THE ROLE OF TRUST IN PUBLIC SERVICES AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

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Introduction

The balance between trust and distrust is shifting – yet again. The move towards public sector reforms inspired by the New Public Management (NPM) from the 1980s on introduced a series of innovations based on mutual distrust between public sector actors. More recently, the concept of trust has gone through a veritable renaissance, and is now regarded as an essential feature of any kind of collaboration. At the same time, public distrust towards government and public administration has remained solidly on the agenda. In this chapter, we discuss the role of trust in the public sector. We first focus on the promise of public sector reforms to restore citizen trust through improving services and through aligning public services with citizen demands. We then further explore the basic premise of this promise, namely that citizens distrust public services and public administration, by providing comparative data on public trust. In the subsequent two sections, we introduce readers to the roles of trust and distrust in the public sector and in the relation between citizens and government, before moving on to contrasting citizen trust in public officials to public officials' trust in citizens. The penultimate section shows how trust has recently re-emerged as a key concept in public administration practice and scholarship, facilitating interaction and reducing the cost of transactions. We end with a short summary.

Restoring trust through reform?

Reform programmes have –at least in their rhetoric, but also possible beyond that– invested heavily in restoring trust. Reasons for the (perceived) low trust in the public sector were thought to be the growing disconnection between the services government

offered, and those citizens wanted. This disconnection was thought to be caused by two factors:

- Government is not offering the services citizens want

- Government is offering services of low quality

Thus, government cannot be trusted to act in the interest of citizens. The belief that a party has the intention or incentive to act in the other's interest is a core characteristic of a trust relationship (Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005: 2). Many reform initiatives have concentrated on remedying the gap between what citizens want and what government is offering. In order to strengthen the link between what citizens want and what services are offered, many Western governments experimented with the introduction of various types of market forces. The idea was that such market forces would force service providers to change their service prospectus. Originally, the debate was mainly framed in terms of privatisation, where privatisation would be the ultimate solution to avoiding a mismatch between supply and demand. More recently, the debate has shifted towards one emphasising user choice (Le Grand, 2007). This means that citizens would have to be given choice between alternative service providers. These alternatives would not necessarily have to be private providers, but could also be public or non-profit providers. In this way, market forces are introduced into public service delivery, even in areas where no privatisation had occurred. Through such market forces, citizens would be given a powerful instrument to express their dissatisfaction with services: they had the power to leave (exit). This permanent possibility for citizens to leave and use other providers created a quasi-market environment, and lead many public service providers to anticipate public demand and change their service delivery accordingly. Tools and techniques borrowed from the private sector came in very handy. Politicians also play an important role in these

markets: they can abandon a provider and shift the responsibility for providing services to another. Service providers could thus be made redundant.

A second type of pressure that was introduced into public services delivery was voice. Through conducting opinion surveys, installing complaints handling departments and appointing ombudsmen, new sources of intelligence about how services were performing were created (Bouckaert, Van de Walle, & Kampen, 2005). This information was to help public services to better anticipate what citizens wanted, and to signal areas where citizens considered the existing services to be of low quality.

These two solutions both have an external dimension. Through structural change, and through facilitating voice and introducing customer relationship tools and techniques, external pressures is applied to the public sector. But the public sector also introduced a series of tools and mechanisms to make sure that internal pressure to improve remained high. Street level bureaucrats, managers, and entire public service organisations were subjected to a discipline of contracts and performance targets. The introduction of such contracts and indicators are a vivid expression of a profound distrust between politicians and managers, and between managers and street level administrators. The other could not be trusted to do what was expected and to deliver high quality services. An extensive set of control instruments was therefore needed in lieu of trust. One of the main innovations of the New Public Management has been the institutionalization of certain types of distrust within the public sector (Van de Walle, 2010). We will elaborate on this issue in a later section. Before discussing proposed solutions, however, we will first go back to the analysis of the problem.

Is there a problem? What do the numbers say?

Many public sector reforms have been motivated by a belief that the public trust in public services is low, and declining. Where statistics are available, though, there is little evidence of such declining trust (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, & Bouckaert, 2008). Furthermore, there is a wide variety within the public sector, with some services being trusted a lot (especially those in the health sector, and emergency services), and others not. Still, trust in more generic public sector categories such as 'the public sector', 'civil servants' or 'bureaucrats' tends to be quite low when compared to other institutions. Bureaucracies tend to feature in the bottom half of 'most trusted institutions' rankings, yet generally well above institutions such a politicians or the press.

There are also considerable differences between countries as figures 1-3 illustrate. They have been compiled using data from the World Values Surveys, an international academic survey measuring value change. Respondents were asked whether they had confidence in the civil service[1]. In the Americas, confidence goes above the 50% threshold in just two countries, Canada and Brazil. In Guatemala, Argentina and Peru, less than one out five respondents has confidence in the civil service.

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[1] Depending on the country, translated as public services, bureaucracies, public administrators etcetera.
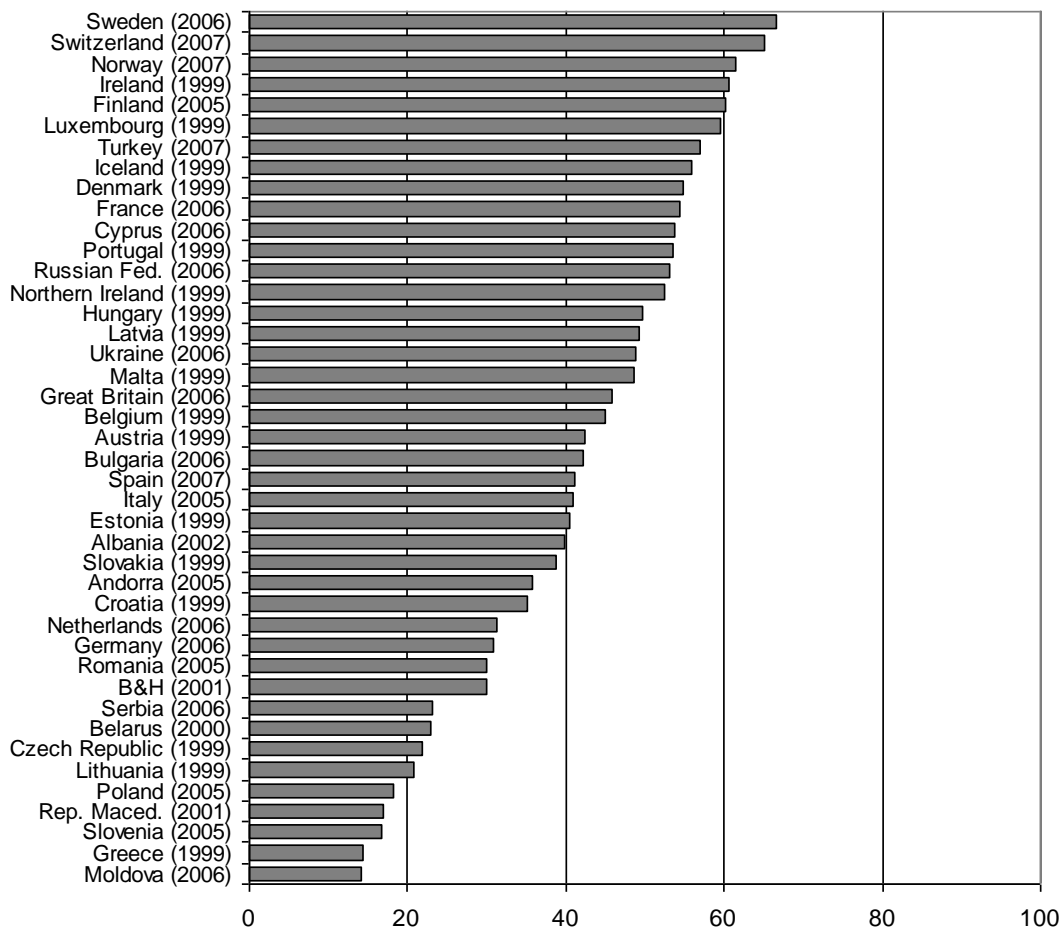
Figure 1: % Confidence in the civil service, Americas
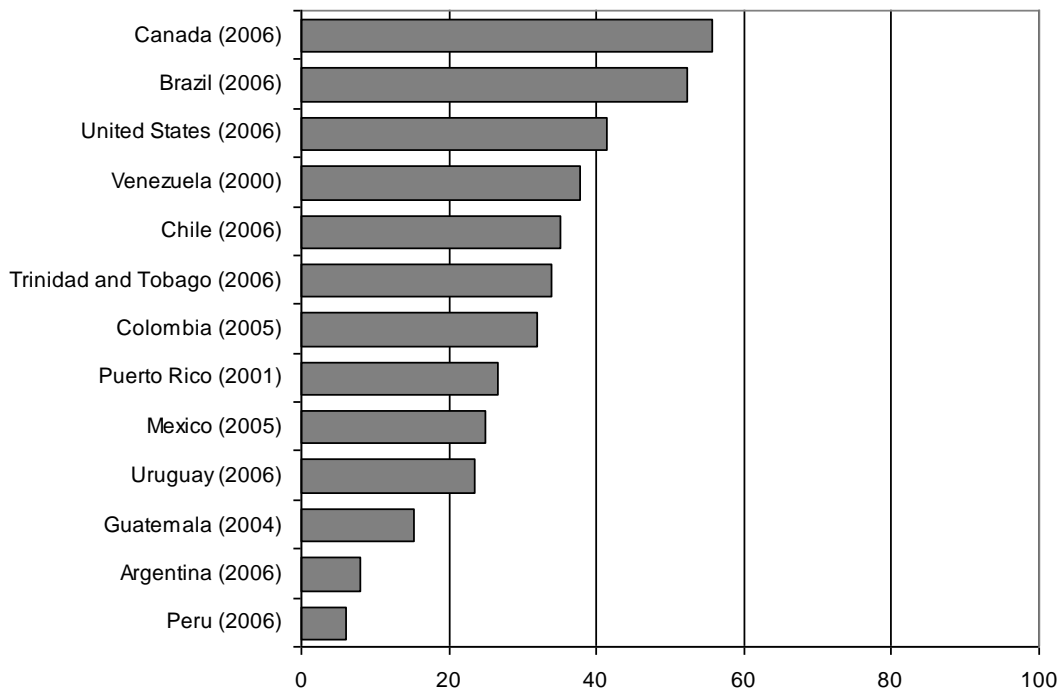
Source: World Values Survey. Figure shows % expressing 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot of confidence', measured on a four point scale also consisting of 'not very much' and 'none at all'. Numbers between brackets indicate year of data collection.

In Europe, levels of confidence tend to be higher on average. All Scandinavian countries can be found near the top of the list, as are Switzerland, Luxembourg and Ireland. The worst performers are predominantly countries in South-east Europe, and Eastern Europe.

Figure 2: % Confidence in the civil service, Europe

Source: World Values Survey. Figure shows % expressing 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot of confidence', measured on a four point scale also consisting of 'not very much' and 'none at all'. Numbers between brackets indicate year of data collection.

Finally, In Asia and Oceania, levels of confidence are remarkably high in some countries, even going well beyond 80 per cent in Bangladesh, Vietnam and China. This may have to do with cultural reasons, respect for authority, and a survey acquiescence bias. Australia, Japan and Iran are at the bottom off the list

Figure 3: % Confidence in the civil service, Asia and Oceania
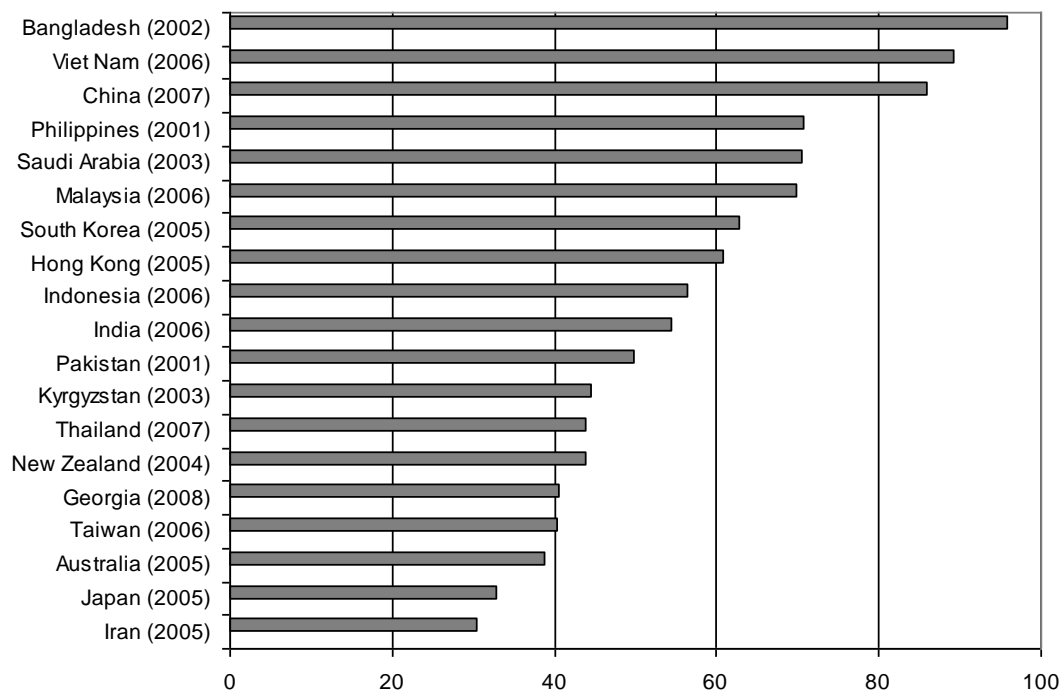
Source: World Values Survey. Figure shows % expressing 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot of confidence', measured on a four point scale also consisting of 'not very much' and 'none at all'. Numbers between brackets indicate year of data collection.

A remarkable observation is that trust in the public sector tends to correlate quite strongly with other factors, notably trust in other types of institutions, and even trust in other people. This means that explanations for low trust should not only be looked for within public services themselves. Low trust in the public sector is likely to be just one element of wider social norms and changes. Sociologists, therefore, have produced a considerable body of research looking into causes for trust and distrust. The list of causes contains, but is not limited to, factors such as social capital, declining respect for authority, individualisation, alienation etcetera.

Trust between citizens and public administration

Do citizens trust public officials?

In public administration we have seen a sharp increase in attention for the public's perception of government, and trust more in particular. Such research ranges from country studies (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005; Marlowe, 2004), over multivariate explanatory models relating trust to a number of government processes and outputs (Van Ryzin, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), to more sophisticated multi-country analyses of trust, looking at country-level explanations for differences in trust (Kim, 2010; Van de Walle, 2007; Vigoda-Gadot, Shoham, & Vashdi, 2010). In this trust relation between citizens and government, it has often been assumed that outputs matter and that distrust results from low government performance. Research has however shown that the process by which services are being delivered, or the process by which policies are being implemented is at least as important (Tyler, 1990). Trust is thus at least as much influenced by procedural justice as it is by outputs (Van Ryzin, 2011).

Do public officials trust citizens?

Things work more smoothly, it has been argued, when citizens trust their government and each other. This reduces transaction costs because there are fewer instances where trustworthiness has to be checked prior to the transaction. But what about the attitudes and opinions at the other end of the relationship: government itself? Do administrators actually trust citizens enough to involve them and to drop their suspicion? While citizens' trust has received a lot of attention, the opposite relation has received only marginal attention (Wu & Yang, 2011). Yang, therefore, described it as a missing link in research (Yang, 2005). Expressions of such distrust are visible in officials'

unwillingness to involve citizens in decision making, in their unwillingness to take their views seriously (Yang & Holzer, 2006), or in an overall relatively sceptical attitude toward citizens (Aberbach & Rockman, 1978). The reason for such distrust can be multifaceted, ranging from negative prior experience, over a belief that citizens aren't sufficiently knowledgeable to play a role, to a conviction that citizens have profound negative intentions when interacting with government. Official's distrust in citizens may evoke a reciprocal reaction, leading to a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Mutual distrust has become well documented in studies of street-level bureaucracy, and especially studies focusing on interactions between welfare officials and welfare clients, where officials suspect all claimants of cheating, and where clients perceive officials not to be there to help them, but to punish them for their dependent situation (Kelly, 1994).

The topic of administrators' trust in citizens has become very relevant in an age when governments want to reduce red tape and control- and inspection-related burdens. This has lead to innovations such as labelling or self-regulation, where companies are for instance granted exemption from regular inspections after they have proven to comply for a number of consecutive years. Systems such as sectoral self-regulation or horizontal inspection require a great deal of trust in citizens' and companies willingness to follow the law. Replacing extensive control systems by trust-based arrangements requires a total change in officials' thinking, and may prove to be very hard when officials continue to be faced with attempts at cheating. Research on the daily work of inspectors has shown that inspectors do indeed utilise different enforcement styles (May & Wood, 2003).

The role of trust in the public sector

The role of trust in citizen-government relations

Trust has been credited with a number of virtues. Trust makes it easier for government to operate: 'To the extent people can trust government, they are more likely to comply willingly, to give their behavioral consent' (Levi, 1998). Distrust in government leads to a decreasing willingness to pay taxes and obey the law (Tyler, 1990). As a result, the cost of enforcement will go up. When trust is low, loyalty towards the public sector will also be low, and citizens will engage in a series of voice and exit behaviours. Citizens may also express their dissatisfaction by engaging in protest behaviour, by changing their vote, or by abstaining form the vote (Hetherington, 1999; Hooghe, Mariën, & Pauwels, 2011). Permissiveness towards tax evasion is also higher among citizens with lower (political) trust (Mariën & Hooghe, 2011).

Attractiveness of the public sector as employer

Distrust in the public sector also has implications for recruitment in the public sector and employee morale. Where the public sector is held in low esteem, it may have difficulties in attracting the right people to work for government (Äijaälä, 2002). Even more, it may lead to a workforce that is mainly attracted by government employment for extrinsic reasons such as salary or job tenure. A good indicator of trust in the public sector is asking people (including public officials) whether they would want their children to work for government.

Internally, officials who don't feel themselves trusted by citizens will have lower job satisfaction and thus perform badly, thereby again stimulating dissatisfaction with government service. When citizens don't trust the public sector, public service pride may suffer (Bouckaert, 2001).

Is there a role for distrust?

Why distrust is important

Much of the public administration literature has tended to consider low levels of trust in the public sector as problematic. Low trust, it is argued, is undesirable, and hinders government's operations. A different argument can and should also be made however. When one looks at the political science and philosophy literature, then it becomes apparent that there is no such thing as a consensus about the value and importance of trust. Political systems of checks and balances are based on an assumption of mutual distrust (Parry, 1976). Even more, many scholars have argued in favour of low trust as a basic attitude towards government, because they consider routine trust in government to be naïve (Möllering, 2006). Low trust guarantees a sufficient level of vigilance towards government, and makes sure that government continues to function within its constitutional limits. Distrust, in this way, can be seen as an indicator of a healthy citizenry. Whereas commentators have often regarded distrust as a problem that needs a solution, other political–philosophical traditions regard distrust as a healthy and desirable attitude (Hardin, 2002). What's more, a certain degree of distrust also facilitates change and innovation (Warren, 1999).

Institutionalising distrust through public sector reform

When one takes a closer look at political systems and public administration, it becomes apparent that distrust is often the guiding principle in institutional design and in the operation of public services (Van de Walle & Six, 2011): public officials have to give account of their work, often through elaborate accountability processes; citizens have to prove they are not cheating on their benefits and taxes; and intuitions

are often shadowed by other institutions with similar tasks and missions. The rise of an audit society perfectly demonstrates how pervasive attitudes of distrust are within modern public administration (Power, 1999).

This is especially true for public sector reforms inspired by NPM ideas. NPM finds its origins in two related movements. One is public choice, which is the source of its intellectual framework. Public choice is based on the idea of the public servant as someone working for his or her own self-interest, and not, as had till then been the dominant mode of thinking, on his or her desire to serve the public interest (Niskanen, 1971). The other is the emergence of new political leaders capitalising on widespread discontent with the public sector, without which NPM's ideas wouldn't have had such an influence.

Public sector actors, suspicious about each other's motives, and a political discourse fuelling citizen distrust in government culminated in the introduction of series of public sector innovations all directed at strengthening control and command systems within the public sector (Van de Walle, 2010). This strengthening happened mainly through a widespread introduction of contract-type arrangements, and through an expansion of the use of (performance) information. Contracts were introduced to regulate relationships between ministers and top officials; between ministries and agencies; between government bodies and external contractors; and between public employers and employees. Both sides of the principal-agent relationship were thought to have antagonistic interests, and contracts were a way of canalising mutual distrust and of inserting control into the system. Performance information helped actors in the system to control others, and to call them to account. Rather than a belief in mutual commensurable interests and a resulting trust, NPM ideas made mutual suspicion the hallmark of public sector collaboration. These ideas were popular, because they now

introduced a solid theoretical grounding for the existing distrust between ministers and mandarins; between bosses and employees; and between citizens and government.

Equating NPM's control characteristics to distrust, however, would be a simplification of reality (Van de Walle, 2010). Trust is often contrasted to control (Choudhury, 2008; Coulson, 1998). Trust then means the absence of a perceived need for controlling the other, while control is considered an indication that the other cannot be trusted. This simple dichotomy, however, tends to ignore the many positions in between the two extremes, and, more importantly, it tends to reduce trust to a one-dimensional concept.

The sociological, behavioural and organisation literature has distinguished between different types of trust. In this section, we use one of the most commonly used distinctions, developed by Lewicki and Bunker (1996). They distinguished between three types of trust: calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust, and identification-based trust. These types each have their own bases and characteristics. Calculus-based trust is for instance mainly based on expected consequences of trusting or not trusting. Actors will then trust other actors because of a trade-off between cost and benefits of trust and distrust. One such cost is a reputation cost; a benefit may be the prospect of new interactions. It is a model based on deterrence, and contracts stipulating punishment in case of non-compliance may make it easier to trust the other party. This type of trust is limited to a small number of relationships and requires extensive monitoring, but it is also relatively easy to create in the short-term. Knowledge-based trust is based on information and predictability. Knowledge-based trust is not possible in a situation with limited information, but can be generated through providing more and better information about the other actor's behaviour and intentions. This shows

that extensive monitoring is not the opposite of trust, but may instead function as an element that makes trust possible, especially within a large number of relationships. Identification-based trust emerges from shared values and goals, and is not a cognitive type of trust, but an emotional one. It takes a long time to develop and it is limited to a few relationships.

The reemergence of trust in public administration

The move towards NPM-style reforms created a situation where trust was regarded as naïve. Instead, it was argued, the public sector needed strict control systems to act as a check on abuse. Trust would only lead to collusion. As a result, the leading public sector paradigm became one of short-term collaboration, guided by contracts and performance metrics, and a wide array of incentives and punishments. Trust, as a result, largely disappeared from the public administration agenda. In recent years, however, we have seen a reemergence of the concept. Trust has been rediscovered as a phenomenon facilitating interactions, reducing transaction costs, and creating innovation.

Trust in steering relations

Absence of trust between principals and agents, between organisations, between ministers and administrators, or between managers and employees often results in expensive micromanagement (Ruscio, 1996), and makes actors resort to legal remedies. Over two decades of experience with contracts between ministers and top officials, between ministries and agencies, and between government and private contractors – both in traditional procurement and in public-private partnerships - has painfully shown the impotence of long and detailed contracts for regulating these interactions in a satisfactory way. Contracts turned out to be incomplete, no matter

how long they were; gave little flexibility to either party in the agreement; and made collaboration costly. The extensive use of contracts hindered rather than helped innovative collaboration and entrepreneurial working. Despite contracts and other control instruments being seen as typical NPM-style instruments, they also went against many of the basic principles of the NPM. Because of the excessive regulation, flexibility became difficult, and managers got little space to manage, despite NPM's plea to let the managers manage.

We have since seen a move towards trust-based management and steering concepts (see e.g., Choudhury, 2008). This is visible throughout the public sector (Bouckaert, 2011), and comes at a moment when the public sector is moving yet further away from traditional bureaucracy (which required little trust) to governance arrangements with few formalised rules, constantly changing interactions and unstable environments (Grey & Garsten, 2001).

In contracting, short term, narrow and specific contracts are being replaced by long term collaborations (Greve, 2008). In doing so, the myth that contracts could entirely replace trust between contracting parties was shed (Lane, 2000). Newer types of contractual relationships are increasingly high trust relationships, with partners committed to each other for the long term, often without very detailed contracts. In performance management, it lead to a move away from a use of indicators in a command and control fashion to a use of performance management as an instrument partly based on mutual trust (Halligan & Bouckaert, 2009). A similar trend can be observed in regulation regimes, where responsive regulatory styles become more and more common, which are based on cooperation and trust, not punishment (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1995).

Trust in public sector collaboration

The concept of trust is also receiving increasing attention from public administration scholars studying (complex) networks, collaborative arrangements and partnerships. In such arrangements, a diverse number of actors have to collaborate to achieve shared goals. It has been found that especially in partnerships, alliances and networks, trust between actors is of utmost importance (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Without such trust, mutual suspicion would lead to constant quarrels between the partners over budgets, responsibilities, and the small print of contracts. Trust between actors in collaborative arrangements, therefore, has been associated with a long list of virtues, such as better performance (Klijn, Edelenbos, & Steijn, 2010), lower transaction and control costs (Fukuyama, 1995), and better and easier conflict resolution (Das & Teng, 1998). It also allows partners to take risk and stimulates mutual learning. At the same time, however, it may reduce vigilance, or lead to too cosy collaborations and stimulate groupthink. Likewise, trust may have positive effects on collaboration within organisations, such as between employees, or between employees and management.

Conclusion

Trust is a multifaceted and omnipresent concept. Its role in the public sector has known ups and downs, from being considered a naïve belief leading to abuse to becoming an essential feature of any collaboration in the public sector. In this chapter, we have sketched this multifaceted nature of trust by showing its multiple appearances in relationships between citizens and government, between government actors, and between government and external parties. Trust, but also distrust, plays a key role in the smooth operation of the public sector. We are currently seeing a

replacement of NPM-style distrust-based models to newer arrangements that rely heavily on mutual trust between actors. This suggests that the focus of future scholarship will also shift even further to exploring the functions, but also the risks of having a public sector based on extensive, deep, trust-based relationships

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