

The government we need

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, we are only just beginning to contemplate - let alone understand - its long-term impact. Recent events in the US remind us that multiple crises will inevitably unfold and intersect - and that they will hit our most vulnerable communities the hardest.

It's hard to predict the future, but one thing we do know is that these events have put every government on the planet in the spotlight. And whether one believes in small government or big government, most of us have renewed our appreciation for effective government, whatever its size.

Every government has been handed the same assignment for the next 3 years and beyond: Protect people (all of them) as you respond to the virus. Support society (all parts of it!) to manage through the years before a vaccine or treatment is available. And lead a recovery and rebuilding that brings us back stronger, more just, and more equitable than we were before. The work will continue for years, and everyone in government is attending to it as the top priority right now.

This begs the question: what has the crisis taught us about what effective government looks like during this time? What capabilities does government need to build for now and for the future?

The challenge we face

There is often a debate when it's time to make a public investment. Whether the investor is government itself or a funder with public purpose, the question arises: should we keep spending on individual sectors and programs within them - so-called "vertical" investments? Or should we invest in the "horizontal" capacity of government itself - to bring these sectors and programs together, to manage toward cross-sectoral outcomes, and to build and strengthen the delivery system that will get it done?

We ultimately need both, but we are more reluctant to invest horizontally. It is harder to justify spending taxpayer money on the systems of government - agencies, ministries, civil servants, and so on - than it is to spend directly on programs, the front line workers who deliver them, the experts who design them, and the citizens and residents who benefit. Vertical investments are simpler and offer a clearer path to a return, so they get more support. And when government capacity suffers as a result, the prospect of horizontal investment can feel like throwing good money after bad (or none at all).

The crisis has forced us to rethink this. It has taught us four things:

- **Government has a unique role:** Only government can decide what the goal of COVID-19 response (and eventual recovery) is. Only government can rally the public around that vision. Only government can coordinate the market and safeguard access to essential goods and services. And as we are seeing, governments that embraced this role early on have seen some initial successes, while governments that devolved responsibility have not. This trend will accelerate as governments move from response to recovery.
- **The challenge is interdisciplinary:** So much of the work ahead has no blueprint or roadmap. It will force sectors and agencies to work together in ways they never have before. To take just a few examples, think of school and university systems working with public health agencies to ensure student safety; public workforces and private infrastructure repurposing to protect the food supply; and digital/IT divisions working with every agency to fundamentally change the way they work. Under these circumstances, we risk a failure of imagination by relying on sector-specific expertise alone. In addition to experts, we also need flexible, adaptive leaders and managers who can understand multiple disciplines, draw the connections between them, and reimagine how these systems will work together to achieve the goals of response and recovery.
- **Inclusion is essential:** The pandemic is exacerbating power and wealth imbalances that have been growing for decades. As a result, most of us in a position to support or lead governments at this time do not come from (or even share experiences with) the communities that need the most support. This gap – and the dissonance it creates – must be bridged in the outcomes and policies governments prioritize, the processes they use to make those choices, and the operational realities of implementation.
- **The whole delivery chain matters:** Front line public service delivery will always be critical. We've never been more aware of the role that nurses, doctors, teachers, and first responders play in protecting our lives and livelihoods. But the systems that support them – yes, including the “bureaucrats” at the center – are just as important. Without them, there is no one tracking progress on the whole, learning from and spreading local innovations, identifying and solving systemic challenges, and ensuring that implementation happens with quality and at scale. Political leaders who want these things but can't get them are learning this now, to their frustration.

The pandemic brings a reckoning for how we think about government. If COVID-19 has taught us one thing, it is that we all have a stake in building a more capable state. Put another way, we are all horizontal investors now.

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Figure 1 lists six skills that we believe governments will need to learn (or relearn) to meet the challenges of the current moment and beyond. Many are already building these capabilities – but all will need them eventually.

Figure 1: Six skills governments will need to learn (or relearn)

Governments must learn to...	This means...
Lead with moral purpose (a lost art)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining public value with measurable outcomes and goals • Holding the whole of government accountable for the goals • Innovating and continuously improving to achieve the goals • Communicating clearly about the goals
Value equity (in everything)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing simultaneously on equitable goals, policies, resources, and processes for decision-making • Centering service design on marginalized communities • Identifying and removing inequities in the systems we rebuild
Build coalitions (the work must have legitimacy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating dialogue between a diverse range of viewpoints inside and outside government • Engaging authentically • Shaping the goals and agenda accordingly • Moving from narrow majorities to broad consensus
Work across disciplines (avoid failures of imagination)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respecting expertise but interrogating it too • Understanding and moving flexibly across disciplines • Seeing and forging connections between sectors • Reinventing the delivery chain
Take calculated risks (rather than none at all)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting public value into the cost-benefit analysis • Having an acceptable rate of failure greater than zero • Insourcing and rewarding smart risk-taking
Deliver (move the numbers that matter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing progress regularly and systematically • Confronting the brutal facts about failures • Gathering evidence from the front line • Making course corrections in real time

What are the practical steps that government can take to do this? We have four to recommend:

- **Take stock of (and build on) current strengths:** Most governments are at least doing some of these things, in some places, some of the time. Some are doing more than that. Understanding your own bright spots (and the corresponding gaps and challenges) is an important first step. Who are the early heroes of your crisis response – the ones who are showing up and working differently? How can you elevate, spread, and systematize what they do?
- **Value these skills in public servants:** Do your systems for hiring, training, managing, and rewarding people emphasize these capabilities? Do they emphasize equity? What are the top 1-2 changes you could make to shift in this direction right now? For many leaders, better training and capacity-building will be a part of the solution. Procure it at first if you have to, but aim to make it something that is internal, cultural, and self-sustaining over the long term.
- **Build equity into the way government works:** Governments will need to ground this work in a shared language, vision, and goals for a more equitable society. These can only be developed through deep engagement with the communities you serve. What would it take to move from participation to inclusion to representation for these communities in your government? How can their perspectives anchor decision-making, goal-setting, and the way systems are rebuilt?
- **Let practice lead policy:** Many of these things can be done without changing any formal law or policy (at least at first). Eventually, you will want to codify the practices that work best. In particular, policy can make the biggest difference in safeguarding equity, empowering public servants to take smart risks in pursuit of public value, rewarding them for the right things, and protecting them when some bets don't pay off.

Governments that build these capabilities will be better equipped to respond to the current crisis. Just as important, they will be ready to lead recovery and more resilient to future challenges.