Senior Civil Servants as Societal Partners: A case study in the Netherlands

This case study was prepared in the context of the 2017-2019 OECD multicountry project on civil service leadership focussing on a variety of challenges and practices relating to the changing nature of leadership in the public sector. It was peer reviewed at a workshop with the ten countries participating in the project. The case study builds on existing OECD work on senior public leadership to explore how senior leaders in the Netherlands can cooperate with external stakeholders in policy design and delivery to provide value for society. Based on the insights gained, it puts forward reflection how the Dutch Algemene Bestuursdienst could support senior civil servants in carrying out this role as societal partners.
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Introduction: The changing role of public managers under Public Value Management theory

More and more, Dutch senior civil servants are finding that they need to work with external stakeholders (other levels of government, private sector agents, civil society organisations and even individual citizens) in order to address a wide range of public policy challenges. This marks an important shift over the course of the past two decades and while generally perceived as a positive development—after all, there is genuine value gained from consultation and engagement with stakeholders in the form of greater legitimacy and quality of public policies and services— it has nonetheless challenged notions on the roles and responsibilities of public managers. Indeed, this shift is creating a unique set of dilemmas for senior civil servants in the Netherlands: where does the boundary lie between the sphere of public management and the sphere of democratic processes? How can senior civil servants demonstrate accountability for their results when these rely on the concerted action of multiple stakeholders? And, as previously invisible technocrats, how do they adjust to their new more visible roles as being the “face” of government? This draft case study looks at the changing realities for senior civil servants in the Netherlands, specifically in their relationships with stakeholders. It discusses some of the drivers behind this shift, including the major challenges faced and emerging good practices to support and improve new ways of working with societal partners.

Conceptualising government as a societal partner, working alongside other actors to deliver broader “public value”, is a relatively new notion. In recent years, Public Value Management theory (PVM) has gained considerable traction amongst practitioners as an overarching framework for understanding the changing role of public institutions- and managers- in their relationship with the broader society and economy. Mark Moore’s seminal book “Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government” was first published in 1995 and shook many of the tenets underpinning New Public Management (NPM) theory, the dominant pubic management paradigm since the early 1990s. Under NPM, public managers had been asked to become increasingly client and delivery-focused. Accordingly, performance management principles and tools were at the core of NPM, as essential instruments to promote greater managerial accountability and help public managers more closely monitor inputs, outputs and outcomes. A proliferation of key performance indicators and other accountability mechanisms ensued: from performance budgeting to performance assessments for civil servants and even performance-related pay. In this context, creating “value” for citizens meant delivering public policies and services effectively while being responsible in the use of public funds (i.e. efficiency and “value for money”).

Moore’s paradigm, however, argued that public value might better be created in additional ways, challenging existing notions of the roles for public managers in both generating and delivering public value. Under Public Value Management (PVM), results certainly still matter, but results for whom? Public managers now needed to think beyond the perspective of citizens as individual “consumers” and consider how their policies and services benefitted larger collectives and socio-economic objectives more broadly. (O’Flynn, 2007).
Table 1. Comparison of new public management and public value theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New Public Management</th>
<th>Public Value Management</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characterisation</td>
<td>Post-bureaucratic, competitive government</td>
<td>Post-competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant focus</td>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial goals</td>
<td>Achieve performance targets</td>
<td>Multiple goals including responding to citizen/user preferences, renewing mandate and trust through quality services, steering network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of the public interest</td>
<td>Individual preferences are aggregated</td>
<td>Collective preferences are expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance objective</td>
<td>Management of inputs and outputs to ensure economy and responsiveness to consumers</td>
<td>Multiple objectives are pursued including service outputs, satisfaction, outcomes, trust and legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant model of accountability</td>
<td>Upward accountability via performance contracts; outwards to customers via market mechanisms</td>
<td>Multiple accountability systems including citizens as overseers of government, customers as users and taxpayers as funders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred system of delivery</td>
<td>Private sector or tightly defined arms-length public agency</td>
<td>Menu of alternatives selected pragmatically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From O’Flynn 2007: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2007.00545.x

Under PVM, senior civil servants are increasingly having to reconsider what delivering public value means, and how they can best deliver it. Public managers were now responsible for discovering what avenues would create most public value, and then convening, persuading and steering actors in all directions and across sectors to deliver it. They cannot do this alone. Achieving this goal necessitates engaging and working with a wider scope of stakeholders and the adoption of different service delivery models beyond through traditional government or market actors (i.e. “networked governance”). According to Stoker, the “father” of networked governance theory, this is due to several reasons: firstly: public value should be defined by the public- that is, government alone cannot decide on what intervention is best or should be implemented without genuine consultation. Second, government cannot achieve public value alone - public health and safety, tackling climate change, and ensuring youth have a good start in life, cannot be achieved without a multitude of stakeholders playing their parts. In short: PVM means government cannot act alone to maximise value for society. Relationships- not only budgets or contracts- were the new currency for public managers. But, like its predecessors, this model brings about its own unique set of dilemmas. Public managers play a key role in convening and steering multiple stakeholders simultaneously. But this calls into question as to whether they are bypassing democratic processes. Second, focused on their new roles as facilitators and enablers of dialogue, they can risk losing sight of taking real action (i.e. “all talk no action”). Thirdly, lines of accountability for results became more complex and blurred considering the number of stakeholders, and the multitude of objectives being targeted. Table 2 below provides an overview of these and other challenges ahead for public managers embracing PVM and networked governance, many of which were echoed by Dutch senior civil servants in interviews for the present draft Case Study.
Table 2. Evolving set of dilemmas for public managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dilemmas</th>
<th>Traditional Public Administration</th>
<th>New Public Management</th>
<th>Public Management Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usurping democracy</td>
<td>The domination of officialdom, a system that frustrates politics; “Yes, minister” syndrome.</td>
<td>Management chases targets not political demands; the extenuation of contract relationships makes political control even more problematic; citizens reduced to consumer.</td>
<td>Managers doing politics could push citizens and politicians to the margins; there are severe limits to the extent that politics can be managed and remain open and legitimate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undermining management</td>
<td>The politicization of bureaucracy.</td>
<td>The undermining of professional judgment.</td>
<td>Encouraging a talking shop rather than action-oriented management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key safeguards</td>
<td>Conventions and constitutions.</td>
<td>Alertness of political leadership.</td>
<td>Good practice and stakeholder pluralist review to ensure that the system delivers effective stakeholder democracy and management.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This draft Case Study explores the changing context/landscape in which Dutch senior civil servants currently work, and discusses how they could improve their roles as societal partners to provide public value through greater engagement and co-operation with stakeholders. The OECD interviewed 12 senior civil servants over two days in July of 2019 in order to collect information from first-hand experiences. The context, dilemmas and innovative practices they shared with us are presented in the following sections.

The ultimate goal of the Case Study is to inform the ABD on how it could better develop and support its senior civil servants in carrying out these new roles and responsibilities, for example in further developing this aspect of its competency framework, as well as through training and support.

Towards PVM and Networked Governance in the Netherlands: recent drivers

In the Netherlands specifically, several trends have also served to push forward the shift in the role of senior civil servants to deliver public value in new ways. Some of the main drivers identified in interviews have included the increasing complexity of policy challenges; decentralisation reforms; and an increasingly hyper-connected and informed society.

Increasing complexity and inter-dependent policy challenges (‘wicked problems’).

Everyone is looking at (a problem) from their perspective, not form society’s perspective. We should not look at problems from the point of view of the organisation.

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS
This observation has long been a common claim across OECD countries, and the Netherlands is no exception. Climate change and environmental disasters, refugee crises, ageing populations, and preparing for/dealing with Brexit were cited as examples of “complex, wicked” problems that the Dutch public administration faced urgent pressure to address.

In the Netherlands, as has been the case in many other OECD countries, senior civil servants have traditionally dealt with policy challenges through discrete interventions layered on top of one another. However, taking a broader systems-perspective, such interventions may serve only to shift consequences from one sector/organisation to another, or continually address symptoms while ignoring causes (OECD, 2017). In short, this approach has had limited success. Siloed, sectoral approaches where ministries or agencies work independently are giving way to broader “policy programmes” and other means of co-operation whereby several policy areas will be brought together, and seek to address several dimensions or root causes at once.

Under PVM, public managers do not so much need to “solve” a wicked problem as much as help stakeholders negotiate shared understanding and shared meaning about the problem and its possible solutions. The objective of the work is coherent action, not a definite policy solution (Conklin 2007). This is an increasingly prominent role for public managers in the Netherlands. One interviewee for example spoke about an innovative cross-sectoral programme for youth: a Social Service Action Programme which involves a multitude of stakeholders to test and design the programme. Indeed, tackling youth issues such as social inclusion and developing skills requires a multitude of government and non-governmental actors, including schools, parents, researchers, etc. This is a multidisciplinary policy challenge; there are regional/territorial dimensions, etc. The programme relies on different stakeholders to help design the policy interventions themselves, helping ensure not only that it works but is later sustainable over the longer-term. The role of the senior civil servant has been to lead and steer this process.

**Dutch decentralisation reforms**

“Before it was “we listen to you” and then we would tell them what we want to do. But today we’re more on the same level, and that it is different than the way we used to do things 15 years ago.”

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS

In the Netherlands in 2015, a large decentralization reform (“Decentralisaties social domein”) was implemented, by which many tasks in the domains of health and social affairs, especially regarding youth care, have been shifted from the central government and provincial levels to the level of municipalities. These entailed essentially responsibilities from the Youth Act, the Participation Act and the (new) Social support Act. This drastically changed how social policies related to these areas were designed and delivered to citizens.

One could argue that greater public value is created through the decentralisation reforms by empowering local authorities to take decisions that concern their own constituents’

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specific needs and with their own particular local contexts in mind. However, the risk of decentralisation is also greater divergence across localities, and the role of the central government is now ensuring a minimum “baseline” of quality and assurance for society. Therefore, in this post-reform era, Dutch central government senior civil servants have to create value by ensuring this baseline is in place. But whereas before, central government public managers may have had more leverage to drive certain policy priorities within these three domains, now they must accomplish this by working with a multitude of municipalities who had legal competencies- and their own financial resources- to implement policy.

The trend to work increasingly with local governments was common throughout interviews. Whether it was working with youth, on long-term care, on Brexit, or implementing a major infrastructure project, all interviewees recognised the changing power dynamics they had experienced in working with sub-national levels of government. Namely, the power dynamics had changed due to different financing arrangements. Interviewees reported that the dynamics in how they related to and worked with other levels of government changed drastically. Whereas prior to the reforms central government entities could rely on their legal authority and financial power to leverage co-operation or delegate responsibilities, under the new regime, these “bargaining chips” were taken away along with the fiscal decentralisation that accompanied the reforms.

Growing speed of information flows and media pressures

“Others may have (legal) responsibility, but today with twitter, and social media – it also makes any issue a national responsibility. When a parent starts tweeting about their child, the national government feels like they need to respond.”

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS

In a digitalised and hyper-connected environment, information travels fast and often “goes viral” with citizens or in the media, whether it is entirely true or not. Interviewees reported having to spend an increasing amount of time and energy responding to media stories and even social media “tweets” and comments from individual citizens, usually complaints, about government services (or a perceived lack of). In this context, neither citizens nor the media acknowledged the differing responsibilities of the public administration but rather saw “government”, in its entirety, as responsible, regardless of the legal competency outlined in the decentralisation reforms.

The accountability pressures facing Dutch public managers therefore in co-operating with stakeholders is increasing. Delivering public value means responding to issues in real-time despite the fact that they may not be legally responsible for a particular case or issue. Reaction time has to be before the 5pm news, and therefore requires even closer co-operation with stakeholders to gather information or achieve results in a timely manner.

One interviewee spoke about a highly mediatised case concerning an adolescent. In the international press particularly, media coverage was not accurate. The case brought into question the delivery of social services that were outside the competency of the central government, but nonetheless Ministers were being questioned and held to account by the media/parliament. Other interviewees spoke about individual citizens sending direct messages via social media to ministers about their frustrations with local services. The pressure was growing to be able to quickly liaise with stakeholders and address concerns in a timely manner.
The Dutch vision of public sector leadership

The Ministry for the Interior is responsible for the senior civil service in the Netherlands. In 1995, the group was legally defined as the Algemene Bestuursdienst (ABD) composed of over 700 staff in the five top grades (from “Head of Department” to “Director” levels). In 2000, it also set up a core group within the ABD – the Topmanagementgroep, or TMG – composed with about 88 of the highest managers in the central government administration today composed of the Secretaries General (responsible for the official management of a Ministry), Directors General (responsible for the management of a large operational service or a large policy issue) and a small number of similar officials (advisors/consultants).

Figure 1. Composition of the Dutch Senior Civil Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups:</th>
<th>Functions:</th>
<th>Office of the SCS’ role:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top Management Group</td>
<td>Secretary General (#11)</td>
<td>Employer: Office for the SCS -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director General (#62)</td>
<td>Recruitment &amp; Selection -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Top Consultants &amp; Special Advisors (#15)</td>
<td>Career counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Civil Service</td>
<td>Director (#390)</td>
<td>DG OSCS directs selection -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Senior Civil Service</td>
<td>Head of department</td>
<td>Employer: their ministries, OSCS provides Training &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABD.

The civil servants forming part of the ABD must meet strict requirements. For the officials in the TMG, extra procedures apply, designed to guarantee that they meet high suitability requirements and that political considerations play no role in their appointment and assessment. For example, vacancies are made public. An independent committee draws up a list of potential candidates and a selection committee then makes a nomination.

The Dutch administration is well aware of the changing context for public managers and has reflected this in its strategy for recruiting, developing and supporting its senior civil servants. Indeed, an internal ABD study³ revealed recently that senior civil servants were spending up to 17% of their time “managing outwards” (i.e. as defined by the study, time spent dealing with local governments, foundations, schools, private sector, international organisations, etc.) As such, the ABD has developed a clear framework for its vision of public sector leadership, where the role of senior public servants as “societal partners” is clearly linked to the types of competencies senior civil servants are expected to develop and display.

³ Master’s Thesis study by Jaimy Wildschut BSc, 2019.
The ABD’s “Vision for Public Sector Leadership” expands on some of the competencies expected for being good societal partners. These include (and are not limited) to such qualities:

- Being a connector between social organizations, political governance and administrative organization;
- Bringing together people with different backgrounds, gender and various disciplines, cultures and organizations; use the complementarity of others;
- Understanding various perspectives;
- Adaptive capacity;
- Vertical and horizontal management;
- Having an overview of context and consistency of the file;
- Active in networks;
- Stimulating initiatives in networks, co-creation;
- Managing decompartmentalization and managing networks;
- Breaking down boundaries;
- Interpreting complexity of content and context;
- Inspiring others about content and offering comfort; and
- Targeted, aiming for results with social impact.

While senior civil servants are responsible for their own career development, ABD provides support in the form of training and coaching. One of the goals of this case study is to help ABD identify additional learning and development opportunities and policies to support TMGs in strengthening this aspect of their roles. A first step however is capturing the realities of being a societal partner and identifying what skills and approaches are effective.
What makes a good societal partner? Navigating the tensions of stakeholder engagement.

Are the aforementioned traits enough to be a good societal partner? Is there a “best” way to be a good societal partner? Dutch senior civil servants’ own experiences reveal there is no single answer to this question, with effective stakeholder management depending largely on the situation at hand including the nature of the specific context/issue at hand (technical complexity, number of stakeholders involved, etc.); the levels of political backing and support from Ministers to engage with stakeholders. In reality, senior civil servants reported having to successfully navigate different tensions that made their work as societal partners, at times, extremely challenging. Some common challenges are described below.

**Drawing the boundary between politics and policy**

“Parliament is worried about their role. We have already made a design with society so what’s their role?”

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS

Meaningful engagement with stakeholders requires negotiation and regular compromise. Concessions on the part of all parties are needed to secure participation and co-operation in the long run. However, in some situations, senior civil servants reported a lack of clarity in terms of to what extent they should yield to outside interests. Without much guidance from Ministers, it was often left up to the individual civil servant to draw the line in terms of which central government interests were to be prioritised. To what extent should civil servants make decisions that may circumvent democratic processes (i.e. mandates from parliament/ministers)?

One senior civil servant for example struggled to get parliamentarians to approve their work agenda, since it was perceived as having gone beyond the scope of what the public administration should determine about the design of a policy agenda. The irony was that they (the civil servant) was perhaps more accurately representing societal views and interests than the elected officials given the wide net of stakeholders involved. They unfortunately faced serious delays to their progress.

**Building and maintaining trust with limited control**

“Partners outside don’t necessarily trust you. It takes a lot of time to build that trust.”

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS

Forming and maintaining effective working relationships with stakeholders requires building- and holding on to- their trust. From the point of view of stakeholders, this entails being consistently “invited to the table”; equal treatment amongst stakeholders; being provided with timely and accurate information on government intentions and plans (i.e. minimising surprises); showing willingness to take on board recommendations and suggestions in policy design and implementation; and following through with any commitments made. However, senior civil servants reported that their hard-won trust from their stakeholders was often tested. That is, they might have to go back on a previous commitment due to changing politics (i.e. decisions from parliament/ministers), or other factors that were outside of their immediate control.

In one example, a senior civil servant had spent years developing close working relationships with local stakeholders, but close to the end of a project these relationships were threatened over competing political interests. In another, a Minister wanted to move...
forward with a decision that was not popular with stakeholders and risked losing hard-won relationships, the senior civil servant had to convince the Minister to choose an alternative. Managing expectations, differentiating between personal and institutional positions was noted as a common challenge.

**Working innovatively in a rigid system**

“We are solving the problems of the 21st century with instruments and solutions from the 20th century.”

- Interviewee from Dutch SCS

Depending on the complexity of the project or initiative in question, working in innovative ways with stakeholders in the co-design and co-delivery of public policies is difficult due to the rigidities of government bureaucracy: working across sectors, sharing budgets, transferring and/or acquiring the required human resources, were often hindered by complex financial and audit procedures. Indeed, the government coalition agreements last four years. Because of this time horizon, the financing and other planning is tends to take a short-term perspective. Even more basic needs, like working increasingly outside of the office “in the field”, seemed to go against organisational culture in several ministries. Some senior civil servants were increasingly using their time to “fight the system” in order to carry out more advanced and sustainable forms of collaboration.

So what makes a good societal partner? Interviewees had some excellent insights on the skills and behaviours that had aided them in this facet of the work, including:

- **A change in mentality.** First and foremost, successful societal partners were those who thought of themselves as such. Indeed, it was mentioned that many senior civil servants were hesitant to work with stakeholders because it often meant leaving their comfort areas (“leaving their desks”), and being confronted with the messy realities of policy implementation, rather than solely policy design. It meant greater risk of failure, since they were still being evaluated by different metrics. More importantly, being a societal partner means thinking in terms of “what is good for society”, and addressing problems from a holistic point of view, rather than purely a sectoral one.

- **Exchanging ideas and views:** this ability came from personal experiences over time, or by learning from the insights of others in such forums as the Intercollegiate Groups. These proved very useful to senior civil servants in the thick of challenges requiring perhaps additional perspective and experiences. For example, ABD offers peer consultation to top managers within the national government. Managers commit for two years, with 12 meetings of 2 hours, to a group of six other managers. Managers themselves choose to register for the peer consultation, they read about it on the ABD website, hear from colleagues or their MD advisors. The aim is to link leadership expectations to the outside world. These inter-collegial groups are each supervised by a professional coach, with 1-2 being present at each meeting to facilitate discussions.

- **Setting clear boundaries and managing stakeholders’ expectations:** Interviewees reported that building trust came from being transparent about what one could have influence over, and what one did not have influence over. Stakeholders were very understanding of the delicate positions that senior civil servants sometimes would find themselves in. They did not expect full disclosure of all information, just a clear, up-front understanding of what a senior civil servant could and could not do.
Making false promises was worse than not making promises in the first place. Treating stakeholders equally without outwardly favouring one or the other was also important in building and maintaining trust. Overall, stakeholders seemed to understand the differentiation between the individual civil servant and that of his/her institution.

- **Simplying co-operation to the extent possible:** In some instances, particularly where complex forms of co-operation would be involved between stakeholders, framework or umbrella agreements were established as a baseline or foundation on which to continue further activities. These agreements served to establish the stakeholders and interests who would be involved, and set out a clear mission or vision for cooperation. In others, senior civil servants reported using “flash consultations” or “marathon consultations” to achieve consensus in a short amount of time.

- **Shifting from power plays to showing their value:** Interviewees noted that their traditional means of exerting influence (i.e. legal competency and financial resources) could no longer be applied to the same extent. “Carrots” and “sticks” ways of working were less effective and senior civil servants had to instead work harder to prove their real value to stakeholders. For example, several senior civil servants noted that their new value was in having the “birds-eye view” and institutional knowledge concerning policy issues and challenges; as well as their convening power to bring stakeholders together.

- **Get help!**: One of the principle barriers to effective stakeholder management on the part of senior civil servants was lack of time. Certain tasks, related to regular communications and information-sharing, logistics for meetings, etc. required a considerable amount of time and investment. Some Ministries (see box x. below) found that recruiting dedicated staff to these tasks helped to maintain strong relationships and allowed senior managers to focus on the more strategic elements of stakeholder engagement such as programme design and monitoring.

It should also be noted that the lessons learned from the Dutch experiences here might be country-specific. In comparison to some other OECD member countries, the Dutch culture in government, and society, is generally one of openness and transparency. This might facilitate stakeholder engagement in the Netherlands relative to other countries in terms of ensuring senior civil servants adopt new mind-sets. Second, save for a few examples, very few of the cases of stakeholder engagement discussed for the case study were disruptive in the sense that they involved advanced forms of networked governance, such as the co-delivery of services. Consultation and communications are important, but still limited, forms of stakeholder engagement. The types of lessons and skills needed for more advanced forms of societal partnership might differ substantially.

**Conclusion: what role for ABD?**

Keeping these reflections in mind, what role is there for ABD in developing and supporting senior civil servants in being better societal partners? What levers are currently at disposal to help promote new mind-sets and traits?

- **Performance regimes:** Under PVM, public managers do not so much “solve” policy challenges as much as help stakeholders negotiate shared understanding and shared meaning about the problem and its possible solutions. The objective of the
work is coherent action. But currently performance assessment metrics are more geared to the traditional activities than these ones.

- **Coaching/Mentoring**: working with stakeholders is difficult to learn in a classroom, occurring over time with changing dynamics. ABD could consider other mechanisms such as expanding current coaching and mentoring activities to guide civil servants in these activities.

- **Facilitating exchange of good practices and examples**: currently there is little opportunity for senior civil servants to learn about others’ experiences - what models are used, what practices have worked, etc. This case study is an excellent first step, but ABD could consider perhaps additional mechanisms for more systematic collection and sharing of examples on stakeholder engagement experiences.

- **Organisation of “shadowing” and “work visit” exchanges**: one interviewee suggested that it would be extremely beneficial, both for stakeholders and senior officials, to learn more about each others’ work and policy portfolios in order to help improve understanding between groups. Further thought would need to be given to this suggestion, but the possibility of promoting greater understanding of the impacts of policies and realities of citizens and interests “on the ground” is surely worth considering.

- **Raising awareness amongst Ministers**: several interviewees noted that at times Ministers did not fully understand the value of stakeholder engagement, including the processes. How could ABD

**Workshop conclusions**

Workshop participants openly recognised the growing need to work with external stakeholders in policy design and delivery, and that ‘networked’ forms of governance provided value for society. However, they also noted that the “old” rigid structures and mindsets of the public sector were still very much in place. As a result senior civil servants who pursued strong stakeholder engagement approaches found themselves operating in two worlds and often having to “fight the system” in order to work in new ways. There were also common ethical concerns that arose around working with stakeholders, particularly around what type of information they should have access to and whether this could give them unfair or competitive advantages, or harm public interests in other ways.

A second observation was that very little guidance and good practices were available to senior civil servants as inspiration to overcome these challenges. The existing rules, regulations, policies governing the behaviours of public servants did not consider scenarios of stakeholder engagement. Updating policies as well as the exchange of experiences was necessary to build a foundation of what worked and what did not, and this could be an important role for SCS regimes like ADB.

Besides the more practical barriers, political barriers were also very much present. Ironically, the growing involvement of stakeholders was at times perceived by elected officials as going beyond the scope/remit of the role of public servants, who they still viewed as only “implementors” of policy.
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