



Adaptive bureaucracies?

Enabling adaptation in public bureaucracies

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A teal circular icon containing the text 'Key messages' in white.

Key messages

- To effectively address the complex challenges they face, public bureaucracies often need to work adaptively: testing, learning and iterating policies, not just implementing pre-determined plans. But bureaucracies' own processes, structures and incentives can frequently be major barriers to adaptation. This paper explores a range of organisations that have attempted to be less bureaucratic and more adaptive.
- A combination of political and organisational factors enables more adaptive practice. Leadership (bureaucratic or political) that is committed to working more adaptively is almost always necessary. This is supported by more decentralised organisational structures that allow greater autonomy for bureaucrats to exercise professional judgement in their day-to-day work.
- Leaders create space for adaptive practice by reforming organisational processes. Policies are deliberately designed to generate learning and adapt accordingly as they are implemented, and this experimentation is both structured and incentivised. Accountability processes incentivise performance without defining results too narrowly, and justifying decisions often takes precedence over reporting on results metrics.
- However, adaptation within bureaucracies has its limits. Policy experimentation cannot come at the expense of consistent delivery of public services. While evidence points to the benefits of more discretion for individual bureaucrats, this also needs to be balanced with other important considerations, including concerns around rent-seeking and accountability. Adaptive practice is commonly found in small pockets of bureaucracies and further exploration of the degree to which it is scalable would be valuable.



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Executive summary

To effectively address the complex challenges they face, public bureaucracies often need to do more than implement pre-determined plans. They need to work adaptively: testing different policies to see what works well, less well and why, and to continually learn and iterate policies accordingly. Yet often these bureaucracies are too bureaucratic to work in these ways: their own processes, structures and incentives are major barriers to adaptation.

This paper explores public bureaucracies across a range of sectors that have attempted to work more adaptively. These examples are diverse and not strictly comparable – they range from China’s widespread policy experimentation from the 1980s onwards to Plymouth City Council’s customised approach to providing services for vulnerable adults. By exploring these experiences in line with relevant literature on public administration, this paper offers initial reflections on what might constitute an ‘adaptive bureaucracy’. In particular, the paper explores the circumstances under which more adaptive organisations emerge; the institutional architecture they use to enable adaptation; and the trade-offs and challenges bureaucracies face in the process. By way of conclusion, the paper suggests areas for future research on adaptation in public bureaucracies.

The examples analysed in this paper suggest that a combination of political and organisational factors is important in enabling adaptation. Leadership (bureaucratic or political) that is committed to working more adaptively – which may arise from political expediency or in response to crisis – is almost

always necessary. But beyond leadership, certain organisational features appear to be more conducive to adaptation. This includes, most notably, a more decentralised organisational structure that allows greater autonomy for mid-level bureaucratic managers and frontline bureaucrats to exercise professional judgement in their day-to-day work.

Leaders can create space for adaptive practice by reforming the institutional architecture through which organisations work: how they design and implement policies; report results; contract and procure services; and recruit and incentivise staff.

Some common features of an adaptive institutional architecture emerge across the variety of cases explored here:

- Policies are explicitly designed to generate learning and adapt to it during implementation.
- Policy experimentation is both structured and incentivised.
- Contracting emphasises a relational approach, building trust and partnerships, and specifying principles rather than specific activities.
- Accountability processes incentivise performance without defining results too narrowly.
- Justifying why decisions are made is often prioritised over results metrics.
- An informal culture of deliberation and learning can be a more powerful driver of adaptation than formal procedures.

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, adaptive and politically smart working has gained increased prominence among international development practitioners. These approaches stem from a recognition that development challenges are often complex, intractable and not amenable to easy technical solutions or blueprints. The implication is that tackling these complex challenges effectively demands that development agencies adopt a different way of working.¹

Initiatives for more adaptive and politically smart ways of working come under various headings, including ‘doing development differently’, ‘thinking and working politically’, and ‘problem-driven iterative adaptation’ (Pett, 2020). At their initial stages these initiatives have focused on making the case for more adaptive and politically smart development programmes, projects or interventions and documenting how these work (see for example Booth, 2014; 2018; Booth and Chambers, 2014; Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Christie and Green, 2018; Laws, 2018; Obrecht, 2018; Punton and Burge, 2018), or they have worked with individual teams and reform efforts within public-sector bureaucracies (Andrews et al., 2017).

In the last decade, organisations’ own processes, structures and incentives have been increasingly recognised as impeding more widespread adoption of these ways of working. Work has therefore started to look beyond individual cases of adaptive programmes or reform efforts to the organisations within which they are situated. The LearnAdapt programme, a collaboration between the former United Kingdom Department for

International Development (DFID), ODI, Brink, and Feedback Labs, is one such example. The programme aims to help make organisational systems and processes within DFID (now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)) fit for adaptive management, both at the centre and at the Country Office level.

This issue is not relevant only to international aid donors. Many public-sector bureaucracies, whether their focus is on housing, education or international development, are dealing with complex challenges that are also deeply political. In looking at organisational structures and processes, there is a great opportunity to learn from different public bureaucracies that have sought to address complex public policy challenges² through more adaptive ways of working. This research can also build on similar critiques in the literature on public administration, such as the growing questioning of New Public Management’s emphasis on ‘markets, managers and measurement’ (Abercrombie et al., 2015; Boulton et al., 2015; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2015; Feldman and Khademian, 2001; Lowe and Wilson, 2015).

Although they are more commonly associated with rigidity and red tape, this paper explores how public bureaucracies across a range of sectors have attempted to be adaptive in how they work. It offers initial reflections on the circumstances under which these more adaptive organisations have emerged; the bureaucratic processes that they use to encourage adaptation; and the trade-offs and challenges they face in working adaptively. It is hoped that these reflections, albeit partial and initial, will be useful to those looking to

1 This recognition is not new (see for example Rondinelli, 1982), but has more recently become increasingly prominent in donor agencies.

2 This paper understands complex policy issues as those that involve networks of different actors with differing incentives, and where the overall outcomes desired are beyond the control of any one actor (see Lowe and Plimmer, 2019). Hence this covers many, perhaps most, aspects of public policy.

build more adaptive organisations (beyond individual initiatives) in international development or elsewhere in the public sector, as well as contributing to ongoing debates and research on adaptive management.

This paper is organised as follows. After a discussion of the methodology, Chapter 2 sets out a definition of adaptation in public bureaucracies and summarises the cases. Chapter 3 describes the political and organisational factors that enabled more adaptive practice to emerge, and Chapter 4 examines the institutional architecture through which the cases have supported and protected the space for adaptation. Chapter 5 reflects on the potential limitations and trade-offs of adaptation in bureaucracies, and concludes with suggested areas for future research on adaptive bureaucracies.

1.1 Methodology

A literature review identified a selection of bureaucracies that have been documented as working in more adaptive ways,³ and other public administration literature that explores the space for adaptation in the public sector.

First, article titles and abstracts of all articles published in the journal *Public Administration and Development* since 1980 were reviewed, as well as searches on Google Scholar.⁴ A snowballing method was followed to identify further relevant literature. In addition, expert suggestions, especially relevant to UK examples, were drawn from an informal working group on ‘Complexity and Whitehall’ (comprising researchers, civil servants and other stakeholders). For some of the examples, documentation was supplemented with interviews with staff members. This yielded a plethora of examples, ranging from Plymouth

Council’s customised approach to commissioning services for vulnerable adults to the widespread authorised policy experimentation across the Chinese state.

This paper seeks to address the following overarching questions:

- What do we mean by adaptive bureaucracy?
- In what circumstances does more adaptive bureaucratic practice emerge?
- What kinds of organisational structures, personnel and formal and informal institutions are used to support adaptation?

The paper presents some analytical reflections based on the selected cases and the relevant literature in order to identify points of commonality and difference in the variety of approaches used, and to tease out core principles and challenges. It does not claim to make a rigorous comparison between the chosen examples or to offer definitive answers to the above questions, let alone propose any universal model of an ‘adaptive bureaucracy’.

In the examples analysed here, most of the literature also argues that adaptive working in the public sector led to improvements. While the cumulative case may be persuasive, albeit inconclusive, the question of whether adaptive bureaucracies perform more effectively is beyond the scope of this paper. Most of the literature relies on individual case studies and impressionistic evidence, and future research could usefully address this question more rigorously. Nonetheless, by drawing out reflections from a diverse range of bureaucracies that have attempted to be more adaptive, the paper aims to inform thinking on what processes and structures leaders might adopt to make their organisations more adaptive.

3 These examples were identified based on the definition set out in Chapter 2. The literature on the examples refers to their innovative and/or alternative ways of working, but not necessarily using the language of adaptivity.

4 Search terms included ‘policy experimentation’, ‘experimentalist governance’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘public administration’, ‘discretion’ and ‘public administration’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘public administration’, and ‘complexity’ and ‘public administration’.

2 Defining adaptive bureaucracies

We seldom think of bureaucracies as being able to adapt to change. Large public bureaucracies are associated with burdensome processes, red tape, rigid systems and inertia. The reality may, however, be different. The literature on public administration has long documented that individual bureaucrats have discretion to tailor policies and work within and around administrative rules and procedures (Lipsky, 1980). Some public organisations also aim to be adaptive, emphasising ongoing learning and flexibility over adherence to rigid plans and rules. These are the organisations this paper explores.

Pett (2020: 8) describes adaptive approaches as those that ‘reject linear planning and execution’ and instead ‘work in cycles of

testing, learning and adaptation’. Applied to public-sector bureaucracies, an adaptive approach can be defined as an intentionally incremental policy process, where policies are designed to be tailored and iterated as they are implemented, based on ongoing learning. This definition captures adaptation whether it occurs through structured policy experiments or trials (see Heilmann, 2008), or through frontline bureaucrats authorised to customise the provision of services (see Lipsky, 1980). Table 1 presents a schematic summary of the cases this paper explores: the features of an adaptive approach they demonstrate and some of the processes, structures and other factors that enabled a more adaptive approach.

Table 1 Overview of cases explored

Case	Adaptive features	Enabling factors for adaptation	Source(s)
Gateshead Local Authority, UK	Bespoke support services (e.g. for people facing homelessness) adapted to individual needs based on professional judgement of frontline staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generalist staff • De-emphasise key performance indicators • Prioritise individual judgement over long processes of referrals and signposting 	Lowe and Plimmer (2019)
Plymouth City Council, UK	Rather than commissioning specified services for vulnerable adults, the council contracted relevant organisations to learn and collaborate to offer more tailored support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning-based outcome measures • Alliance contracting used where service providers shared mutual accountability • Integrated funding for service providers 	ibid.
Nesta 100 Day Challenges, UK	Structured 100-day process where frontline staff collaborate to address complex challenges in UK health and the care sector and are granted freedom to test and develop new ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders focus on ‘permissioning’ – granting space for frontline staff to experiment • Intensive period of action with ambitious goals 	Nesta (n.d.)
Government Digital Service, UK	Used agile design principles to digitise government services and improve the main government website.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of minimum viable products that are tested with clients • Rapid timeline • Senior staff who understand and support agile ways of working 	GOV.UK (2019); Government Digital Service (2020)

Table 1 Overview of cases explored (continued)

Case	Adaptive features	Enabling factors for adaptation	Source(s)
Experimental Finland	A unit established in the Prime Minister's Office to promote an experimental culture and run national and regional government-led policy trials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime minister with business background intending to reform bureaucracy and promote experimentation • Variety of policy experiments, some carefully designed and others more rapid and emergent 	PMO (2017); Hokkanen and Kotipelto (2018); Young (2019); interviews with staff
Singapore	Leadership led push for public sector to embrace complexity and work adaptively, including policy pilots, public consultations and designated experimental areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schemes and awards for the 'continued improvement' of the civil service • Processes of horizon scanning and scenario planning • Leadership embraces complexity theory and design thinking 	Neo et al. (2007); Ho (2012); Lee et al. (2017); Chang and Jalees (2018)
China, reform-era economic policy (national and sub-national)	Local jurisdictions delegated broad discretionary powers to improvise and tailor policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberately vague policy directives to allow space for sub-national experimentation • Competition among bureaucrats based on high-level quantifiable outcome targets • Provisional national-level regulations given trial implementation periods 	Heilmann (2008); Ang (2016)
Organised Crime Field Lab, The Netherlands	Lab established as an environment for experimentation and learning to address 'wicked' crime problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-structured experimental process, with templates for problem definition, prototyping and implementation plans • Reporting mechanisms allow for various interpretations of progress 	Waardenburg et al. (2020)
Department of Labour Inspection (in parts), Brazil	Certain parts of the department managed inspections in an 'experimental' (rather than the New Public Management) approach, working collaboratively with inspected firms and tailoring procedures by sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress reports allowing justification through non-quantifiable results • Regular interactions with relevant stakeholders, including co-designing strategies 	Pires (2011)
Child Protective Services, Alabama and Utah, US	Reforms to child protection services to support flexible and customised responses and more collaborative and context-specific decision-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central administration articulates general goals, but frontline offices have broad discretion • Focus on principles for service delivery over rules • Accountability through peer review, and norm that decisions must be documented and articulated 	Noonan et al. (2008); Pires (2011)
Countering Human Trafficking, The Netherlands	Problem-oriented approach to addressing conditions enabling trafficking, not relying solely on prosecution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration with other public institutions • Rethinking output indicators (beyond conviction rates) • New processes for collecting and analysing different sources of data 	Mayne et al. (2019)
Primary education, Himachal Pradesh, India	A deliberative model of service delivery, encouraging bureaucrats to 'work collectively and adapt policies to local contexts' and 'promoting the participation of citizens and civic agencies'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic norms that encourage deliberation over strict adherence to rules • Senior staff valuing input of frontline staff • Citizen and civic agencies incorporated in implementation 	Mangla (2015)
European Endowment for Democracy	Flexible and politically smart support to pro-democracy organisations, which aims to embrace risk and support rapid responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick funding approval process • Monitoring plan used as living document; results defined in discussion with grantees • Broad results indicators at organisational level 	Interviews with staff
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	A set of principles on strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management incorporated into the cycle for designing and implementing development programmes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational tools and guidance on applying adaptive management • Case competition to promote adaptive ways of working and learn from practice • Internal initiative to identify 'adaptive champions' 	USAID Learning Lab (2015; 2017); Sharp and Wild (2020)
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)	Management of development programmes that emphasises trust, ongoing learning and adapting to changed conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management champions of agile working • Culture of autonomy and partner-led development, through flexible funding arrangements • 'Change managers' recruited with mandate to promote adaptive working 	Itad (2018); interviews with staff

3 What enables bureaucracies to be adaptive?

The first question this paper explores is what makes it more likely that adaptive practice will emerge within bureaucracies. A reading of the examples identified, alongside other literature on public administration (e.g. Lipsky, 1980; Tandler, 1997; Feldman and Khademanian, 2001; Rasul and Rogger, 2017; Sharp and Harrison, 2020), suggests that a range of political factors and organisational features shape the context for adaptation.

3.1 Political factors

Political factors refer to the power dynamics and incentives that lead bureaucratic and political leaders to authorise or encourage more adaptation and experimentation. Unsurprisingly, in nearly every case, there was a leader or group of leaders committed to more adaptive practice. This leadership needs to believe in a different vision of how to do things and to be persistent in pursuing this, creating and protecting the space to be more adaptive.

In the Chinese case, for example, the central government provides policy direction and the space for innovation, within which it encourages local governments to develop innovative policy solutions. Heilmann (2008: 10) describes how ‘the dynamics of the experimental process rest precisely’ on the interplay between local bottom-up initiative, and top-down central sponsorship, with the centre authorising local experimentation, and then taking up locally generated innovations.

To allow such space for experimentation also requires confidence that national priorities will be taken seriously at sub-national levels. Harrison and Kostka (2014), for example, compare

central government efforts to promote energy efficiency measures in China and India, and find that it was this confidence that enabled the Chinese government to be less interventionist in their implementation.

To be operational at some degree of scale, adaptivity thus needs to be supported by senior authority. But the more challenging question is what incentivises this kind of leadership. Why do some leaders support and promote experimentation, or ‘direct improvisation’ (Ang, 2016)? Our cases provide several possible answers, albeit not conclusively supporting any.

One reading of the Chinese case is that experimentation stems from political expediency. Experiments and reform efforts can provide useful opportunities for leaders to promote their supporters. For example, Deng Xiaoping was able to use the slow progress of the Xiamen Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to promote more enthusiastic supporters of the reform (Zeng, 2015). Maintaining a degree of distance from local pilots can also be politically expedient. As well as encouraging local experimentation, this distance ‘washes the central government’s hands entirely of responsibility for potential reform failure’ (ibid: 341). The lack of electoral cycles may also provide more space for experimentation, with longer timeframes and fewer risks to politicians.

More adaptive practice can also emerge from a state of crisis or because the status quo is no longer sustainable. In the UK, many local authorities moved towards a more collaborative and tailored approach to service delivery in response to budget cuts and austerity (Lowe and Plimmer, 2019). Blundell et al. (2019: 18)

describe how ‘it is partly financial pressures from prolonged austerity that resulted in citizens becoming “assets” in public service delivery’.

Championing adaptation is not easy, and elements of political expediency should not detract from the individual agency and commitment of public-sector leaders in our cases. Political leaders and senior bureaucratic managers tend to be more comfortable with certainty, as highlighted in the interviews undertaken by Bailey and Lloyd (2016) with those involved in the UK policy lab:

... you have to be very careful when you say to a Minister ‘none of these things have worked before, we don’t really know exactly what to do now, and we’ll have to bring in other people to help us find a solution’. Because as an official you want to be able to give options and show that you know what you’re doing. And actually being able to say ‘we’re in a space where there’s a lot of ambiguity, and we’re going to dwell in that ambiguity, and I want you to give me time to do that.’ That’s quite tricky.

Beyond commitment to adaptation, the form in which this commitment is institutionalised in directives and processes is also important. As Neo et al. (2007: 468) write about Singapore: ‘Leaders achieve results not just by their own intellect, charisma, choices and effort, but by building systems, structures and processes that enable organizations to continue to sustain effort and performance long beyond their tenure’. It can be easy even for well-intentioned leadership to be too prescriptive and allow too little space for adaptation. Chapter 4 describes some of the specific approaches used to encourage adaptation.

3.2 Organisational factors

Organisational factors refer to the internal characteristics of a bureaucracy that are conducive to or impede adaptive practice – of particular relevance are the degree of decentralisation, autonomy and discretion at various organisational levels.

One common feature is an organisational structure that promotes autonomy for

individual bureaucrats. Recent literature on public administration has explored the value of bureaucratic autonomy for public-sector performance in general. For example, Rasul and Rogger (2017) studied 4,700 Nigerian public-sector projects and found that allowing greater autonomy to mid-level bureaucrats increased project completion. This study was later replicated across the Ghanaian civil service with the same results (Rasul et al., 2017). It remains unclear how exactly greater autonomy improves bureaucratic performance (Sharp and Harrison, 2020).

One suggestion is that bureaucrats are motivated by autonomy (Cummings, 2015; Rogger, 2017). It might also be that autonomy is necessary for effective adaptive practice. In general, mid-level managers will probably be key in protecting space for adaptation (Sharp and Harrison, 2020). Feldman and Khademian (2001) highlight that managers will always need to balance flexibility and accountability, and the space for adaptation depends on how well they do so.

Autonomy is also important for frontline bureaucrats in direct contact with the public, to whom they are the face of the state (Lipsky, 1980). Our cases suggested that using and promoting these bureaucrats’ ‘embeddedness’ and engagement with the people they are serving can help enable adaptive practice. In the Brazilian state of Ceará, Tandler (1997) describes how frontline bureaucrats in the more effective agencies customised their services to individual needs. This was partly explained by the closeness of these bureaucrats to the public they served; the bureaucrats wanting ‘to live up to the new trust placed in them by their clients and citizens in general’ (ibid: 15).

Individual autonomy is, then, supported by a more decentralised organisational structure. In his early critique of control-oriented development practice, Rondinelli (1982: 66) argued that:

programs should be administered through modified bureaucracies that can be released from conventional central controls to extend their reach in unconventional ways. Local authorities often have linkages of interaction with local groups that central bureaucracies do not know about and cannot reach.

Similarly, the flat and decentralised arrangement of the Singapore Civil Service ('15 ministries and over 60 statutory boards, each with its own mission and functions') 'gives individual agencies the autonomy to act fast, and the freedom to innovate', according to Peter Ho, head of the Singapore Civil Service, quoted in Neo et al. (2007: 42). Chinese bureaucracy is also highly decentralised with a strong commitment, at least in some policy domains, to avoiding 'one size fits all' policy. Its development is thus pursued across sub-national bureaucracies rather than being concentrated in a handful of powerful central ministries (Husain, 2015). This creates a wide range of bureaucrats being able to exercise considerable discretion, which can be further encouraged.

In other cases, public-sector reforms have been motivated by a 'fear of discretion' and how it could be used for rent-seeking or personal gain, rather than 'the potential benefits of responsible exercise of discretion' (Pires, 2011: 45). Our examples are often characterised by trust-based, as opposed to contractual, mechanisms to meet the demand for accountability. For example, the study by Blundell et al. (2019: 26) on collaborative approaches in local government in the UK found that 'individuals were asked to take more personal responsibility for their decisions'. Rather than relying on formal rules to guide behaviour, organisations prioritised

good data on clients' needs and the outcomes of decisions, and 'empowered frontline workers and service providers to make what they felt were better informed judgements'. As Hidalgo (2015: 93) argues, trust can be a 'highly efficient mechanism to deter malfeasance [as] it works without the burden of costly paperwork and enforcement procedures'. Nonetheless, it remains critical to understand when autonomy and discretion promote effectiveness and when they might be employed for personal gain.

In summary, a combination of political and organisational factors appears to enable adaptation. There were bureaucratic or political leaders committed to working more adaptively in almost all the examples studied. Such leadership may ultimately rely on the presence of the right individuals, but sometimes political expediency and crisis can generate commitment to reform. Beyond political factors, certain organisations seem more inclined to facilitate adaptation, in particular those allowing more autonomy for mid-level bureaucratic managers and frontline bureaucrats to exercise discretion and professional judgement in their everyday work. Organisations with a more decentralised structure are more conducive to bureaucratic autonomy and so, in turn, adaptation. The following section explores how this commitment to adaptation can be institutionalised in bureaucratic processes.

4 How adaptive bureaucracies work

Although individual bureaucrats might be able to carve out space to work in more adaptive ways, adaptive bureaucracies do not emerge from individual agency alone. They are fostered (or inhibited) by the kinds of structures, systems and processes that guide and shape how organisations operate. This chapter describes the institutional architecture through which our cases supported, enabled or protected space for adaptive practice in four areas:

- how the implementation of policies is planned, designed, achieved and adjusted in response to learning and feedback
- how implementation is procured and contracts managed
- how demands for reporting on results and accountability are met
- how staff are recruited, promoted and managed, as well as general considerations of staff culture.

4.1 Programme design and feedback

Policy design and implementation is at the heart of how government departments function. Although our examples of adaptive practice span multiple policy domains, they share some common principles in terms of the policy process.

First, policies and programmes are often designed to be flexible, responsive and experimental, where ongoing learning becomes a key part of the policy process (Heilmann, 2008). Policies are designed to be adjusted as they are implemented, and there may be no deliberate distinction made between the functions of policy design and implementation (ibid.).

There are various approaches to encourage policy experimentation and iteration. Chinese

policy experimentation took diverse forms: provisional policies whose implementation is trialled before the adoption of formal legislation; limited ‘experimental units’ that pilot projects in specific policy domains; and local jurisdictions delegated broad discretionary powers to experiment with policy, such as the SEZs (ibid.). At a much smaller scale, the Finnish government’s team in the Prime Minister’s Office – Experimental Finland – is mandated to promote an experimental culture across the public sector (PMO, 2017; Hokkanen and Kotipelto, 2018), although it is not yet clear how far an individual unit can achieve cultural change across a whole bureaucracy.

Policy experimentation is not just ‘freewheeling trial and error’ but designed to be purposeful and coordinated (Heilmann, 2008: 3). Leaders of adaptive bureaucracies face a challenge in finding methods that both foster and bound the experimentation, without curtailing the space and flexibility to be able to experiment effectively. One approach China has adopted is the deliberate use of policy directives that are vaguely worded or ambiguous (see Box 1).

At the level of individual initiatives, structured processes (as opposed to directives) are often useful to guide experimentation. The Organised Crime Field Lab in the Netherlands structures the experimental process with suggested questions, and templates for defining the problem, planning implementation and reporting on results (Waardenburg et al., 2020). Challenges of 100 days have been widely adopted around the world and are designed to harness experimentation and innovation from frontline bureaucrats in the urgency to address a defined problem within 100 days.

Box 1 Structuring experimentation in China

Ang (2017: 92) suggests that ‘bureaucratic adaption only works in China when it is bound by rules’ and ‘free-for-all experimentation invites chaos, not adaptability’. If poorly designed, these rules could easily restrict the flexibility to adapt and learn or create disincentives to doing so. It’s important exactly how these rules are structured.

The approach Ang describes is the deliberate use of policy directives with differing levels of specificity. Central political leadership adjusts the degree of clarity in its policy directives to ‘influence the amount of discretion that local agents exercise when implementing different policy goals’ (ibid: 89). Some directives are ‘red lines’ which clearly forbid certain actions (e.g. quotas on the conversion of agricultural land) and others are ‘black lines’ which officially approve particular actions (e.g. permitting rural decollectivisation). In between, there is a large range of deliberately vaguely worded or ambiguous policy directives (‘grey lines’), opening room for local officials to experiment within clear boundaries (ibid: 94). For example, Ang describes how Chinese leadership ‘neither conceived nor approved of [Township and Village Enterprises] at the beginning of reform’, which arose from more ambiguous directives. Initial directives encouraged local communities to be entrepreneurial according to their local conditions, but did not set out how this should happen beyond remaining within certain ‘red lines’. As local experiments with collective enterprises were successful, central policy directives then shifted towards officially sanctioning these approaches.

Finally, many examples place substantial emphasis on incorporating feedback from the general public in policy design and implementation and building mechanisms for policies to adjust to this ongoing learning. For example, e-government reforms have made use of ‘minimum viable products’, which involve developing early-stage products, policies or interventions which can be tested with users to ensure it meets their needs (see Government Digital Service, 2020). Incorporating such feedback also often involves a more participatory approach, paying greater attention to frontline bureaucrats with regular engagement with the public. In Himichal Pradesh, Indian bureaucrats were encouraged to take ‘exposure visits’ to learn more about the needs of the communities they aimed to serve, which enabled effective customisation of services to local needs (Mangla, 2015).

4.2 Procurement and contract management

When government work is outsourced, how these services are procured and contracts designed frames the space for implementation. Hence, getting the procurement and contracting process

right is key to ensuring the ability to adapt. The ‘procurement and contract management tools appropriate for buying “paperclips” – highly commoditised, easily specified goods and services – are not appropriate for commissioning complex support services and front-line human services’ (Sturgess, 2017: 7).

More adaptive organisations often move away from a transactional form of contracting, which relies on enforcement and financial penalties, to more relational contracting, which emphasises trust and personal relationships. Multi-year core funding can better enable providers to respond flexibly to change. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) advocates longer contracts with break clauses to balance flexibility and accountability, rather than relying on heavy-handed compliance and reporting (Itad, 2018). These break clauses enable the funder to terminate a contract if performance is not satisfactory, and can be structured around review points or programme milestones.

Many adaptive procurement processes also embed co-creation, treating contracted suppliers as partners. In the United States, the Department of Children, Youth and Families in Rhode Island restructured its tendering processes

to ask suppliers to propose the programmes they felt would best achieve a range of child welfare outcomes. According to the Government Performance Lab (2019: 3) this approach helps leverage local expertise and enable better matching of families and children to the services they need.

Contracting can also be used to promote co-operation among different service providers. Alliance contracting (pioneered in the offshore oil industry, and now more widely used in Australia and New Zealand) promotes suppliers' collective responsibility for outcomes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; Walsh, 2015). In the UK, local authorities increasingly use alliance contracts to tackle complex social issues. For example, Plymouth City Council tendered an £80 million shared budget through an alliance contract, where relevant organisations supporting vulnerable adults developed a shared response, and shared liability for its performance. The philosophy was to switch from 'buying services' towards supporting organisations to learn and adapt in order to provide more relevant and tailored support (Lowe and Plimmer, 2019: 15) (see Box 2).

It is important in alliance contracts not to pre-define services or outputs too rigidly, which is likely to lead to costly contract amendments down the line. It is preferable to agree on broad parameters and principles, rather than seeking to pin down the time, cost and scope from the outset. For example, the Plymouth City Council joint alliance contract does not specify outputs or outcomes to be achieved, but agreed principles on how the alliance of organisations will function (ibid.).

4.3 Results reporting and accountability

As mentioned earlier, a major challenge is to balance the demands for accountability (especially regarding the use of public money) while ensuring space for adaptation (Feldman and Khademian, 2001). Much has illustrated how processes of upward accountability can, if poorly designed, distort how organisations operate (Lowe and Wilson, 2015; Valters and Whitty, 2017; Centre for Public Impact, 2019). Our examples take different approaches to meeting this dual demand – some focus on

Box 2 Alliance contracting to address substance abuse in York

A commissioner in York, in the UK, used an alliance contracting approach to encourage 'learning by doing' in providing services related to substance abuse: 'coproduction in year one of the contract will provide the basis for testing new ways of working in year two' (Lowe and Plimmer, 2019: 16). Members of the alliance – providers and commissioners – then use this learning and experience to jointly specify years three to seven of the contract.

A key element of a successful alliance contract is to agree on the governing infrastructure, commonly including a joint governing body. These self-developed agreements and processes:

- set out how resources are allocated between the members of the alliance
- oversee delivery
- maintain the desired culture of principles, values and behaviour
- ensure that learning processes are undertaken, and that information about the service and the people who experience it is regularly captured and reflected on (Sanderson et al., 2016; Lowe and Plimmer, 2019: 54).

Lowe and Plimmer (2019) suggest shared principles for this approach to public commissioning to address complex social issues: begin by mapping out the system of interest and organisations, jointly discuss design, and allocate resources to these organisations through an alliance contract in which they cooperate and share joint responsibility. A further test for these approaches will be how they meet sharper demands for accountability, but they appear to offer promise and merit further exploration.

high-level outcome-based results, while others prefer to move away from performance metrics entirely in favour of alternative ways to account for performance.

Quantitative performance metrics are often complemented with or replaced by narrative-based approaches to accountability that focus on articulating how decisions are made. State governments in Alabama and Utah in the US reformed their child protection services to take this approach, with the intention of encouraging services tailored to individual needs. There was greater discretion allowed to frontline caseworkers and less focus on strict rules, but it was emphasised that the caseworkers had to articulate the rationale for their decisions (in line with the guiding principles of the programme). Their rationales are then scrutinised – with intensive case reviews of a random sample – designed to test how well the overall system and approach is operating, not simply to review one individual’s work (see Box 3).

Organisations may also incorporate multiple perspectives in their accountability measures. For example, Gateshead Local Authority moved beyond the conventional metrics of outputs and outcomes to incorporate measures focused on citizens and on frontline bureaucrats (Lowe and Plimmer, 2019), for instance by asking people whether they find the support services are relevant to them. Frontline bureaucrats are asked ‘how easy/difficult was it for me to do the right thing for the person I am trying to help?’, including measures such as the percentage of issues that were solved first time and of actions they felt were valuable or pointless (ibid: 17).

When results metrics are used, they are at a high level, legitimising substantial variation in how ‘results’ are achieved. Reform-era China offers a stark example. In one sense, performance management was very narrow: based on a single, measurable and comparable definition of success – economic development. But while bureaucratic leaders are evaluated according to how well their

Box 3 Quality Service Reviews in Alabama and Utah child protection services

In the Alabama–Utah model of child protection services, the narrative reporting process is known as the Quality Service Review (QSR), which involves a random sample of cases, each of which is treated as a test of how well the overall system is operating. According to Noonan et al. (2008: 557): ‘in a system committed to radical individuation, intensive review of the particularities of an individual case is the most important mode of systemic diagnosis’.

Each case review takes about two days. Colleagues score the case performance, based on interviews with the relevant individuals and those with pertinent information (e.g. the child, family members, professional staff, teachers). For each indicator, suggestive interview questions are provided, but interviews are deliberately semi-structured and questions allow space to explore and explain individual contexts (Noonan et al., 2008). The scores are then discussed between the reviewers and the caseworker (the frontline bureaucrat).

According to Noonan et al. (2008), the Alabama–Utah model has three advantages: first, the peer-review system offers professional development for caseworkers; second, the process of interacting with and assessing the quality of frontline workers across various settings exposes more senior staff to the context-specific nature of the work, and opens up discussions and debates about how to assess quality and apply standards; and finally, the data from the QSR can be used as a diagnostic tool to identify potential issues. Overall, the system places less focus on rules, seeking accountability by emphasising that decisions and decision-making processes must be articulated and documented. In the QSR model, rules are not designed to restrict discretion, which instead is managed by ‘qualitative peer review and by public reporting of monitoring results’ (ibid: 555). Noonan et al. suggest that similar models of accountability could be used by other service-delivery programmes that aim to emphasise the customisation of services and adaptability.

region generates economic development, they are free to experiment with how to achieve this. This creates a very strong performance incentive without being prescriptive (Edin, 2011; Ang, 2016; Mei et al., 2016).

This approach to performance management is not without difficulties, however, not least in how a narrow focus on economic development can have damaging side effects (of environmental degradation, for example). Others are less convinced of the suitability of outcome-based performance management for complex problems; including how it undermines professional judgement and citizen engagement (Centre for Public Impact, 2019: 4) or mistakenly assumes easily measurable outcomes (Lowe and Wilson, 2015). Nonetheless, the Chinese case illustrates the power of an effective performance-based incentive combined with flexibility in how to achieve it – a balance struck in some form by all of the examples studied.

4.4 Staffing and organisational culture

In one of the earliest critiques of relying on traditional management procedures to address complex development problems, Rondinelli (1982: 52) describes how:

the most valuable managerial skill is not necessarily the ability to conform to preconceived project plans or to networking charts and project schedules, but the ability to innovate, experiment, modify, improvise, and lead – talents that are often discouraged or suppressed by rigid designs and centrally controlled management procedures.

Management of adaptive working requires a different set of skills to more conventional programme management. These include the ‘soft’ skills necessary for developing collaborative relationships; the ability and willingness to test and revise assumptions about what works; and the capacity to learn from various sources of relevant knowledge (Mayne et al., 2019: 2). These adaptive approaches to working also tend

to require greater hands-on engagement and management time, which need to be accounted for (Sharp et al., 2019).

Informal elements of organisational culture and norms are essential in driving effective adaptation, often more so than formal rules and procedures. Mangla (2015) compares the norms regarding ways of working in two Indian states: in Himachal Pradesh a deliberative approach that encourages tailoring of policies, and in Uttarakhand a legalistic approach which emphasises adherence to official rules, procedures and hierarchies. Mangla finds that the former led to more effective implementation of policies on universal education.

Also notable in adaptive approaches is the attempt to harness public officials’ intrinsic motivation and public-sector ethos. The emphasis is on trust, discretion and professional judgement. Peer pressure can be a powerful motivator: in the Brazilian Department of Labour Inspections this came from partners who built up positive expectations of inspectors (Pires, 2011), and in the Brazilian state of Ceará from citizens’ trust in frontline bureaucrats (Tendler, 1997). An effective adaptive bureaucracy needs to balance formal accountability processes with fostering the informal norms that encourage performance and ‘mission-driven bureaucrats’ (World Bank, 2019).

Neo et al. (2007) describe in the case of Singapore how expecting civil servants consciously to learn and seek to improve their work is vital to the country’s dynamic governance. It is this organisational culture that enabled adaptive ways of working to become common tacit practice when dealing with emerging policy issues, even without being made an explicit requirement (ibid.). Similarly, in the UK the FCDO emphasises the importance of individual mindsets (including values of curiosity, humility and openness) in supporting trust building, learning and effective adaptation (Proud, 2020). Achieving such an organisational culture change is not easy, nor is explaining how it occurs, although the Singaporean government has made attempts (albeit unproven) to institutionalise its approach to continuous improvement (see Box 4).

Box 4 Fostering continuous self-improvement in Singapore

Much of the adaptivity and innovation in Singapore's civil service is intended to rely on a staff attitude of continuous improvement. This involves bureaucrats who are:

- (i) consciously learning and seeking to apply new ideas and explore different ways of doing their work better, or
- (ii) observing different systems and their outcomes, and incorporating their new learning and knowledge into the system to improve performance, or
- (iii) sensitive to new citizen or customer requirements and learn new knowledge and skills to meet these emerging needs. (Neo et al., 2007: 463)

Processes that foster such a culture include the Staff Suggestion Scheme, Work Improvement Teams (WITs) and Makeathons and Hackathons, all designed to provide opportunities and tools for bureaucrats to suggest improvements in public services. Perhaps even more important is leaders' encouragement for public servants to play this kind of role, and expectations that staff should be involved (Chang and Jalees, 2018). This is complemented by awards, such as the Public Service Innovation Challenge, which bring together bureaucrats in different agencies with the chance to win funding for experiments (and bypass bureaucratic approval processes).

This approach is also linked to the state's intention to be more citizen-oriented. The revamped WITS in 2019 begins with inviting every public agency 'to examine their workplace processes and the citizen's experience when using public services, and then to re-engineer those processes to save time' (ibid.).

5 The limits to adaptation in bureaucracies

This chapter reflects on the potential limitations of adaptation in public bureaucracies and the trade-offs that might be faced in trying to promote it. These insights emerge from the analysis of the case studies as well as the broader literature on bureaucracies.

A useful starting point is to see how our examples compare with the Weberian bureaucratic ideal – which does not leave much space for adaptation. Weber's (1948) seminal theory sees bureaucracies as rule-oriented, dispassionate and impartial, with an emphasis on hierarchy and standardisation. To the extent possible, bureaucracies are controlled and constrained via rules and regulations (Waters and Waters, 2015). Today, as we have seen, this command and control approach to addressing the complex nature of public policy issues is widely disputed (for recent critiques informed by complexity theory see Abercrombie et al., 2015; Boulton et al., 2015; OECD, 2017). Nonetheless, some of the principles Weber identifies remain important to the functioning of bureaucracies in relation to normative goals and practical constraints, suggesting at least four potential limitations and trade-offs to consider in encouraging them to adopt adaptive practice more widely.

First, there are limits to the benefits of experimenting with policy. Public services need to be provided consistently – so experimentation should never be at the expense of fulfilling the core functions. Although China's experimental approach was no doubt successful, it was supported by a narrow focus on economic development. Ang's (2016: 248) study concludes by asking 'Will China stay adaptive?', noting that it is becoming harder to achieve now that 'local officials are expected not only to deliver material prosperity but also to maintain social harmony, protect the environment, supply public services, respond to public

complaints, and even to promote happiness'. Other bureaucracies will (rightly) operate within certain constraints that limit wider improvisation.

Second, and relatedly, while recent research appears to converge on the benefits of enabling bureaucrats to enjoy greater autonomy, unlimited individual discretion is unlikely to be desirable. Various considerations may have to be balanced in deciding how far to promote individual discretion, such as the risks of rent-seeking and corruption, demands for upwards accountability and whether tailoring services to meet individual needs may conflict with the Weberian principle of impartiality. Bailey and Lloyd (2016) also suggest that giving bureaucrats too much power to experiment with policy may circumvent democratic policy-making arenas, where policies are presented to and approved by elected representatives.

Third, adaptive practice may be more relevant for certain public services and more achievable at certain scales. For many of our examples, the entry point to adaptive practice was customising services to individual needs (e.g. child protection services; services for vulnerable adults and people facing homelessness). These services naturally support a more individualised approach, and may be more conducive to adaptation than broader, less personal, services.

Finally, although this paper has illustrated some notable examples of widespread bureaucratic adaptation, it is more commonly concentrated in pockets of adaptive practice. This raises the question of whether the processes used to promote small-scale adaptation could be adopted across a bureaucracy, such as whether narrative reporting could comprehensively substitute for quantitative measures of performance. The successful efforts to build a broader culture of adaptation (such as in Singapore or through Experimental Finland) could be further explored.

6 Conclusion

An adaptive bureaucracy sounds like an oxymoron. Bureaucracy has become synonymous with burdensome regulations and rigid processes. This paper has explored a selection of public organisations that aim to defy this description. These organisations intentionally work more adaptively to provide public services, customise services to individual needs, experiment with and adapt policies, and learn as part of the process of policy implementation. Insights from complexity science (on the need for adaptive policy-making in addressing complex problems) and public administration (on using bureaucrats' commitment to public service) highlight the value of understanding how, when and why such organisations are able to work adaptively.

A combination of organisational characteristics and political context enable organisations to become more adaptive. Promoting experimentation may become especially appealing when leadership can use it for political gain or when traditional ways of working become unsustainable. Individual leaders are key in pushing for adaptation, but this is easier in organisations that are decentralised and promote greater autonomy for individual bureaucrats.

Leaders create the space for adaptive practice by reforming the processes through which organisations work. Policies are deliberately designed to generate learning and adapt as they are implemented, and this experimentation is both structured and incentivised. Contracting emphasises a more relational approach,

specifying principles rather than specific activities. Accountability processes incentivise performance, without narrowly defining results to a degree that would restrict flexibility. Justifying decisions often takes priority over being accountable to results metrics. Often, informal elements of organisational culture are also more critical to adaptation than formal rules and procedures.

The case studies explored here primarily present individual examples of the effectiveness of adaptation in bureaucracies. While there is some comparative work (Pires, 2011; Mangla, 2015), the literature overall does not provide rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of adaptive practice compared to more traditional ways of working.

This paper suggests that situating adaptive practice in the context of how bureaucracies function (and the broader demands and trade-offs they face) could make it easier to explore its effectiveness and the potential to better embed it within organisations. Future work could usefully ask where adaptation is most appropriate in bureaucracies; whether it is best suited to certain areas of service provision; and how far adaptive practice can be scaled within organisations or if it is by its very nature more of a deviation from standard *bureaucratic* ways of working. Finally, future research could revisit studies of how frontline bureaucrats use their discretion in their work, and to what extent and under what circumstances this enables them to adapt policies effectively.

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