Building good practices for a new digital agenda: The case of Spain

Reform of the public a dministration is very high on the Spanish policy agenda. To achieve the government's goals, the Commission for the Reform of the Public Administration (CORA) was established to improve the efficiency of the public administrations, enhance the quality of services provided to citizens and business, and make the public administrations more accountable and transparent.

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Rather than focusing on cutting expenditure or downsizing the public sector in an environment of severe budgetary duress, the CORA reform aims to increase the quality of public institutions in the long term. It is being implemented in parallel with a number of complementary measures in the areas of public finance, multi-level regulatory policies, local governance, transparency and access to information, as well as the Package of Democratic Regeneration to fight corruption.

Governance reform is not an end in itself; it is a means to achieve public policy results for citizens and businesses efficiently and effectively. Good governance is about building a better national and regional environment in which people can live, learn and work; in which entrepreneurs can innovate and commercialise the results of their creativity; and in which businesses can invest to create wealth and jobs. Good governance is about enhancing trust in government, its institutions, the quality of its services and decisions, because they are perceived to be made in the general public interest.

The OECD has been closely associated to the process of Governance reform in Spain. Indeed, the OECD Public Governance Review of Spain is an important contribution to the global debate on how to build public institutions that are innovative, effective, efficient and accountable, and can foster economic performance and competitiveness. The OECD welcomes Spain's efforts to reform its public administration and is confident that its full implementation will deliver better lives for all Spaniards.

The CORA reform package should not

be regarded as a "one-off" exercise, but as a first and critical step to lay the foundations for continuous improvement and for a new approach to public administration reforms so that initiatives are linked and guided by medium- and long-term strategic objectives for Spain's economy. More than one wave of reforms will be needed to mainstream public administration reform on an ongoing basis to pursue national strategic objectives.

While some initiatives have a relatively short time span impact (i.e. supressing a specific agency and transferring its functions to another one), others represent more structural changes in the way public administrations conduct their day to day activities and provide mechanisms for continuous improvement. Transparency and the use of technology are certainly among the dimension of reform that will require continuous impetus and strategic vision.

Transparency is particularly associated in the CORA with the quality and accessibility of the underlying information required to ensure budget discipline. In addition, transparency is contemplated in complementary reforms, as it is an important element of the Democratic Regeneration Plan (DRP) and a standalone objective of the Law for Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance. Taken together, these initiatives represent a bold step forward in the recognition of transparency as an important and necessary element of public administration reform. Transparency should become a guiding principle underpinning the different initiatives of reform, from financial management and regulatory design to HRM and multilevel relations (including transfers). Transparency has the potential to set new incentives for public officials to perform their duties and manage budgets knowing that they are under continuous public scrutiny. Indeed, transparency is an essential element to prevent corruption and promote integrity in public management. This is critical to overcome the low levels of trust in government prevailing among the Spanish population. Furthermore, transparency interacts strongly and maximises the effect of other reforms, such as those dealing with financial management and Better Regulation. Last but not least, transparency can drive new forms of public engagement and spur more participatory and collaborative governance.

It is important to keep in mind that enhancing transparency in the public administration often requires a cultural change, which needs clear guidance, steady support and adequate incentives to become a reality. Comparative experience illustrates the imperative of investing in the attributes of the information disclosed – providing informed guidance, capacity and criteria to ensure that complete, objective, reliable, relevant and easy to understand information is made available and usable by stakeholders for different purposes, from holding governments to account, to proactively participating in the public policy discussion.

The Spanish government needs to go "the extra mile" to regain trust from its citizens, which is clearly in a downward trend. This is an issue that may have consequences in the future. Low levels of trust in government may hinder state revenues, rule of law and social fairness. Efforts should be made to explicitly increase social trust and to reinforce the confidence on the ability of public administrations to drive and sustain change for the benefit of the public interest. Administrative reform is necessary to address such lack of trust, but it is clearly insufficient. A comprehensive governance approach would anticipate the need to engage citizens in governmental functions, consult them on critical policy matters and communicate effectively its decisions. Such an approach would help the government identify social trends and potential future issues, so that the policies of today anticipate and provide remedies to the problems of the future. As mentioned in the Review, the strategic link between the CORA reforms, the implementation of the Law on Transparency, Access to Information and Good Governance, and the package of democratic regeneration is a unique opportunity to improve governance frameworks in Spain.

Involving citizens is much more than pure rhetoric; it is a requirement to realise the benefits of reforms. Emerging technologies, technological platforms (e.g. social media) and technology driven trends (e.g. Open Data) provide new opportunities to move from consultation to stronger engagement. Nevertheless, ICT-enabled channels and opportunities will not have a strong impact if citizens do not use them for their interactions with public administrations and if governments do not leverage them to improve people's wellbeing. In order to facilitate uptake, user needs should be linked with the achievement of internal efficiencies. Likewise, the right of access to government information should be socialised, so that citizens make use of it and exercise control over the public administration. This may take time, but it can certainly become a strong incentive to advance integrity in the public service.

Make technology and information work for reform

Technology can be an effective tool to correct the "silos approach" and overcome a situation of atomised initiatives by enhancing information-sha- »

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ring; creating common infrastructures, platforms and applications; and by allowing real-time updates and communication throughout the government and in its interactions with citizens and business.

The CORA acknowledges the efforts made by the previous governments to reach the current state of maturity in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the public administration and leverages their strategic importance as a powerful cross-cutting enabler of reform. About 50% of the CORA initiatives are ICT related, or enabled, and for 30% of the initiatives ICTs are at the core of the reform programme. The CORA aims also to maximise the impact of ICT on other initiatives, such as those dealing with transparency, administrative simplification and better regulation. The establishment of a General Access Point for Public Administrations (PAGA) for Spanish citizens and the creation of the "ventanilla unica para el comercio exterior" (one-stop shop for foreign trade), providing a single point of access to the administration for foreign companies, are key iniatives supporting the reforms' overall objectives to foster an efficient and user-centred administration, by cutting the red-tape, enhancing the capacity to achieve economies of scale and providing better access to public services.

Similarly, the CORA builds on previous efforts undertaken within the framework of the Aporta project to stimulate economic and social growth through open data and big data. It embeds initiatives that provide the conditions to strengthen the Government's capacities to manage data and information in order to improve efficiency, service delivery and transparency. The planned unification of statistical surveys foreseen by the CORA supports for example

better integration in information management, access and sharing. Similarly, the development of performance indicators to assess efficiency provides a platform to link the work on measuring public sector performance with the national Open Data agenda. Furtermore, the recently adopted Law on Transparency (no. 274/2013 of November 26) relies on the use of ICTs and new technologies to facilitate compliance with the obligations of active publishing and access to disclosed information.

Last but not least, the Law includes some essential measures to create the conditions that enable data re-use and thus maximise the impact of Open Data not only on good governance, but also on the creation of economic and social value for the private and public sectors and for the broad economy. Public data are indeed a key public infrastructure akin to road, bridges and ports. Yet, data availability and accessibility are necessary but per se insufficient conditions for value creation. Data re-use is a necessary condition to produce economic and social value. For instance, data re-use can enable easier access to public services - let's think of the wealth of apps that re-use transport data and that combined with social network platforms enable real time choices on routes and means of transportation. But data re-use can also support more informed personal choices on where to live, in which hospital to go, which school to choose for our children. This is why governments have a key role to play not only in using their own data to reinforce public sector intelligence and support better ex ante decisions on policies and services based on improved data analysis, but also in making data available as open data – i.e.in formats and at legal conditions that enable re-use by citizens and businesses - to create value.

Setting the right conditions to sup-

port Open Data programs includes also fostering a context and a culture within the administration conducive to co-ordination and collaboration. According to the OECD 2013 Open Data Survey, most member countries consider the administrative and organisational challenges as the predominant obstacle for further development of Open Data. Similar challenges have for years undermined the type of co-ordination needed to achieve the expected outcomes of the considerable investments made on ICT by the Spanish government. This problem is not unique to Spain. Governance and co-ordination related issues are one of the most common underlying challenges for effective and efficient digital government across many OECD countries. The OECD Council Recommendation on Digital Government Strategies recommends that governments secure leadership and political commitment to the digital strategies, ensure coherent use of digital technologies across policy areas and levels of government, and establish effective organisational and governance frameworks to co-ordinate strategies' implementation within and across levels of government. Regardless of the specific national administrative context and arrangements, political leadership and co-ordination are essential elements to support coherent decisions and actions, strategic ICT investments that contribute to overarching policy priorities, transfer of knowledge and expertise, and decreasing overlaps and duplications.

In line with the OECD Recommendation the sub-commissions preparing the CORA recognised the relevance of redesigning the current organisation and creating a governance structure to improve rationalisation and management of common IT resources. The CORA's decision to establish by Royal Decree the po-

sition of a Chief Information Officer (CIO) of the general state administration is meant to support the adoption and implementation of a single strategic vision for the central administration focusing on achieving economies of scale by consolidating common infrastructures, services and processes. The CIO is expected to lead the process of change and articulate the government's policy on ICT for the general state administration together with a newly established ICT council. He will also lead the efforts on ICT consolidation, which include creating a single vision to coordinate and centralise decisions on IT procurement.

However, good visions need to be complemented by effective implementation, says the OECD Recommendation. To enable the CIO to deliver, the CORA foresees the creation, under his leadership, of an agency that shall provide common ICT services to the public administration as a whole, and that is expected to help streamline the development of infrastructure and sector services.

In line with the good practices of the OECD, the new governance and organisational model foreseen by the CORA constitutes a solid and strategic first attempt to correct dysfunctional and inefficient use and deployment of ICTs in the Spanish general state administration. These digital governance changes will help address existing inefficiencies created by insufficient integration within and across levels of government and will foster joint planning in the ICT domain. Nevertheless, it will be very important to maintain a clear balance between the intention to centralise decisions to achieve better economies of scale, rationalisation and synergies and the need to spur co-ordination. The two are often considered as alternative options, and they raise resistance within the administra-

tions, while they can be seen as two different sides of the same coin. In order to overcome possible conflicts, it will be pivotal to ensure the right level of communication and foster a change in the organisational culture: successful digital government strategies and delivery of results require continuous knowledge sharing and a sense of joint ownership and collective commitment across all levels of the administration.

Finally, ensuring uptake of newly developed ICT services from a high number of citizens, businesses and local levels of government will be essential to reap the benefits of effective and efficient implementation. This will require training, skills development and a communications plan on new available services. Furthermore, in order to increase the uptake of services inside and outside the administration, the Government could consider making the use of some digital services mandatory or developing services and content more relevant to those segments of the population which appear to be less active in interacting with governments online, e.g. the youngsters. The Government has required advanced entities, such as the National Tax Administration Agency (Agencia Española de la Administración Tributaria, AEAT) to use common ICT infrastructures. These are good experiences that could be tested to other key sectors (e.g. Social Security, traffic administration) to maximise the impact of the investments made so far. ✳