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Editorial

Illusions and Disillusions of Development Management

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Before World War II, less than fifty countries had claimed independence. After the war, dozens of new nations emerged, especially in Asia and Africa. These were joined by older and equally poor countries in, for example, Latin America and the Caribbean, forming an immense group of underdeveloped countries. They networked and, at times, came together in search of support for their progress. They longed for well-being exemplified by the lifestyles of the most advanced nations.

At the time, the premise spread that, in order to conquer modernity, it would be necessary to build strong public institutions that were more advanced than society itself to play the role of development drivers.

However, there were controversies about this premise. The most intense came from the view that it was impossible to overcome traditional cultural values. The opposite was shown: efficient public administration was more a consequence of the development of society than an antecedent factor. Although not fully resolved, this controversy has been circumvented over time by the perspective of cultural adaptation. Modern administrative models could be placed in a more traditional context as long as they were adjusted to local conditions. Adaptation was also considered a process of creation.

Thus, comprehensive plans have proliferated in developing countries, involving political, economic, social, and administrative reforms, started by the countries' own initiative, promoted by regional associations, or conditioned by substantial foreign aid.

Despite many achievements, developmental projects had limited reach, mainly due to the political dominance of traditional local elites. In most developing countries, the ruling elites largely absorbed the feudal elitism of the colonizers, enjoying more sophisticated and differentiated lifestyles from their own peoples.

These elites had a rural base and dominated the political scene: they were not threatened or inhibited by the values of modernity: they were initially opposed to the siege of power by urban elites and, later, to the demonstratiosn of the working class. They did not see the need to adhere to progress or cede power to emerging groups. They were more concerned with preserving their own privileges.

Despite some achievements of modernity, public institutions have developed as instruments for the interests and needs of traditional political groups. Public institutions were formally based on rules and productive roles inspired by modernity, but their practices and work processes repeated traditions. In fact, they formally manifested modernization, idealizing, dictating unenforceable rules, and indicating behaviors that did not exist in the cultural context.

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The editorial of this issue of the Brazilian Journal of Public Administration (RAP) was written by our guest Professor Paulo Roberto Motta, to honor the 50th anniversary of the article "Administração para o desenvolvimento: a disciplina em busca de relevância" (Administration for development: a discipline seeking relevance – our translation).

Economic growth and the emergence of new political groups intensified the political struggle and the use of administrative instruments to conquer and maintain slices of power. Traditional elites maintained their political dominance, focused on family and personal loyalties and patronage in the occupation of public office. To break up the traditional controlling power of public institutions, urban elites advocated the merit system for access to public service and suggested greater decentralization of power. Some middle-class and working-class groups, disbelieving in both formats, encouraged different ways of sharing power, such as the participation of organized civil society in public decisions of the government bureaucracy. All these suggestions brought hope and some achievements, but in most countries, the results were below expectations. The dominance of traditional power was imposed and reduced the impact of modernizing ideas.

Selected more for loyalty to the political elite and less for merit, public officials urged to maintain loyalty and benefit preferential groups performed political functions, in addition to administrative functions. They tended to centralize power and spend much of their time protecting their own political group and office.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the state and its bureaucratic structures grew considerably due to the pressures of new social segments. Development options favored large-scale public projects. The expansion of the state itself was assumed to be sufficient to guarantee greater equity in access to power and public administration bodies.

Historical experience has shown the expansion of the state serving less to achieve greater equity and efficiency in its activities and more for the expansion of the power of preferential groups. In the same way, later state reduction practices did not cause significant damage to traditional power groups.

The dominance of traditional groups in public administration has survived to a greater or lesser extent in several emerging countries depending on some important factors: the dominance of interest aggregation structures such as political parties to protect political alliances; control of government bureaucracy to manage public resources in favor of preferential groups; patronage and welfarism to attract political support by distributing benefits with public resources.

These practices formed a network of power that damaged the democratic rights of citizens to access and participate in public decisions and distorted the use of public resources. As the loyalty of the leaders was linked to these preferential groups, the use of resources was independent of the damage they could cause to public accounts. Excessive patronagem turned citizens into passive recipients of what they consider kindness from incumbent politicians.

The expansion or reduction of the state took place without substantially altering its relations with the public administration and society. Making public administration more efficient without considering social and democratic efficiency proves to be counterproductive. It amounts to providing preferential political groups with more modern and agile administrative schemes aimed at the interests of these groups.

Without a marked change in connecting and aggregating interests, administrative reforms will always have limited impacts on the political infrastructure that constitutes the state's foundations.

Initially, development was seen primarily as a technical and economic issue. Social benefits would be a natural consequence of economic progress. Nature was also assumed to be infinitely giving, which everyone could enjoy at will, without time limits. There was little attention to social planning and environmental protection.

However, since the 1970s, when concepts of sustainability and social value have been added to economic planning, new strategic motivations have emerged to create public value and renew administrative environments. There was also progress in awareness of the integration of economic, political, social, and environmental factors in all development projects.

Awareness of sustainability has reinvigorated the attention of all countries to the importance of democratizing public management, protecting the people through social projects, and awareness of the preservation of nature and the limits of human beings.

Debates on sustainability have intensified between rich and poor countries. The demands of poor countries grew with populations still marginalized in intense poverty. Criticism and questioning were extended to mimicry and to the values and ways of life of the most developed countries.

Development management has contributed to a new sense of emancipation and social equality. It is impossible to develop a nation in which a large part of its population feels their own social access as something beyond their possibilities. Overcoming barriers depends not only on individual and collective efforts, but also on overcoming social prejudices and finding opportunities to transform one's own live. Only education provides these initial conditions to make people more confident, hopeful, and aware of the possibilities and alternatives of development.

Through its practice, the administration of development created positive impacts in several countries, but it continued to be considered as the management of social inequality, economic backwardness, and resource scarcity. Through its ideals, administration of development cherished dreams and actions of equity, progress, and wealth.

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