

Design Thinking for Public Service Excellence



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion paper was prepared for the Consultation on the Co-design of Public Policy and Services titled 're:thinking public service', organized in Singapore by the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) 2-3 December 2013.

The goal of design thinking (design thinking) is to equip governments with innovative approaches to face contemporary challenges such as inter-connected and diffused economic and social patterns, more complex problems, blurred governance boundaries, and reduced trust in public action.

Design thinking is an explicit human and user-centred approach. It leads to solutions that are progressively refined through an iterative process of providing voice to end-users and engaging them in shaping decisions (professional empathy and co-creation); of considering multiple causes of and diversified perspectives to the problems at hand (scaling); and experimenting initial ideas (prototyping and testing). As such, it is most promising when innovation rather than adaptation is needed.

Drawing from private sector experiences, design thinking seeks to stimulate creative thinking within the decision-making process and accelerate the synthesis of increasingly effective and efficient policy solutions. Framing the problem correctly from the start is a pre-condition for the effective unfolding of the phases of policy formulation, development, adoption and implementation. Designers hence act as stewards for enhanced interactions both across administrative compartments and on the interface between the public administration and the 'real world'.

If implemented well, design thinking approaches help improve decision-making, contributing to a more comprehensive problem definition; reduced risks of duplications, inconsistencies or overlaps; minimized unintended consequences and more legitimized and effective decisions.

Design thinking challenges traditional public policy formulation and decision-making. It first of all requires specific skills rarely available in public sector environments (ethnography, behavioural sciences, communication, design and architecture, to name but a few). It also breaks down organizational and procedural silos, contesting established hierarchies or bureaucratic categories. Innovation or design labs have been established with more or less direct affiliation to governments to serve as catalysts for the design thinking change; however, this is usually in an effort to make the labs independent from political or administrative capture.

Labs advance on a 'project' basis through typically small-scale and local (controllable) initiatives that deliver meaningful impacts, prove effectiveness and, possibly, create momentum. How labs approach decision-making is more important than the end-result, although successful projects bear significant potential for lesson-drawing and the progressive institutionalization of design thinking. For this reason, the logistical arrangements of the labs are as relevant as the type of expertise they manage to mobilize.



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A critical juncture in mainstreaming design thinking practices appears to be the distinction between applying design thinking to public service delivery as opposed to policy formulation. Especially in the latter dimension, where uniformity and legal certainty are arguably more required, the institutionalization of design thinking in traditional decision-making appears to date more as a goal to aspire to than a lesson to learn from.

Existing tools might be used to leverage design thinking mainstreaming (the discussion paper specifically suggests considering encompassing forms of regulatory impact analysis). Yet design thinking is likely to become more institutionalized if it results from a new social contract arrangement in which there is more trust in the well-intentioned nature and effectiveness of the 'trial-and-error' and 'learning-by-doing' approaches. Expectations about what design thinking can deliver must nonetheless be managed. This requires educated communication strategies to explain the nature and role of design in decision-making to citizens, stakeholders and – most importantly – to policymakers and bureaucracy agents. Training and concrete involvement in projects are key because they bring public administrators outside their office, confront them with real-life situations, and help them directly grasp users' challenges and expectations.

Design thinking does not seem to necessitate specific preliminary governance capacities which, if lacking, would prevent developing countries from embracing it. However, one cannot deny that design thinking requires skills that developing countries might find particularly challenging to exploit within the public decision-making process. A number of factors may affect the propensity of emerging societies to appreciate the nature and benefits of design thinking including political and social resistance, degree of maturity and self-awareness of individuals and civil society as a whole, deference to authority, and the power distance between the state and citizens.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Centre for Public Service Excellence is a joint initiative of the Government of Singapore and UNDP. It was established in September 2012 to do three things: promote evidence on how best to create and sustain excellence in public service, support innovation and reform, and convene events that encourage new ways of tackling reform. The Global Centre is a catalyst for new thinking, strategy and action in the area of public service, striving to enhance the quality of the activities of UNDP and its partners.

Social, economic and political processes are complex and happen differently at different times in different contexts. At the Global Centre, we aspire to discover, distil and disseminate evidence of 'what really works' to promote effective, efficient and equitable public services. Research findings about development processes agree that there are no blueprints, easy answers or quick fixes. Yet better evidence will help us learn, from both theory and practical experience, those general principles and transferable solutions that may best inform local practices.

This paper builds on the 'Theory of Change' developed by the Global Centre. It holds that four factors were critical in the rapid and sustained development Singapore and other examples success: 1) effective co-operation between a country's political and administrative leadership; 2) a strongly motivated public service; 3) government capacity for long-term planning, foresight and handling of complexity, while 4) retaining the capacity to innovate.

Design thinking

An increasing number of governments are or envisage using design approaches to innovate and co-create public policy interventions with professionals, the private sector, civil society representatives, third sector organizations and citizens. In design thinking, stakeholders are called upon to play a responsible, active and constructive role in shaping decisions. They are no longer considered merely passive receivers at the end of the regulatory, administrative and public service delivery chain.

Public Service Innovation (PSI) Labs and design centres are being established in various parts of the globe – both in industrialized and emerging economies – to foster innovation, spin off initiatives in different public institutions and levels of governments, and train civil servants in the application of design thinking approaches.

The paper was prepared for the Public Service Innovation Lab's Consultation on the Co-Design of Public Policy and Services, Singapore, 2-3 December 2013. The consultation¹ provided an opportunity for experts and practitioners to discover and debate public service innovation trends and applications. Two discussion papers were prepared for the event, one on social innovation and the other on design thinking.

¹ See <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/capacitybuilding/publicservice/PSI-Lab/>

This paper supports UNDP's evidence-building work on design thinking. It illustrates how design thinking approaches have contributed to solving public service challenges, and explores the potential that is yet to be tapped. It also outlines forms and degrees of institutionalization of design thinking within public service administrations. It is intended as a contribution to stimulate discussion, not as full review of literature and practices. The aim is to trigger interest in deeper understanding and continued comparative research in the coming years.

Background information and evidence underpinning the paper was obtained through selected secondary literature, websites and blogs, as well as e-mail exchanges and conversations with design thinking practitioners. This final version of the paper includes a number of elements raised during the December 2013 consultation.

The discussion paper is structured as follows: First is a summary of the main features of the design thinking notion, its conceptual origins, and its evolution when applied to from the private sector to the public sector. By relying on relevant examples and applications, the subsequent parts of the paper consider how design thinking approaches are deployed, and consider promises and challenges for their mainstreaming within decision-making. Annexes provide additional information, including references and a list of design thinking institutions.

2. UNWRAPPING DESIGN THINKING

This chapter summarizes the main features of design thinking, its conceptual origins and its evolution when applied to the organization and procedures from the private to the public sector. The chapter also presents the main methods and tools characterizing design thinking in relation to the various functional dimensions of government action.

The 21st century

Design thinking has emerged as a promising innovative approach to public service organization and decision-making, in response to the concomitance of a number of new global phenomena.

- ▶ **Increased inter-connection and diffusion** – The world in the 21st century is characterized by faster and faster interactions that spread vertically and horizontally across levels of established governance. We no longer live in well-defined, discrete territorial and jurisdictional systems of governance in which single, clearly identifiable and legitimated (public) actors address societal problems. Globalization has brought unprecedented opportunities for both developed and emerging countries but it requires a structural re-adjustment along the global-national-local axes.

- ▶ **Increased complexity** – The challenges that governments are called upon to tackle today are increasingly complex and multifaceted (Power, 2004). This constitutes a major shift from the past, when problems were simple, knowable and independent. Modern challenges may relate to un-defined or overarching societal goals (e.g climate change and global warming); uncertain risks posed by specific exposures to single chemicals (e.g. an endocrine disruptor) or posed by using determined technologies or processes (e.g. nano- and bio-technologies); or lifestyle risks such as obesity, tobacco or alcohol consumption.
- ▶ **Blurred governance** – Governments tend towards extensive primary legislation combined with complicated implementation processes involving rule-making or adjudications. This is notable when they are exerting their public risk management functions responding to the concerns and desires of citizens and stakeholders. Within this context, a ‘regulatory state’ (Majone, 1996) and also an ‘administrative state’ (Lawson, 1984) has emerged in which the executive frequently acts as the regulator, the administrator and the arbiter, sometimes confusing the traditional separation of powers designed to protect citizens from poor quality or arbitrary decision-making. Accountability, rule of law and the quality of decision-making may suffer when decision-makers are disjointed from those affected by their decisions.
- ▶ **Reduced trust** – Long before the financial and economic crisis of 2008, public institutions in general had experienced a steady decline in trust (Blind, 2007; Bouckaert, 2012). Trust and confidence in government are directly correlated to the public’s expectations, and the more citizens are educated and mature, the higher their demands for high-quality and timely policy interventions. A decline in trust can significantly hinder policy implementation, making citizens and businesses more risk-averse and delaying investment, innovation and employment (Murphy, 2004). Winning the challenge of regaining and maintaining trust is crucial for contemporary governments and can be accomplished through structural reforms (Fukuyama, 1995; Lofstedt, 2005; OECD, 2013b).

The 21st century experience highlights the widening gulf between the sophistication of contemporary challenges on the one side, and the ability of the governments’ organizational, procedural and methodological tools to handle that sophistication on the other. As the rate and scale of change increases and the nature of problems becomes more and more intricate, established individual public agents are less in a position to tackle them with own capacities, or without affecting other jurisdictions. At the same time, policy interventions by public authorities and/or private actors are likely to be more intrusive than in the past, while each individual choice becomes more and more relevant systemically.

Governments have so far tended to cope with these developments by engineering increasingly refined solutions without denaturing the intrinsic organizational and cultural rationale of public service. The past model of societal governance based on increasingly specific and numerous silos of deep expertise no longer appears fit for its purpose. Governments are required to work at the intersection of multi-disciplinary, multi-actor knowledge. To answer the right questions correctly, solutions are less likely to be found in any one single silo, however sophisticated it may be, but in a mix. It appears now to be the time to take an innovative plunge.

Design thinking is an innovation with promise for government.

Towards a definition of design thinking

The origins of the term ‘design’ lie with the private sector and conventionally revolve around the art and science to shape objects and symbols creatively and in an innovative manner (box 1) (Ralph/Wand, 2009; EC, 2009b). Increasingly, the notion of design is expanding into shaping decisions – and this is when design becomes ‘strategic’ (Brown, 2009).

Box 1: Relating creativity and innovation through design

‘Creativity’ is the generation of new ideas. These ideas can be either new ways of looking at existing problems, or of seeing new opportunities, perhaps by exploiting emerging technologies or changes in markets.

‘Innovation’ is the successful exploitation of new ideas. It is the process that carries them through to new products, new services, new ways of running the business or even new ways of doing business.

‘Design’ is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end.

Source: Cox (2005)

Design thinking puts end-users needs – rather than legacy and policy – at the centre of the policy formulation system, shifting paradigms and creating a new decisional process (figure 1).

Figure 1: From the old to the new decision-making



Source: adapted from Bracken (2013)

Bason (2010:138) provides a synthesis of what design thinking has become to represent in public service innovation. He considers design thinking as principally a structured and systemic ‘attitude’ or a ‘way of reasoning that allows bridging and managing the two opposing (yet complementary) cognitive styles constituting knowledge acquisition and implementation of public policies: the “analytical-logical mind-set that characterizes most large organizations and professional bureaucracies, and the more interpretative, intuitive mind-set that characterizes the arts and creative professions” (table 1).

Table 1: Bridging gaps through design thinking

Analysis (splitting)	Synthesis (putting together)
Rational	Emotional
Logical	Intuitive
Deductive	Inductive
Solutions	Paradigms, platforms
‘Thinking it through’	Rapid prototyping (think through doing)
Single discipline	Multiple disciplines, T-shape
Elegance	Impact, value, diffusion

Source: Bason (2010:139)

‘Design’ acts in this context as a multiplier throughout the decisional process, as it enables a broader range of questions and potential solutions (alternative options) to be elaborated and developed more quickly. It also helps make abstract assumptions and analyses more concrete and tangible. Design thinking places enhanced attention to the crucial phase of decision-making: problem definition. Framing the problem correctly from the start is a pre-condition for the effective unfolding of the phases of policy formulation, development, adoption and implementation.

A decision-making process informed by design is thus more likely to be successful if strategic designers are brought in at the earliest stages of decision-making, when abstract and theoretical delineation meets with conceptualisation geared towards more concrete outcome demands. Ideas are refined through continued iterations while they are developed, moving quickly across organizational or policy silos. Using design to involve end-users further smooth the process. Overall, the task of strategic designers is to serve as synthesizers amongst a group of peers in the quest for policy effectiveness and efficiency.

Design thinking is thus mostly concerned with how decision-making processes are organized and function and how collaboration and cross-fertilization can be fostered and guided across organizational structures and policy disciplines. Design approaches leverage on visual representations as an important and iterative means of communicating complex – even contradictory – relationships, which would be difficult or impossible to explain in text and numbers alone.

“Systemic and inter-connected problems need systemic and inter-connected solutions.”

Brown/Wyatt (2010:35)

“As strategic designers, we often find ourselves acting as the ‘glue’ that binds together multiple types of expertise, multiple approaches, and multiple forms of value in a team working towards a coherent proposition”

Boyer et al. (2013:14)

If implemented well, design thinking approaches can deliver the following benefits to public decision-making:

- ▶ a people-centred perspective;
- ▶ reduced risks of partial approaches;
- ▶ a comprehensive, holistic problem perspective;
- ▶ reduced duplicated efforts, policy inconsistencies or overlaps;
- ▶ enhanced synergies and better addressed trade-offs;
- ▶ integrated and better-targeted solutions;
- ▶ stronger reality-checks at earlier stages;
- ▶ reduced risks of unintended consequences; and
- ▶ higher chances to deliver more complete and resilient solutions.

As such, design thinking appears to deliver its most promising results exactly when applied to so-called ‘wicked problems’² that have no off-the-shelf solution – and when innovation (rather than adaptation through ready-made templates) is needed. An example is when the class and order of challenges is so complex and systemic in nature that it constitutes a new threshold for the progress of civilization.

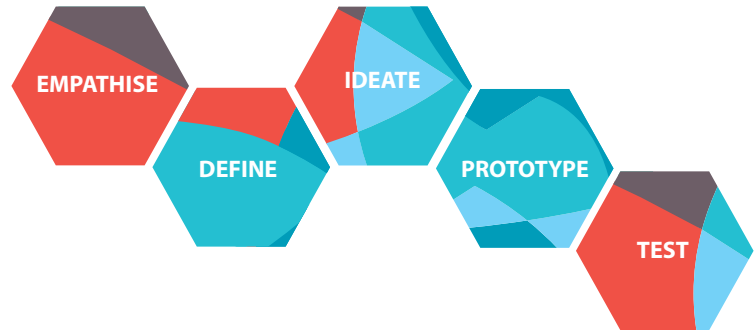
Design thinking is likely to bring maximal added value if design is embedded in the systemic procedure and routine functioning of the executive organization. As it will be addressed below in this paper, the ‘institutionalization’ of design appears to be a critical factor for long-term success.

Key features of the design thinking approach

Design thinking results from a number of essential components

Figure 2: The design thinking approach

Source: d.School, Stanford University



Empathizing and co-creating

The best designers do not work alone. Collaboration is essential when faced with a complex challenge because innovation is unlikely to occur in isolation. The most interesting solutions lie at the boundaries of disciplines.

Empathy

Looking at societal problems from the windows of a public administration office building is hardly a recipe for success. Policies must be designed with people and not only for them. Design thinking starts with ‘professional empathy’ among clusters of actors (Clarkson et al., 2003). Empathy is the capacity to understand and imaginatively enter into another person’s feelings. As such, it is the cornerstone of a human-centred design process.

“The best solutions come out of the best insights into human behaviour. But learning to recognize those insights is harder than you might think. Why? Because our minds automatically filter out a lot of information without our even realizing it. We need to learn to see things ‘with a fresh set of eyes,’ and empathizing is what gives us those new eyes.”

HPID (2010:2)

Developing empathy is about literally bringing public administrators outside their offices, confronting them with real

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