

## Book Review

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Stephens, Melodena, Awamleh, Raed, and Salem, Fadi (Eds.) (2022) *Agile Government: Emerging Perspectives in Public Management*, World Scientific Publishing Company

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The book “Agile Government: Emerging Perspectives in Public Management”, edited by Melodena Stephens, Raed Awamleh, and Fadi Salem, provides a comprehensive overview of the many and varied aspects of agile government, from digitization and the use of all available intellectual resources to stakeholder trust and collaboration. While innovative practices are a key element of agile projects, cognitive biases and limited resources might be obstacles to successful implementations of strategies and projects. For the authors, skills, better data, and political will are scarce resources that need to be further cultivated. The 23 chapters help the readers to understand the ups and downs of agile government (e.g., the support for change brought about by digitalization and the difficulty to deal with a long-term agenda) and identify areas where institutions and stakeholders need to improve to meet future challenges (e.g., innovativeness, adaptability, data literacy, and data sharing). The book is structured into 7 sections, which aim to familiarize readers with agile government and key definitions, present specific case examples to learn more about change processes and uncover tips and significant elements for future considerations. The sections are the following: (1) Concepts & Realities, (2) Systems Thinking, (3) Futureproofing for an Agile Government, (4) Building Trust and Solving Wicked Problems, (5) Cross-Border Challenges, (6) Strategic Communication, and (7) Innovation.

In section (1), Chapter 1 defines agile government as “a way of mobilizing public resources in a fluid, interactive, flexible, and resilient manner that optimizes public value generation without rigidity while utilizing fit-for-purpose policies and procedures” (p. 18). In that regard, agile government as a new model in public administration aims to enable multilevel and complex structures to navigate challenges in an uncertain future. The COVID crisis has highlighted the importance to move toward “better government” (p. 19). Chapter 2 puts forward that a balance is needed in the way one approaches change within institutions, to leave room for agility, but also for stability, structure, and regulations. The authors of Chapter 3 integrate the wide range of stakeholders (i.e., citizenry, service designers, I.T. experts, and policy owners or leaders) in their agile model. While Chapter 4 illustrates restructuring from an agile and public value perspective with the example of the federal government of the United Arab Emirates, Chapter 5 highlights the democratic changes taking place in South Africa. The above examples demonstrate that transformation requires political will. Finally, in the era of digital transformation, recommendations for the Arabic region are developed in Chapter 6, including the need to expand technological readiness, data literacy, and adaptive leadership, among others.

Chapter 7 in section (2) explains the WISE method – Whole, not just the Parts (W), Intelligence flows (I), Sensemaking (S), Emergent effects (E) – and highlights that, due to systematic biases, policymakers should always be human-focused. Chapter 8 emphasizes the importance of assessing readiness or the

extent to which stakeholders are prepared to implement agile projects to increase success rates. Not only do governments need to be ready for change, but they also need, as emphasized in Chapter 9 in section (3), to carry out projects that are embedded in future-proofing policies, and thus effective over the long run. Chapter 10 shows that while agility helps to face crises, as was the case with COVID19, it also contributes to recovery. To this end, collaboration, data sharing, and human resources management are examples of key elements that deserve attention. According to Chapter 11, skills related to policy entrepreneurship (at lower management levels), boundary-spanning (at middle management levels), and transformation are particularly desirable for encouraging the sharing of ideas and promoting teamwork. This demonstrates that human resource strategy is linked to how agile government can be promoted.

In section (4), the authors of Chapter 12 highlight the idea of nurturing public trust, which has undergone a general decline since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. In that regard, digitalization within governments has the potential to improve dialogue between organizations and citizens, the latter having to be at the heart of the public governance. As evoked in Chapter 13, to preserve a public value perspective, data must also be used wisely, and “creating a data-enabled organization requires a culture of sharing, trust, and responsibility” (p. 261). Chapter 14 highlights that many challenges in terms of behaviors have been particularly high during COVID-19, as is the case in the healthcare sector in Africa regarding poor policy coordination, data transparency, lack of motivation to work on common agendas, and corruption. Nevertheless, some countries (e.g., Rwanda, Ghana, and Madagascar) “have demonstrated some semblance of agility” (p. 286). Chapter 15 explains that while changes are taking place, behavioral approaches can give new insights into the way problems are tackled, and how biases in decision-making processes are considered. For instance, the illusion of control requires “policies [to] always include a mechanism to find how they are being realized in practice” (p. 303).

Chapter 16 in section (5) shows that agile government should prioritize the development of a global community, where multiple stakeholders communicate and share knowledge. In this perspective of knowledge sharing, Chapter 17 recommends considering international students as a source of soft power. In addition, section (6) highlights the need for creativity and storytelling in Chapter 18 and communication in Chapter 19. Finally, in section (7), Chapter 20 explains the Liebig’s Law of the Minimum, which denotes that “growth is dictated not by total resources available, but by the scarcest resource – the limiting factor” (p. 383). These limiting factors which can be very varied, ranging among others from strategy, network, and process to inspiration, courage, and diplomacy, must (for the largest in each context) be addressed. To turn ideas into reality, like telemedicine in Chapter 21, the use of regulatory sandboxes, the promotion of transparent debate, the development of infrastructure, the coordination of data transfer, and the management of expenditures are recommended to be focal points. Moreover, the importance of knowledge management in Chapter 22 and of data openness in Chapter 23 shows that both access to information and access to data plays a vital role in implementing change.

This book emphasizes five key elements that need to be considered to not hinder the achievement of agile government. Firstly, according to the authors, strategic thinking should be prioritized over tools. Secondly, the effort must be all-encompassing within institutions and between stakeholders and should not be compartmentalized. Thirdly, the talent management process should integrate the skills needed to implement and foster changes. Fourthly, knowledge should be shared. Finally, governments are accountable for public value creation and the right balance should be found between stability and agility. Regarding the five above considerations, the book’s various authors provide insights for thought on how to tackle agile government issues in complex and varied environments that call for strategic thinking, sensemaking, and knowledge sharing.

The book helps to illustrate the theme of agile government to understand the current practical issues and the tools to be developed to achieve ambitious goals. In line with the five above considerations of the

authors, the book provides insights for thought on how to tackle agile government issues in complex and varied environments that call for strategic thinking, sensemaking, and knowledge sharing. Chapter 20 on the Liebig's Law of the Minimum particularly opens the way to new research as growth is a matter of scarcest resources, not of total resources. Further considerations in various contexts and countries would be an opportunity to gain understanding and cases. As stated by the authors, "to make real progress supporting innovation – whether it's inside a government organization trying to boost their internal innovation efforts or outside in the startup community – we need to create an innovation ecosystem to foster the right activity, executed at the right time, directed for the right purpose" (p. 380).