

India's Response to Coronavirus Pandemic: Nine Lessons for Effective Public Management

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has spared no country. Yet, the degree of infection and consequent deaths have differed vastly. There is, as yet, no scientific explanation based on climatic or genetic differences in populations. However, there seems to be an emerging consensus that public management matters. This article looks at three largest countries in the World and finds that outcomes in India, measured in terms of deaths from COVID-19 virus, are a fraction of deaths compared to other two large populous countries and appears to be an outlier. This article examines the public management response of a democratic government and draws lessons for effective public management in dealing with other grand public management challenges of our times.

Keywords

new public management, performance management, India, COVID-19, coronavirus pandemic, government performance management

There is consensus among experts that India's response to COVID-19 pandemic has been successful thus far (Sharma, 2020). India acted early and acted decisively. This is not an opinion but an evidence-based conclusion. The relative performance of three comparable countries is as follows (Table 1).

The key to judging performance of a country in the war against COVID-19 is not related to the quality of talking points, messaging, public-relations, processes, and activities. All that matters in this business is lives saved. That is the bottom line and the only relevant success indicator in the short run. Testing and social distancing are only “means” toward the “end” of saving lives. That is, the purpose of testing and social distancing is also to ultimately reduce mortality from this pandemic. By this criterion, as can be seen from Table 1, India has done exceptionally well.

For sure, there were some real snafus on the way and they often looked quite distressing from a distance. It was, for example, painful to see migrants being huddled at exit points and being sprayed with a disinfectant. Optics were horrific (Abi-Habib & Yasir, 2020). Yet, that was a small cost for preventing deaths. Most experts believe that there was no time to set up a committee to figure out a less painful exodus without incurring fatal delays. Today, World Health Organization (WHO) and experts from other countries give high marks to India (“Coronavirus Pandemic,” 2020) for its timely response and strict implementation of lockdown and social distancing.

The focus of this article is not to analyze India's success in responding to this global pandemic, but rather, to draw lessons from this experience for effective public management in other fields of development. As this pandemic has shown so dramatically, government plays an important role in deciding the destinies of the countries. That is why the competitive and comparative advantage of nations is determined by the effectiveness of their governments and not merely by resource endowment (Porter, 1990). A poor country like India, with its limited resources, is widely considered to have outperformed a resource-rich United States in this battle against coronavirus. In what follows, I list nine main lessons that we can learn for designing effective government systems to deal with other equally huge, though less obvious and dramatic, development challenges facing most countries.

Lesson 1: Clarity of Goals and Objectives

In this battle against coronavirus, the immediate objective was clear—how best to stop the spread of coronavirus and

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Table 1. Relative Impact of COVID-19 on Three Most Populous Countries.

World Health Organization data on April 20, 2020

Country	Population	GDP (US\$)	Coronavirus cases	Coronavirus deaths
China	1,439,323,776	15.47 trillion	83,369	4,642
United States	331,002,651	22.20 trillion	461,275	32,427
India	1,380,004,385	3.26 trillion	7,747	507

Source. World Health Organization (2020); International Monetary Fund: World Economic Outlook Database; Worldometers.

Note. GDP = gross domestic product.

prevent massive potential loss of lives. Clarity and unambiguity of the main goal and objective is also the reason given for relative greater success of private sector over public sector organizations (van der Hoek et al., 2018). In most countries, government departments are required to report to multiple principals, who often have multiple objectives that are not always consistent with each other. This leads to fuzziness of goals and objectives, and public managers do not have a clear idea of what is “really” expected from them (Andersen, 2010). If the public sector managers do not even know the race they are running, it is unreasonable to expect them to win that race (Trivedi, 2018). Therefore, for effective management, it is important for a government agency to agree on goals and objective at the beginning of the year, and the public managers should be judged at the end of the year only and only on the basis of their success or failure with regard to agreed goals and objectives (Elliot, 1976; Scott & Boyd, 2017; Shirley, 2008; Williamson, 1975).

Lesson 2: What Gets Measured Gets Done

It is not only important to agree on various goals and objectives, but one must be able to measure them without ambiguity (Gilmour, 2006; Mathys & Thompson, 2006; Wavelett, 2019). In the case of coronavirus, the metrics for success are clear and unambiguous. The bottom line for ultimate success or failure in dealing with this pandemic is the number of deaths per capita from this virus. A country’s leadership is judged ultimately by this single bottom line. Number of people tested and number of people infected are intermediate indicators for working out an effective strategy to manage the bottom line—how to reduce total number of deaths from Coronavirus in a country.

Lesson 3: Transparency of Data and Operations

In many government operations, the available statistics and data are suspect and the government operations are opaque—at least in many developing nations. However, in the

COVID-19 operations, the number of deaths (key statistic) is being monitored not only by the Government of India but also by WHO on a daily basis. Often, these statistics are updated several times in a day. These statistics are also part of both global and national COVID-19 trackers on their respective websites. This transparent display of data has another advantage—it allows countries and states within India to benchmark themselves against good performers. This led to what is called “benchmark competition” among nations internationally and also among states in India. This is a tried and tested tool of public management for improving performance in government (Ho, 2007; Lee & Kwak, 2011). In India, NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) used with great success a similar benchmark competition among states to improve Governance and the Ease of Doing Business index for individual states (“Delhi Slips Most in Ease of Doing Business Rankings,” 2019). It also used a similar benchmarking competition for innovation (NITI Aayog, 2019).

Lesson 4: Explicit and Unambiguous Assignment of Accountability

Governments all over the world famously suffer from the notorious “Not-Me Syndrome.” When the project or program is going well, there are plenty of people to take credit for this good performance. However, when things are not going well, the same people are quick to point fingers toward others. The solution in public management is to ensure that the accountability is assigned to a particular person (Frederickson, 2018; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000; U.S. Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 2013). It is not enough to say that a particular project is not doing well. It is critical to say “who” was responsible for management of the project. Projects do not self-implement; they invariably have a person in-charge for ensuring effective implementation of the project. In this pandemic crisis, the accountability was clearly assigned to the heads of government and consequently down the line. The credit for India doing well is already going to the Indian Prime Minister. Similarly, the U.S. President is already being blamed for the disastrous track record of United States in confronting this crisis.

Lesson 5: Accountability for Results Trickles Down

According to another basic tenet of public management, accountability for results trickles down (Metzenbaum, 2006; Scott & Boyd, 2017; Vaughan, 1997). Hence, for effective management, the top needs to be held accountable and the rest of the hierarchy is taken care of. As alluded to in the previous para, during this pandemic the heads of governments are being held to account, and the accountability is trickling down the government hierarchy.

Lesson 6: There Must Be Incentives to Perform

One can do everything right—create a good performance evaluation system and good performance information system, but if there are no consequence for good or bad performance, then it is difficult to expect good outcomes and results (Burgess & Ratto, 2003; Risher, 2004). Incentives play a critical role for human beings, whether in public or private sector. The nature of incentive system may differ in the two sectors, but they are critical for human motivation. During pandemic, several officers have been discharged or disciplined for failing to do their duties properly. These reprimands (consequence) were quick, explicit, and meaningful. At higher levels also, leaders are aware that their performance in managing this crisis will determine the electoral outcomes in the coming elections.

Lesson 7: Importance of Communication in Public Policy Implementation

Effective and timely communications are an important part of effective public policy management and implementation. As the saying goes, a well-informed customer is a happy customer. Any public policy, whether social distancing or lockdown, is like a commodity (or an idea) that needs to be sold to the public. You may have a great policy, but if the value proposition is not clear to citizens, they will not support it. We know great ideas and plans are of little use if the government is unable to communicate them to citizens. Furthermore, communication must start from the very top. Fortunately, Prime Minister, who has an unparalleled ability to communicate, showed the World how to do this effectively to a country of 1.3 billion free people.

Lesson 8: A Whole-of-Government Approach

Government is a team sport and not a solo event (Kamensky, 2018). Nothing that is done in government can be done alone (U.S. GAO, 2017). History of public management is littered

with failed government that worked in silos (Boxelaar et al., 2006). Coronavirus pandemic was not the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India. The entire Government of India was mobilized, Department of Civil Aviation, Department of Education, Department of Home Affairs, Department of Defence, and Department of Biotech, to name a few. In fact, to India policy makers' credit, they took this a notch higher and made it a whole-of-society approach.

Lesson 9: It Is the System Stupid

Most observers agree that a dysfunctional system is the root of most of public management woes (Moynihan & Kroll, 2016; Trivedi, 2017). All management experts agree that 80% of the performance of any organization depends on the quality of its systems and only 20% on its people. Thus, by focusing on creating appropriate systems and protocols, India was able to effectively harness the energies of public managers in achieving collective success.

These nine lessons are at the heart of the emerging Generally Accepted Performance Principles (GAPP) in the so-called field of New Public Management (NPM). If the policy makers apply the above nine lessons to designing accountability systems for public sector, they are much more likely to have high-performing public sector organizations. It is therefore everyone's hope that India will apply these same principles in opening the economy and will be equally successful in reducing the suffering due to the economic slowdown, a collateral damage of the fight against COVID-19.

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