



Insights Capture with



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Observatory of
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2020 After Shock Dialogue Network – Event report

About this document

The COVID-19 coronavirus crisis of 2020 has been a significant shock to governments, societies and economies. The OECD, through its Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, has collaborated with like-minded organisations and conveners to capture key insights from relevant events to inform global discussions about the crisis, its aftermath and the implications for governments and their roles.



This event report is one of a series of reports developed through this [2020 After Shock Dialogues Network](#). This will help inform, among other things and events, the discussions at Government After Shock on 17-18 November 2020.

It provides an overview of some of the key messages, insights and take-aways from a series of interactive webinars titled 'Reimagining Government', which were facilitated between May and August 2020 by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and the Centre for Public Impact. This event report has been developed collaboratively between ANZSOG, the Centre for Public Impact and the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation.

A high-level view of the Reimagining Government event series

The [Reimagining Government series](#) comprised seven interactive webinars, exploring a range of topics under the concept of the '[Enablement Paradigm](#)', such as thinking in systems, putting relationships first, sharing power, leading with humility and reorienting to learning.

Trust in government across the world has been in decline, as has the faith of citizens in their governments' ability to solve complex 21st-century challenges such as globalisation, climate change and crises such as COVID-19. One explanation for this decline could be that politics and governments remain structured in ways that reflect the values and mindset of an industrial era, when the world looked very different from what it does now.

Based on the view that existing models of government need reimagining, the series explored a model of government that sees its role as moving beyond existing command and control paradigms to become an enabler of citizens and communities. The series brought together leading thinkers, academics and leaders to explore these principles more closely, particularly in the context of the challenges and opportunities afforded by the COVID-19 crisis.

What is the relationship of the Reimagining Government series to the crisis?

The COVID-19 pandemic has put enormous pressures on governments, while simultaneously demonstrating the need for strong governance and leadership to confront a global crisis. As well as being a personal tragedy for many, and an unprecedented challenge for communities and governments across the world, the crisis provides an opportunity to re-think how governments serve

their citizens. In light of this paradox, the series was deliberately optimistic seeking to inspire and “put a fire in people’s bellies”. It was designed to help connect and inform people of how the COVID-19 crisis has offered both opportunities and acted as catalyst for change, and highlight the different pockets where new models of government are being demonstrated.

What was the focus of the Reimagining Government series?

The series explored a vision of government founded on three beliefs:

- most of the challenges we face as a society are complex
- the quality of human relationships matters a great deal
- progress is best achieved through experimentation and learning.

What were some of the highlights or points of reflection?

Fear of failure

- People are overwhelmingly positive about these new models of government, but there are some entrenched reasons why some of these new models are not being taken up more. There is a widespread, deep-seated fear of risk and it is very difficult in the public sector to accept (or admit) that you have failed at something. This concern is reinforced by experience within the system. “You get 98% right, but it is the 2% that will kill you”. There are no incentives for being upfront about failures and mistakes.
- A very small number of people might do something wrong, but then that will be the only thing spoken about, and that encourages a command and control approach seeking to reduce the possibility of outliers, but command and control is often not an appropriate strategy.
- These issues contribute to a culture of fear and risk aversion – regarding media feedback, from public sector departments and ministries towards the offices of their own ministers, and towards the leadership within departments from staff. One panellist stated, to much acclaim, that “risk is something to be acknowledge and managed, not avoided!”

Complexity

- There is a tendency for all of us to “know” the problem and to know that it exists or is caused by somewhere else in the system, rather than seeing it (and ourselves) as part of an interdependent system.
- There are complicated elements within complex systems that make it harder to understand and know when to switch between complicated and complex problem mindsets and strategies (for instance, when you need to follow the rules and when there needs to be autonomy and room to experiment).
- There is an inherent tension between following instructions and autonomy. Institutions find it hard to balance these competing mindsets at scale, particularly around crisis situations/high profile/key priority areas where scrutiny or the risk/cost of failure is highest.
- It is difficult for policy discussions to “break-out” of the policy and political circles and truly engage the media in communicating the complexity and what is truly known and what is not. The media is often not directly in the conversation.

Scaling innovation and change

- Great things happen within the public sector, and they are regularly demonstrated and discussed, but there is a lack of understanding, or drive, or ability to expand or scale up and replicated good practices.

- There have been huge changes to how the public sector is working and doing things, but how can it be taken to the next stage?

What were some of the key take-aways or messages that you want others to know?

- One of the challenges of implementing a paradigm shift like this is that it is itself a wicked problem. Taking an outcomes-based approach is hard when we are still not very sophisticated in identifying the outcomes we want. Also, outcomes-based approaches come with their own challenges and can result in KPI/evaluation-driven policy and programmes, which sometimes then lose sign of the initial problem that we are trying to solve.
- It is difficult to break down the silos between different parts of the public sector unless you take a systems view/undertake systems thinking, but equally, it is hard to take a systems view/do systems thinking when you are working as part of a silo in a fragmented system.
- A shift in our models for government and the public sector will involve every part of the system. Everyone has a role to play in this shift to a new understanding and way of doing government, in improving outcomes.
- A shift to a more enabling kind of government requires a different way of understanding what success looks like and combining qualitative and quantitative evidence. It requires a much higher regard for different forms of insight and evidence. Evaluation needs to be part of the design process, but the process should not be evaluation-led.
- The COVID-19 crisis is facilitating cultural change – for instance, seeing senior leaders engaging through webinars.
- This is an opportunity to go beyond rhetoric now, to use the sense of greater trust in government, greater bipartisanship and increased tolerance for mistakes and failure, to make the shifts to the new approaches and models of government that have been and are being talked about. There is an opportunity to experiment at both a leadership and operational level.

What would you add to the three ‘Government After Shock’ questions?

What do we need to leave behind (both from before and during the crisis)?	What do we want to keep (both from before and during the crisis)?	What should we do differently?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need (within the public sector) to be right and certain about all things • Letting go of power and the need to control • The blame game • Siloed design and decision making – there’s really no excuse in an increasingly interconnected world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance and tolerance of being able to say “we don’t know and we’ll find out” • During the crisis there has been a letting go by government and a stepping up by community – how to hold on to that shifting dynamic from the crisis • The connection between the community and government • The appreciation and understanding that everything is linked and the connections from within the crisis between different 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need to create a culture where we can own, fix and learn from mistakes • We need to be better able to navigate between complicated and complex problems, and help people understand the difference between the two and what to do for each.

	<p>policy domains and the demonstrations of thinking and acting across silos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The embracing of technology that has occurred during the crisis • The decreased partisanship during the crisis and banding together to get things done • Cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships that have emerged during the crisis. 	
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What do we need to keep talking about?

- How can these new ideas, approaches and models of government be made applicable for people in their day-to-day work?
- What are the qualities needed to enable and facilitate these new behaviours and how can they be encouraged?
- What do these new paradigms and perspectives entail for each of us as practitioners, leaders and knowledge generators? What are the personal qualities needed to enact this paradigm?
- When is command and control appropriate and necessary, and when can and should more devolved and enabling approaches be used?
- How do we change the dominant cultures of fear of mistakes and risk aversion and allow people the space and opportunity to fail when it is needed? How do we manage risk rather than seeking to avoid it?
- How can organisations and institutions and practitioners switch, in a moment/quickly, between complicated and complex problems?
- How do we measure the new ways of doing government?
- How do we move beyond the need to adapt and innovate that this crisis has provided and take it further to fix problems?

What advice could be given to others undertaking something similar?

- The participatory nature of online events can be great. Two big benefits are the ability to have access to speakers from elsewhere in the world for short events that would not have been possible otherwise, and the mixing of different perspectives and experiences that you might not get at an in-person event.
- Breakout rooms and opportunities for participants to discuss and share with each other can be highly valuable, however it is important to ensure that people do not feel obligated to participate in them, and that it is alright to leave and come back when the main discussion/event resumes. This should be signalled up-front, otherwise participants may disconnect before the end. People come with differing levels of engagement, and that's okay.
- Online chat can be terrific for conversations and making connections.
- It is valuable to ensure that the events match the ethos of the subjects and perspectives being discussed, so that the principles (e.g. humility and learning) are embodied in the structure and not just the content.
- Every event should be designed and regarded as an opportunity to learn, both as individuals and for organisations.

- A knowledgeable and expert moderator is very important, particularly for an online format.
- Always over-subscribe an online event, particularly if it is free. Dropoff is significant and registrations are no indicator of attendance!

Thank you and further information

Thank you to James Button, Daniel Gray, Bridget Nurre Jennions, Simon Kent and Thea Snow for sharing their insights and experiences of the series. Further information about the Reimagining Government series, including recordings of the webinars, can be found at <https://www.anzsog.edu.au/resource-library/resources-tlss/reimagining-government>.