Governance in the 21st Century: Power in the Global Knowledge Society

What forms of organisation and decision-making will be needed in the emerging global knowledge society? Although the debate frequently focuses on the need to “re-invent government”, the issue of governance is much broader: how might societies – governments, corporate entities and civil society – become more effective in arriving at desirable collective outcomes. Nurturing social capital – based on networks and mutual recognition of worth – is both a key outcome and requirement of tomorrow’s broader involvement in governance.

An OECD publication, Governance in the 21st Century, sets out to trace a path to the new forms of governance that are likely to emerge as a result of long-run economic, technological and social transformations. It highlights three broad themes. Old forms of public and private governance are proving increasingly ineffective. The new forms of governance will involve a much wider range of active participants. And the rigid modes of power concentration and distribution that characterise most existing organisations seem destined to give way to more flexible and dynamic methods in the future.

For more than 300 years, the nation-state has been accepted as the key political actor in developed industrial societies. In tomorrow’s global knowledge society, however, national governments seem destined to become only one of many decision making nodes on a vast network. Setting and achieving goals, be it in a specific community or planet-wide, will depend on a constantly changing constellation of collaborative efforts. Fostering shared values will be a crucial part of making this type of network decision making workable.

To adapt to these changes, public and private organisations will need to be able regularly to redistribute responsibilities according to the nature of the task at hand, rather than on the basis of rigid hierarchies. Success will increasingly depend on using the richest sources of knowledge about both the specific problem and solution. A radical diffusion of authority and major leap in the acceptance of experimentation – with its failures and breakthroughs – seem to be the crucial ingredients for realising the benefits of tomorrow’s profound changes.

Journalists may obtain a copy of this report from the OECD Media Relations Division (request by fax: 33 1 45 24 80 03 or news.contact@oecd.org).

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