The effects of new public management

An EU-funded team investigated the social effects of new public management (NPM). Examining public/private sector coordination, the fiscal crisis and the impact of public services on social cohesion, the study showed areas of improvement and decline.

NPM is an administrative concept introduced in the late 1980s intended to improve efficiency through privatisation, downsizing and openness to private sector influence. Certainly, NPM has had strong effects on European countries, but whether these have been socially positive is debatable.

The EU-funded 'Coordinating for cohesion in the public sector of the future' (COCOPS) project examined this question. The aim was to assess the impact of NPM reforms in European countries, addressing public management, public services and social cohesion. The project's 10 objectives included evaluation of innovative coordination and reintegration practices, and determination of future trends in the public sector. COCOPS operated between early-2011 and mid-2014.

First, the team compiled an accessible database of over 500 documents, used to examine the effects of NPM-style reforms in European countries. The work found few
reliable studies. Changes in public spending also varied across countries since the 1980s, confounding the analysis, since the effects may have been related to cost cutting rather than NPM.

The project queried the views of senior public officials and citizens. The resulting survey became one of the largest records of the subject, containing around 10,000 responses. The resource permitted comparison of the views of senior public sector managers in 20 countries on a wide range of NPM themes.

Researchers addressed three challenges facing the public sector: the need for sector coordination, the fiscal crisis and the impact of public services on social cohesion. COCOPS also considered innovative arrangements developed within the public sector to address cross-cutting policy issues, and matters of coordination between public and private sectors. The work demonstrated how cutbacks impacted the government sector, and described how different reforms have affected social cohesion, equality and inter-group tensions.

Further enquiries sought the views of additional stakeholders regarding what they see as the main challenges. The respondents showed a strong agreement about key trends over the last five years. Cost efficiency, transparency and service quality improved the most; issues having worsened include citizens' trust in government, the attractiveness of government as an employer and social cohesion.

COCOPS developed a substantial knowledge base containing the viewpoints of stakeholders concerning NPM reforms. The project also stimulated debate about the topic, aiding public sector reform.

Keywords

New public management, private sector, social cohesion, privatisation, public sector

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