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Good governance and how to maintain it

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GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HOW TO MAINTAIN IT

The public administration in Finland is often praised for its high quality. Finland is internationally recognised for the quality of governance, trust in authorities' actions, low levels of corruption, transparency in administrative decision-making, accountability, and the ease of using public services. These factors undoubtedly support one another. However, in order to maintain this kind of high quality, these aspects must be continuously supported, maintained and renewed.

The requirements of good governance must be fulfilled each time when a civil servant makes an administrative decision or a municipality provides services. These requirements include good service, handling matters in an interactive way, openness, the realisation of legal rights and obligations, and flexible procedures.

Depending on the situation, good governance may also necessitate obligations, prohibitions or restrictions to prevent environmental damage, protect the safety of individuals, or ensure fair competition, for example. Civil servants must follow legislation and act in an impartial and appropriate way when carrying out measures that create benefits, services, and restrictions. It is therefore important that good governance also includes accountability and the principles of impartiality, fairness and proportionality. These standards apply to the processing of matters as well as decision-making.

Why good governance is important

Good governance is pursued for various reasons: because administration is too bureaucratic and costly, or because people's trust in the administration has diminished due to its bureaucratic, distant or otherwise poor nature. Good governance can also be a qualitative objective in itself. At the same time, perceptions of good governance also vary: an economist, a management consultant and a lawyer will all have different views on the elements of good governance.

One of the incentives of striving for good governance is ensuring the legitimacy of administration. In order to strengthen trust, efforts to improve governance include increasing transparency, efficiency, flexibility and approachability, and making it easier to influence authorities' activities.

Growing expectations

Public administration is also facing growing expectations and requirements regarding quality and content. This is because the decision-making and public regulation of public administration affects individuals and businesses in many different ways. That is why it is important to ensure that authorities act appropriately and in compliance with law and that the rights of the individual are fully realised.

Good governance is also important in the tasks of the welfare state, especially in the provision of public services. People are no more satisfied with only lawful administrative activities and receiving the benefits and services of a welfare state; people also expect more services at a higher quality.

In addition, dismantling public monopolies and outsourcing public services means that public bodies operating in competitive situations are expected to produce services that are at least as good as ones from private service providers. In practice, public service may be better than private if there are enough resources.

How to maintain good governance

Good governance is safeguarded as a fundamental right that obliges authorities and civil servants. Due to this, good governance creates rights for administrative customers that can be invoked in administrative courts. The guarantees of good governance are secured by law. Concrete requirements can particularly be found in the Administrative Procedure Act, the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, and the Act on Public Officials. Compliance with good governance is also subject to legality control.

In addition to these normative and official guarantees, the safeguards of good governance also include softer and unofficial elements. In this respect, important ones include administrative operating methods, administrative culture, civil servants' education level and ethics, and administrative practices. It is not possible to define these elements with very strict standards, although their level is an essential part of the quality of governance. Instead, they can be promoted with training, organisational arrangements, service commitments, and, to some extent, instructions.

Good, predictable and reliable governance is beneficial for both individuals and businesses. It is worth investing in these objectives, and it may not even be expensive. Poor governance increases bureaucracy, undermines the legitimacy of authorities, restricts transparency, and enables the abuse of power. The value of these features can hardly be understated.

Dr. OLLI MÄENPÄÄ has served as a professor of administrative law at the universities of Turku and Helsinki and as a judge at the Supreme Administrative Court. His key research topics are transparency, good governance, European administrative law, municipal law, and judicial protection in administrative matters.