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# Motivation of Public Service Officials: Insights for Practitioners

## WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Studies have shown that reduced salaries, insufficient equipment to perform work duties, dysfunctional government budgets and the pressure to remain effective while cutting resources and costs have impaired public service motivation in many countries. Years of such decline make the prospect of a public service workforce being able to deliver an increasingly complex agenda on reduced budgets unlikely.

Yet the public sector is critical to international development and key public services, such as healthcare, sanitation, electricity and water supply, can be harmed by the lack of a motivated workforce. It is thus important to restore motivation in the public service to achieve UNDP's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of frontline public officials is crucial for public service sector effectiveness. And because the public service sector is such a key pillar for international development, motivation also becomes critical to achieving international development goals. To produce effective and lasting reforms, there must be an internal desire to change and motivated public officials are best placed to lead this charge.

While public services are constrained in their ability to compete for top talent, it may not actually be in their best strategic, long-term interests to compete. Resources will always be a limiting factor, and the vagaries of human nature make the management, let alone motivation, of public service officials challenging in the best of conditions. The discussion in this brief seeks to offer inspiration, insight and instruction as a starting point on the crucial journey to improve motivation in the public service.

Public Service Motivation (PSM) is "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions or organizations".<sup>1</sup> It is an inclination to provide services for the good of society.<sup>2</sup> One study identified four factors that draw individuals to the public service: attraction to public policy making; commitment to public interest and civic duty; self-sacrifice; and compassion.<sup>3</sup> Another study classified motives for public service into different

'helping orientations': Samaritans (defined by service to individuals in need), Communitarians (community activists), Patriots (who value service to one's country) and Humanitarians (who work for the broader interests of humanity).<sup>4</sup>

In reality, motivation among frontline public sector officials varies across space and time. Assuming that all public service officials possess sufficient intrinsic motivation to serve the public good may be naïve. Unfortunate incidents across the world, such as a strike in South Africa where staff in public hospitals turned away paramedics when they brought in accident victims, challenge this view. However, intrinsically motivated public service workers do exist. In 2008, the International Civil Service Commission surveyed 15,000 UN Common System Staff and found that most employees joined the UN because of opportunities to use their skills to serve a good cause.

## WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Organisations, including public sector agencies, move from "a vicious circle of capacity erosion to a virtuous cycle of economic growth and bureaucratic efficiency" when they link incentives and motivation to the organisations

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objectives; poor incentives such as low salaries and unfair recruitment and promotional criteria can lead to capacity erosion. Furthermore, many public services compete for staff with the private, non-profit and voluntary sectors; public services do not hold a monopoly for staff with 'pro-social' values looking for a career dedicated to the public good. Having proper incentives is therefore a basic prerequisite for public service motivation. Without these, there might not even be enough employees to carry out required tasks, let alone aspire to enhance public service effectiveness.

Having said that, incentives and extrinsic motivators are insufficient—best-selling author Daniel Pink argues that the current carrot-and-stick operating model does not work and often does more harm than good.<sup>5</sup> He says that rewards “can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity, and crowd out good behaviour”. Hence, it is important to create an environment with autonomy, mastery and purpose to motivate those on the ground.



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For a more detailed coverage of Public Service Motivation – please refer to the full paper: [www.bit.ly/GCPSE-evidence](http://www.bit.ly/GCPSE-evidence)

## ENDNOTES

1. Perry and Wise, “The motivational bases of public service,” pp. 367-373.
2. Perry and Hondeghem, eds., *Motivation in Public Management*; and Kim, et al., “The Development of an International Instrument to Measure Public Service Motivation”.
3. Perry, “Measuring public service motivation,” pp. 5-22.
4. Brewer, Selden and Facer, “Individual Conceptions of Public Service Motivation,” pp. 254-264.
5. Pink, *Drive*, p.218.

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