
Külli Sarapuu: Skills for the government of the future

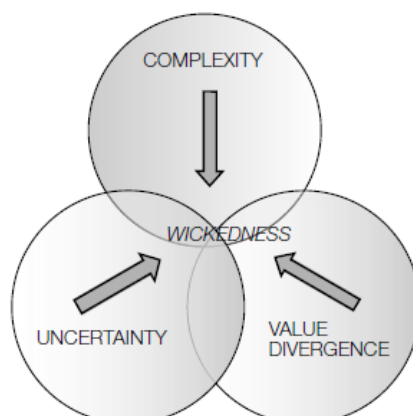
When discussing the economic prosperity and competitiveness of Europe in general, and education and training of future generations more specifically, the role of governments cannot be underestimated. They employ around 10-30% of the labor force, spend around 40-60% of GDP, establish market regulations, educate current and future labor force and cooperate with other governments in the international arena.

However, governments are not anonymous entities. Public servants who design and implement public policies, participate in the EU decision-making processes and cooperate with private and third sectors play a crucial role. Especially in smaller states, individual officials can make a big difference.

In a recent five country project initiated here in Helsinki, Finland, and called 'Governments for the Future' (bringing together Austria, Finland, Scotland, Sweden and the UK; Helsinki 2013) three key themes for the European governments were identified. These were:

- horizontal policy making;
- improving systematic use of evidence in policymaking; and
- promoting innovation and building learning capacity.

These themes have become central because our societies and economies are changing. The processes of aging, climate change, globalisation, digitalisation, urbanisation etc. as well as European integration change the way they work. Growing expectations towards governments, financial resources diminished by fiscal crises and the demand for more personalized approaches in public services present several challenges to the governments. Altogether, public policy problems are becoming more 'wicked'



Source: Head, B. (2008) Wicked Problems in Public Policy. *Public Policy*, 3:2 pp101-118.

Wicked policy problems are characterized by:

- *complexity* of elements and interdependencies;
- *uncertainty* in relation to risks and consequences of action; and
- *divergence* and fragmentation in viewpoints, values and preferences.

Increasing complexity, uncertainty and divergence mean that new approaches are needed in public management. Transforming societies and more complex policy problems demand changes in the knowledge, skills and abilities of public servants in order to foster collaboration, analysis and learning. It seems to me that the most critical competences from that respect are:

- **sense making** – the big picture thinking, understanding social processes, ability for exploring the value dimensions of public choices, transdisciplinary ability;
- **novel and innovative thinking** – ability and willingness to question the ‘obvious’, ability to come up with solutions that go beyond the existing rules or routines;
- **cross-cultural competency** – ability to understand and to operate in different cultural settings; skills in communication; and
- **collaboration and coordination** – the ability to work across organizational and sectoral boundaries; ability to work cooperatively.

The understanding and recognition of the importance of these skills should feed into higher education, recruitment and selection of public servants, their in-service training activities and accountability structures, but also to media and public expectations that are crucial for supporting more dynamic and innovative public services. European economic prosperity needs smart governing, but smart governing is not possible without smart and appreciated public servants.