

## Government at a Glance: A Lighthouse for our Public Services

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**W**ith the fifth edition of *Government at a Glance*, it is timely to reflect on the role of the publication, its progress over time and how it is different from other datasets on public governance. It is all the more timely as we witness new developments in the role of evidence in policy making. On the one hand, there is the rational approach, where evidence is used to know where we are and where we want to go. Policies and reforms are – or aspire to be – evidence based. On the other hand, there is a backlash against using scientific evidence, and in some extreme cases fake “evidence” has been created.

In this context, it is crucial to have institutions that generate data and information that is not only valid and reliable, but also legitimate and trustworthy. At the country level two institutions fit this bill: supreme audit institutions (SAIs), and national statistical offices. At the international level the OECD is one of the organisations that is trusted to produce highly relevant, valid and reliable evidence that helps governments in policy making and reform. In the area of public administration and governance, its *Government at a Glance* publication fulfills this role.

In 2009, the OECD launched a new, innovative project called ‘Government at a Glance’. It led to a publication, accompanied since 2015 by a free online database. For the first time, a large set of comparative data on the performance of the public administration were combined in a coherent and accessible way, – Over time, *Government at a Glance* has become a “dashboard” for governments to see, at a glance, where they are in terms of reforming public governance. This dashboard follows a ‘production chain’ logic, but also takes public values into account. This ‘Government Positioning System’, or GPS, can be used by governments to evaluate their own performance compared to other governments’, help them decide how best to improve, and design reforms grounded in evidence. Subsequent editions have continued to develop, broaden and deepen this milestone initiative.

### **The trajectory of *Government at a Glance*: Developing unique public sector information**

The *Government at Glance* editions demonstrate a trajectory with at least six key developments. 1. *Broadening the scope: from a focus on inputs and processes to a focus on outputs and outcomes*

The basic architecture of the indicators follows and describes the public ‘production’ process and identifies five major categories of indicators: context, inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes. While the first edition contained indicators only on the context, inputs and processes, there has been a clear strategy over time to broaden the scope and the span of coverage to also include outputs and outcomes. This also allowed a shift from focusing on

the more narrow machinery of government - or public administration – to covering broader public sector. For example, chapters presenting core government results include indicators on key whole-of-government outcomes, such as trust in government, redistribution of income, fiscal sustainability, the rule of law, public sector efficiency and public sector cost effectiveness.

In addition, the chapter on serving citizens highlights indicators on the quality of service delivery in a range of policy fields such as health care, education, justice and tax administration. Building on a new framework for measuring public service delivery to citizens, indicators in the chapter evaluate service accessibility, responsiveness and reliability as well as citizens' satisfaction. This framework provides a strong multi-dimensional setting not only for indicators, but also for showing how inputs and processes lead to outputs and outcomes. It allows the systematic modelling of service outputs and outcomes, comparisons across different services, and the development of scorecards.

For example, in the area of the responsiveness of health systems to patient needs, *Government at a Glance* provides indicators on waiting times, whether doctors provide easy-to-understand explanations, whether doctors involve patient in decisions about care and treatment, and doctors' use of e-mail with patients. These indicators show how re-organizing processes may immediately affect the quality of outputs.

By deepening and enriching the set of indicators, it is possible to link resources and processes to outputs and even outcomes. *Government at a Glance* thus did away with the limited view that government is just about budgeting and spending money.

*2. Deepening the management picture: from a standard set of indicators to a renewed set of indicators*

More than any other initiative, *Government at a Glance* has been able to show the complexity of public management. This administrative, managerial, and governance complexity becomes clear through indicators on the number of key functions that constitute an administration. Within each function, an increased variety of indicators makes the evaluation of a country's performance more nuanced and substantial.

Indicators are presented not only on the standard set of processes and procedures for public employment, human resources management, and budgeting, but also on regulatory management, procurement management and digital government, and on how openness, transparency and integrity are organized and managed across all functions. *Government at a Glance* includes indicators on broader systemic dimensions of public governance such as the role of centres of government, leadership, foresight, and how inclusiveness is operationalized. Within these processes, the variety of indicators provides a unique and kaleidoscopic view, allowing a much better assessment of both of these government functions as well as of related emerging issues.

For example, human resources management is not confined to indicators on delegation, recruitment systems, performance-based compensation and the existence of a separate senior civil service practice, but also focuses on gender, age, flexibility and mobility, industrial relations and working conditions. When looking at women in government, indicators show not only the ratio of women in general government employment, but also their representation by key occupational groups, e.g. in senior positions, as judges, in politics, in parliament and as ministers.

For regulatory governance there are indicators not just on regulatory impact analysis, simplification and consultation, but also on the role of regulatory oversight bodies, the transparency of regulations, compliance and enforcement, and the governance of the regulators themselves.

### 3. *Increasing the policy relevance of indicators*

In *Government at a Glance*, indicators are not just descriptive, but are immediately relevant for public policies.

An indicator such as ‘percentage of first instance cases granted with legal aid’, or ‘percentage of people who feel highly informed about legal procedures’, as part of the topic of access to judicial systems, challenges immediately the need and quality to improve access to judicial systems by enhancing financial support, or communication and information. From this angle, and by choosing specific indicators, *Government at a Glance* takes a clear position on what good and better government is.

More and more indicators in the publication are grounded in recommendations and principles of good practice that member countries subscribe to, thereby providing a normative element to their construction. For example, the regulatory governance indicators reflect the 2012 OECD Recommendation on Regulatory Policy and Governance and are used to monitor their implementation. The OURdata index on open government is built on the Open Data Charter.

### 4. *Connecting information: from separate indicators to more composite or combined indicators*

By combining and correlating indicators, a new type of thinking is introduced, which may then lead to action. If causality is not suggested, then at least the correlation of key concepts becomes clear and has the potential to affect debates. When the ‘fundamental rights’ index is linked to the ‘limited government powers’ index, it reflects a hypothesis: that countries with well-developed fundamental rights also have systems where government powers are not unlimited.

By including output and outcome indicators, it also becomes possible to connect inputs with outputs to demonstrate efficiency levels, or inputs with outcomes to assess cost-effectiveness. For example, by combining ‘total health expenditure per person’ (input) with ‘life expectancy at birth’ (outcome), or ‘cumulative expenditure per student’ (input) with a ‘PISA score’ (outcome), we create indicators on public sector cost effectiveness.

Other indicator sets have developed composite indexes without clearly enumerating their component variables and the methodological choices made when developing them. *Government at a Glance* is very transparent in this regard, clearly displaying the component variables that form the composite indicators - and the country values for each of them - as well as all the methodological choices made in combining them. This detailed information allows countries to identify where they could improve their practices, making these composite indicators actionable, and therefore more useful.

### 5. *Setting agendas: from supplying data to focusing on emerging topics*

Highlighting new trends by providing indicators on them is a central feature of *Government at a Glance*. Over the years emerging topics or special features in the publication included workforce restructuring, green procurement, partnering with citizens in service delivery in 2011; or ICT spending in central government in 2013, just to name a few. The diversity of topics shows that their selection reflects the need for indicators: 1) in emerging policy areas (e.g. green procurement, citizen involvement in service delivery), 2) to address

new policy challenges (health care financing), 3) to react to changes in the external environment, the most prominent being the last economic and financial crisis (workforce restructuring), and 4) to fill data gaps (ICT expenditures).

In recent elections in OECD member countries, popular discontent with political elites has been expressed. Such discontent is often based on parts of the population feeling ‘left behind’ in employment opportunities or trapped in low-wage jobs, without a voice, often segregated geographically. Several indicators in *Government at a Glance* focus on inclusiveness, or the lack thereof. These include – among others – data on the role of government in redistributing income, indicators on financial and geographic access to health care, education and justice.

6. *Organising ownership of indicators: from passive provision of data to interactive involvement of respondents*

A key strength of *Government at a Glance* is that it has not only gathered data from a range of reliable sources, but carries out its own survey-based data collection. This collection is done primarily in governance process areas, such as budgeting, human resources management, regulatory governance, public integrity, open government, digital government, risk management, etc. In many of these areas, the OECD is the sole source of this type of information (e.g. HRM, open government; integrity, etc). It takes advantage of its unique position to involve government officials who are responsible for and knowledgeable about these topics in the surveys. Any possible bias in the responses is mitigated by the OECD’s technical experts, who review the data and ensure quality control by checking the responses against previous responses, other countries’ responses and other sources of data. The OECD’s networks of government officials and experts also actively participate in the development of survey instruments, their piloting and the discussion of the results.

## Government at a Glance: from forefront to the future

OECD’s *Government at a Glance* is also at the forefront of at least three major shifts in public service governance.

The first shift relates to the breath of indicators included in *Government at a Glance* and the logic followed in their selection. Since the 1980s, public sector performance has been equated with economy, efficiency and effectiveness (the three Es). However, this approach, based on the *logic of consequences*, where inputs are transformed into activities, outputs and, ultimately, desired outcomes, is necessary but not sufficient for evaluating how governments perform. The public sector also needs to behave according to a *logic of appropriateness* to be perceived as legitimate and trustworthy.

This logic of appropriateness emphasizes three layers of appropriateness. The first one focuses on the values that public and civil servants should adhere to in their individual behaviour – so-called *individual appropriateness*. This is reflected in codes of conduct, requiring ethical behaviour of agents of the state, shown, for example, by the indicator on conflict of interest and asset disclosure rules for key occupations. Another layer of appropriateness is *organizational and systemic appropriateness*, which includes elements of sustainability, resilience, and system robustness. Whereas initially this was reflected in indicators related to open and responsive government’, *Government at a Glance* expanded to include indicators on the rule of law, the role of centres of government; strategic foresight and leadership, transparency, and risk management. A third layer of the logic of appropriateness has been added by developing indicators and chapters on *policy appropriateness*, focusing on fairness,

equity, inclusive government and inclusive policy making. This last layer seems particular necessary for understanding recent political debates on reforms.

Thus, over time, *Government at a Glance* has managed to make both logics (consequences and appropriateness) visible in a significant way.

The second shift involves how data are collected. The movement of co-creation and co-production has also affected the social sciences and their handling of data. ‘Participatory sciences’ implies that data collection also includes co-creation of data and crowd data sourcing. For example, new types of data and indicators based on web-based household surveys could generate new ways of looking at the provision of public services and citizens’ satisfaction with them. By combining different types of data, such as more classical statistics with expert opinions and crowdsourcing, it becomes easier to triangulate data and information. It also combines the technical features and strengths of data with ownership through participation. A third shift relates to the view of the role of state – the public sector – in society. There are two competing visions of this role. On the one hand, there is the minimalist state with low taxes and restricted service provision; on the other, there is a more flexible state concept, where the public sector may have a variable role and size. The implicit assumption in *Government at a Glance* seems to be that size does not ultimately matter if the public sector performs well and reflects societal expectations about its role. When a public sector is considered to be an investment rather than a cost, and being part of the solution rather than the problem, there is a responsibility to make the public sector function properly as a significant actor in the economy. The horizontality of public governance for the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an additional argument for putting ‘*Government at a Glance*’ even more at the centre of our attention, as a ‘lighthouse’ for our public services.

