depends on what comes into it. In this illustration, the compliance, performance, resilience and emergence functions are at play simultaneously. Government is playing an active role and so are other agents of society and citizens themselves. This mix is used to generate public results of value for society.

The second useful aspect of the diagram is that actions and interactions create ripple effects. It could be small and reach only the people directly affected or have vast affects throughout society. The concept of ripple effects appears in one of the cases presented in Appendix A at the end of this book.

Finally, this diagram points out that civic results play a unique role in the functioning of the overall governance system. Civic results are outputs, inputs and contribute to societal outcomes.

Civic results are an *output* as the active engagement of citizens has intrinsic value in itself. This contributes to building the capacity of people to act as citizens. Citizens are active beings that behave in ways that serve their interest and the collective interest.

Civic results are an *input*. Civic results build the capacity to act collectively and to mobilise behind a shared purpose. The greater the civic capacity and the stronger the civic will to deploy this capacity, the greater the likelihood of success of an ambitious change agenda. Civic results reduce the costs of friction in society.

Civic results provide the fuel to generate societal outcomes. In this case, people are doing the heavy lifting. The efforts of government and people are aligned and moving in the same direction. There is less need to rely on enforcement because voluntary compliance and self-organisation are prevalent. In the diagram, the civic results arrows point downward (accumulating civic results in abundance) and upward (joining efforts with government and others to move society forward).

The NS Framework recognises the need for law and order, and well performing public institutions and organisations. The State must be able to ensure stability and governments must be able to govern. But it also recognises the limits of what can be accomplished by relying primarily on the authority of the State. *Governing is a search for balance*. The mastery most needed by public sector leaders is the capacity to harness the unique and irreplaceable contributions of the public, private and civic spheres in society to advance the collective interest.

The following chapters will describe what was learned from practitioners as they searched for a pathway towards a better future in their respective contexts.