W01 / Putting public sector innovation in context

Topic : Public Administration & Governance

Chair : Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)

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Third Chair : Mehmet Akif Demircioglu (Carleton University)

Fourth Chair : Roberto Vivona (University of St. Gallen)

CALL FOR PAPERS

Public sector innovation is deeply influenced by its context: from leadership and culture within organizations to collaboration across networks and the wider political and institutional environment. Despite decades of research, we still know too little about how and why certain innovations succeed, spread, or endure under specific contextual conditions. This workshop seeks to advance that conversation by bringing together scholars examining the organizational, meso-, and macro-level contexts of innovation in policy and public services.

We invite empirical, theoretical, and methodological papers that explore:

How leadership, learning, and organizational routines shape the initiation, implementation and sustainability of innovation.

How inter-organizational collaboration, networks, and professional communities influence diffusion and legitimacy of innovations

How political institutions, reform trajectories, and administrative traditions open or constrain opportunities for innovation

How power relations and governance design mediate innovation across multi-level systems.

Comparative, longitudinal, and cross-level analyses are particularly welcome, as are contributions that draw on under-researched regions and governance traditions. We encourage papers using qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or network-based methods to capture the complexity of context and power in innovation processes.

The workshop will feature interactive sessions organized by thematic clusters, followed by integrative discussions to identify emerging frameworks and collaborative research opportunities for a special issue on “Putting Public Sector Innovation in Context”.

ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT

Public sector innovation is increasingly recognized as a multi-level process shaped by organizational capabilities, inter-organizational dynamics, and political–institutional environments. Yet, despite growing attention to innovation in governance and public management, the role of context remains underexplored. Why do some public sector innovations thrive and scale, while others stall or remain symbolic? This workshop brings together scholars examining how different contextual layers (organizational, meso-, and macro-level) enable or constrain innovation in policy design, implementation, and service delivery.

The workshop situates PSI within complex governance systems where political authority, fiscal capacity, and accountability are distributed across multiple tiers of government. It invites theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions that address how contextual interdependence, governance design, and power relations shape innovation trajectories. Key themes include how leadership and culture drive organizational change; how networks, partnerships, and professional communities support the diffusion and legitimacy of innovation; and how political institutions, administrative traditions, and reform trajectories define the boundaries of transformative change.

The session will be organized around thematic clusters corresponding to these three levels, followed by integrative discussions exploring cross-level linkages and power dynamics. By bridging insights from public management, policy studies, and institutional theory, the workshop aims to advance a comparative and power-sensitive understanding of innovation processes.

Participants will collaboratively identify emerging research priorities and methodological approaches to studying innovation in diverse governance contexts. The workshop will conclude with plans for a collective

research agenda and the development of a special issue on “Putting Public Sector Innovation in Context”. In doing so, it seeks to connect global scholarship on PSI with new empirical frontiers, highlighting how multi-level governance, contextual asymmetries, and institutional diversity shape the possibilities for innovation in public service systems.

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Session 1

Monday, July 6th 10:15 to 12:15 (3202)

Introduction

Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)
Ali Guenduez (University of St. Gallen)
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Workshop Introduction

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Session 2

Monday, July 6th 14:00 to 17:15 (3202)

Administrative tradition as evolving context: Longitudinal evidence from Estonia

Marlene Jugl (Bocconi University)

This study focuses on the macro-level context for administrative reforms and in particular on administrative traditions. However, instead of treating administrative traditions as a static antecedent of reform, as much of the literature does, it conceptualizes traditions as a coherent set of administrative system features that are the continuously evolving outcome of distinct historical processes – including administrative reforms. The literature mostly presents administrative traditions and classifications of countries as static and focusses on paradigmatic cases such as France, Germany, or the UK, thus largely ignoring smaller countries and hybrid traditions. This study addresses these gaps through an exploratory longitudinal study of Estonia's public administration system (ca. 1991-2023). While the literature either overlooks Estonia or classifies it superficially as "post-communist", although its administrative system shares some features with the Germanic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-American traditions (see Jugl 2025), this study asks: How have key features of Estonia's public administration system evolved since independence in 1991? What were critical junctures for persistence or change? Which historical conditions explain the continuity or change of key administrative features?

The study starts by mapping quantitative and qualitative data (possibly yearly) on ten central features of the administrative system (developed in Jugl 2025), including:

· The role and size of the state

· Vertical fragmentation (decentralization)

· Horizontal fragmentation (number of ministries and agencies)

· Public personnel system

· Politicization

· Legalistic versus managerialist orientation

· Public service orientation

· Participation of interest organizations

· Accountability

· Legal system

Data were collected from different sources including official statistics and government publications, existing datasets, and academic literature. Descriptive data analysis allows for a longitudinal overview of the trajectory of the administrative system over three decades, detecting periods of change and persistence, sequences of change, as well as critical junctures. Preliminary results identify as critical junctures (a) the period around independence up to the early 1990s and (b) the years preceding EU accession in 2004. The second part of the study analyses these distinct periods from a comparative historical perspective – I plan to collect and use interview and archival data – to understand the political and socio-economic conditions that led to change or persistence as well as the sources and inspirations for administrative reforms (e.g. foreign versus domestic). Results identify a unique mix of widespread rejection of Soviet legacies, preferences for a minimal state, alignment with international organizations' reform programs, and continued fiscal pressure, which fostered a particular set of administrative reforms, moving the system away from other post-communist administrations.

In doing so, this study (i) refines our understanding of administrative traditions as a dynamic interconnected

set of administrative system features, (ii) highlights the reciprocal influence of administrative traditions and administrative reforms on each other, (iii) and explores actors and mechanisms through which-macro-level conditions enable specific reforms, highlighting the role of political and historical constellations for understanding reform dynamics.

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Jugl. 2025. "Patterns of bureaucracy: Conceptualizing administrative traditions." Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 35(3), 277-291.

The 2017 Municipal Fiscal Reform in Quebec: A New Framework for Innovation

Tommy Gagné-Dubé (Université de Sherbrooke)

The 2017 reform of Quebec's municipal fiscal framework marks a major institutional shift in local taxation governance. Previously, legislation operated under a prescriptive logic, specifying what municipalities could do. The reform introduced a paradigmatic change: the law now defines what municipalities cannot do. This move from a permissive to a prohibitive model opened new opportunities for fiscal innovation.

Two key instruments underpin this reform: the general taxation power and the authority to levy regulatory fees. These tools provide municipalities with greater flexibility to diversify revenue sources and adapt fiscal strategies to local priorities. In theory, such autonomy should foster innovative practices tailored to territorial contexts and citizen expectations.

Yet, this potential remains largely untapped. Studies show municipalities have been slow to exploit these powers, particularly in areas such as development charges and eco-fiscal measures (Tremblay-Racicot & Beaulieu, 2023; Meloche et al., 2023). This raises a central question: Which factors enable or constrain fiscal innovation in Quebec municipalities? Addressing this question aligns with the workshop's aim to explore how institutional and organizational contexts shape public sector innovation.

Our research adopts a qualitative, inductive approach, informed by fiscal sociology (Leroy, 2002; Martin, Mehrotra & Prasad, 2009), which views taxation as a social and institutional practice rather than a purely technical instrument. Based on over sixty semi-structured interviews with elected officials and senior administrators, we use thematic analysis to examine local decision-making configurations and their impact on innovation. Three dimensions guide our analysis:

- Institutional factors (legal architecture, intergovernmental relations) defining room for maneuver;
- Organizational dynamics (leadership, administrative culture) shaping risk tolerance and creativity;
- Political and societal pressures (citizen acceptability, interest groups) influencing legitimacy.

By integrating these levels, the paper shows that legal flexibility alone is insufficient: fiscal innovation depends on a complex ecosystem of rules, actors, and governance dynamics. This study offers an empirically grounded perspective on how structural reforms recalibrate the conditions for innovation in municipal governance.

Presenting: on-site

The Governance Arrangement of ColaboraGov: Innovation in Shared Services within the Brazilian State

Marcos Rodrigues (Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services)

Aliny Vanzetto (Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services)

Rodrigo Brito (Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services (Brazil))

Daniele Borges (Ministry of Management and Innovation and Public Services of Brazil)

The pursuit of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and innovation in public service delivery has led governments to adopt shared services centers (Bueno et al., 2016). This article examines how collaborative governance – decision-making that engages actors beyond organizational boundaries (Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012) – can convert political and fiscal constraints into capacities for innovation, efficiency, and results delivery. The analysis draws on ColaboraGov, the Shared Services Center of the Brazilian federal executive. The study focuses on its multilevel collegiate governance structure and examines functioning, composition, and institutional roles, based on normative frameworks and the Conformity and Performance Assessment of Governance Collegiate Bodies (ACPG) applied in 2025.

In 2023, Brazil expanded its ministries from 23 to 37 without increasing expenditures, thereby demanding greater efficiency and organizational innovation. ColaboraGov was established by Decree No. 11,837/2023 and implemented by the Shared Services Secretariat (SSC) of the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services (MGI). The initiative provides administrative support to thirteen ministries through collaborative and centralized mechanisms (Gebrim et al., 2025). Its implementation is estimated to save approximately US$ 1.55 billion over thirty years, primarily through centralized management of about 1,800 contracts, with US$ 220 million obligated for shared procurements. ColaboraGov also introduced advisory services in strategic management and organizational modernization for participating agencies, covering governance, process management, project management, and organizational design (Gebrim et al., 2025).

ColaboraGov's governance arrangement comprises three levels. At the strategic level, the Interministerial Committee (CIG-SC) has a deliberative role, is coordinated by SSC/MGI, and is composed of the highest-ranking or deputy officials from the Executive Secretariats of participating ministries. At the tactical level, the Management Subcommittee (SG) holds consultative and deliberative functions and comprises officials responsible for administrative management. At the operational level, five consultative Thematic Chambers are formed by managers from support areas.

In 2025, ColaboraGov's governance bodies were assessed using the ACPG. The instrument, experimental and biennial, comprises 33 Likert-scale items organized into the "Conformity" and "Performance" dimensions. By integrating both dimensions into a single, structured, periodic assessment tool, the ACPG introduces an innovative approach to operationalizing normative governance principles. Seventy-seven valid responses were obtained from 183 potential respondents. Results indicate high overall conformity and performance, with particular strengths in communication and executive coordination. Conversely, analytical blocks related to results delivery, committee configuration, and institutional routines showed lower scores, suggesting challenges in translating deliberations into concrete deliverables and systematizing results.

Findings suggest ColaboraGov's governance structure has bolstered legitimacy and strategic direction, consolidating it as a structural pillar in the transformation of the Brazilian state. Preliminary evidence also points to concurrent gains in efficiency and innovation in public management, associated with the promotion of inclusive social policies.

Putting collaborative public sector innovation in context

Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)

Putting collaborative public sector innovation in context

Mattia Casula, Emre Cinar, Myropi Garri

Collaborative public sector innovation has become an increasingly central approach to innovation in government (Torfing, 2019; Cinar et al., 2023; Casula & Migone, 2025). While recent studies highlight the importance of context in shaping public sector innovation (Cinar et al., 2024), the conceptualisation of contextual conditions influencing collaborative public sector innovation remains underdeveloped. This study reviews academic work on collaborative public sector innovation in three southern European countries: Italy, Greece, and Turkey. These cases offer a theoretically meaningful comparison because they share broadly similar state-centred administrative traditions, enabling a "most-similar systems" comparison, while differing in key contextual conditions that shape collaborative innovation capacity; particularly vertical collaboration conditions (intergovernmental relations and decentralisation trajectories) and horizontal collaboration conditions (state–society relations and the legitimacy and trust underpinning collaborative governance) (Casula, 2020).

The study examines how contextual conditions influence collaborative public sector innovation by shaping (1) which actors are available and recognised as legitimate partners, (2) the instruments through which collaboration is organised, and (3) the norms governing trust, legitimacy, and risk-taking in collaborative processes. Through a comparative review across the three national contexts, the study develops a contextual framework linking governance conditions to distinct configurations of collaborative innovation.

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Session 3

Tuesday, July 7th 09:00 to 12:15 (3202)

(Virtual) Building Innovative Public Organizations: Capabilities, Leadership, and Collaboration for Public Value

Bushra Faizi (Hamad Bin Khalifa University)

Evren Tok (Hamad Bin Khalifa University)

Public sector innovation (PSI) refers to the introduction and institutionalization of new ideas, processes, policies, or organizational arrangements designed to generate public value and enhance government responsiveness, equity, and effectiveness (Wirtz et al., 2021). PSI is increasingly recognized as a critical mechanism for enhancing government responsiveness, effectiveness, and public value in complex social, economic, and technological environments. Innovation outcomes in the public sector are shaped by the interplay of organizational, inter-organizational, and macro-level institutional contexts.

PSI prioritizes societal impact, democratic legitimacy, and the well-being of citizens (Gesierich, 2023). PSI involves both the creation of innovative solutions and their integration into formal systems to meet complex public needs. Haug et al. (2023) emphasize that innovation enhances the adaptive capacity of public institutions, particularly in the face of digital disruption and institutional complexity. This makes PSI a critical concern for contemporary governance and public policy reform.

The paper conceptualizes PSI as a multi-level, contextually interdependent process, where innovation is shaped by organizational capacities, networks and partnerships, and macro-level institutional arrangements. This research examines the dynamics of public sector innovation in Qatar, an under-researched but strategically significant governance context in the Middle East. Qatar has centralized governance structures, strong developmental state, and ambitious national reform, and economic diversification. These characteristics create opportunities and constraints for innovation, offering a unique context to explore how governments can mobilize contextual conditions to enable sustainable change.

Primary data will be collected through interviews, focusing on the reasons and sources of innovation, short- and long-term goals, the activities undertaken to achieve these goals, drivers and constraints, and illustrative examples that help capture how innovation takes shape in practice.

This research focuses on the five dimensions that shape the landscape of innovation in the public sector: public sector creativity (Houtgraaf et al., 2024), innovation labs, design thinking, co-creation and participatory governance, and drivers and challenges of PSI in our context of Qatar.

The experts' insights are expected to enrich the analysis and highlight how innovation is shaped in specific-country context (Cinar et al.,2022). We will also use secondary data from Global Innovation Index to draw brief comparison of the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) members.

The objectives, aligned with the workshop's research questions, are:

1. Exploring organizational-level factors, including leadership, culture, routines, and internal capacity, that influence the initiation, implementation, and sustainability of innovations.

2. Examining meso-level dynamics such as networks, collaborative ecosystems, and professional communities that affect the diffusion, legitimacy, and scaling of innovation.

3. Considering macro-level conditions, including administrative traditions, regulatory frameworks, and reform trajectories, that shape the boundaries of what innovation is possible.

This research is expected to contribute a context-sensitive and power-aware understanding of public sector innovation, offering lessons for other countries, especially in Middle East. The study aligns closely with the workshop's focus on multi-level contexts, comparative innovation trajectories, and the ways in which

governance design shapes the sustainability and diffusion of public sector innovations.

On-site presentation

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(Virtual) Making Innovation Stick: Collective Intelligence, Context, and Public Sector Innovation Labs

Sarah Dagher Al Feghali (Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chausees)

Public sector innovation is increasingly pursued through public sector innovation labs (PSI labs) as governments seek to address wicked, cross-cutting societal challenges that exceed the capacity of traditional bureaucratic structures. While PSI labs are widely recognized for mobilizing participation, experimentation, and collaboration, less is known about when and how these efforts translate into enduring institutional innovation and sustained public value. This paper aims to address this gap through an integrative literature review examining how PSI labs mobilize collective intelligence across organizational and institutional contexts.

The study is guided by the following research question: How do public-sector innovation labs leverage collective intelligence mechanisms to shape institutional innovation and deliver public value? To answer this question, the paper synthesizes 39 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 using an integrative literature review methodology that combines Russell's structured analytical approach with Torraco's theory-building orientation. The review is anchored in a composite conceptual framework that integrates three complementary perspectives and theories. The first one is Malone's Collective Intelligence Genome, examining who contributes, how knowledge is mobilized, what is achieved, and why participation occurs. The second one is Raffaelli and Glynn's theory of institutional innovation, assessing how new practices gain legitimacy and become embedded. The third one is Moore's Public Value Triangle, which evaluates outcomes in terms of public value creation, legitimacy, and operational capacity.

The review spans 547 PSI labs across diverse governance contexts, including policy, service, urban, social, and digital innovation labs. Findings show that PSI labs are effective at activating and integrating collective intelligence mechanisms, such as participatory design, co-creation, experimentation, and data-enabled collaboration, leading to short-term innovation outcomes, improved service delivery, enhanced policy design, and increased legitimacy and trust. However, these mechanisms are rarely institutionalized as enduring routines, capabilities, or governance arrangements. Instead, innovation often remains confined to project-based pilots or protected niches, limiting its systemic impact.

To explain this persistent gap between experimentation and institutional innovation, the paper introduces the Collective Intelligence-to-Institutional Innovation Continuum, an interpretive framework that conceptualizes innovation as a progression from activation to integration to institutionalization across organizational levels. The framework emphasizes the crucial role of contextual enabling conditions, such as leadership commitment, structural autonomy, learning routines, collaborative culture, and alignment with societal objectives, in determining whether collective intelligence practices persist or dissipate.

By framing PSI labs as relational infrastructures, the paper directly engages the workshop's focus on how networks, partnerships, and professional communities shape the diffusion and legitimacy of public sector innovation. The findings show that collective intelligence gains institutional traction when carried by enduring inter-organizational relationships, boundary-spanning roles, and shared professional practices that link labs to core administrative and policy arenas. In doing so, the paper advances a context-sensitive explanation of innovation diffusion that connects collaborative networks to institutionalization, thereby helping to explain why some public sector innovations stabilize and scale, while others remain isolated or temporary.

Contexts of Public?Sector Innovation: The Case of Agricultural Innovation in China and India

Stuti Rawat (University College London, University of London)

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the lack of research on public sector innovation (PSI) in Asia (Chen et al., 2020; Van Der Wal & Demircioglu, 2020), highlighting in particular the gap in cross-country studies that illuminate national contexts (Cinar et al., 2024). Although a few studies have made valuable contributions by evaluating PSI typologies for understudied countries (Cinar et al., 2024; Suchitwarasan et al., 2024), they tend to flatten sectoral differences when comparing PSI across nations. Yet the form of PSI is likely shaped by the sector in which it occurs. Using Chen et al. (2020)'s typology, to take an example, one can reasonably argue that the institutional strategy, capacity and operations associated with the defence sector are likely to differ markedly from those in the health sector (Selviaridis et al., 2023), and these differences shape how PSI emerge, diffuse, and deliver. Thus, this paper argues for a sector?anchored comparative lens and applies it to the national agricultural innovation systems in India and China.

Agricultural innovation is an especially revealing test case: both India and China remain among the world's largest public spenders on agricultural R&D, even as high-income countries have reduced public investment in agricultural R&D, despite the rising spectre of climate change (Pardey et al., 2016, 2025). Thus, both countries treat public?sector agricultural innovation as a strategic public good. I argue that this is in part due to the path dependency, rooted in distinct legacies of state?led agrarian science and recent modernization drives. However, divergent political authority and systems of administrative organisation, have conditioned the PSI repertoire for the two nations in different ways. I support this argument by undertaking a content analysis of official policy documents, public expenditure records, and scholarly literature from the past decade pertaining to public agricultural R&D systems to map innovation types and context types, operationalising Cinar et al. (2024)'s national context framework. By comparing PSI within the agricultural innovation sector across two countries, this paper aims to clarify mechanisms linking national context to PSI types and to contribute to a more methodologically robust framework for cross?country PSI comparisons.

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Session 4

Tuesday, July 7th 14:00 to 17:15 (3202)

Varieties of Local Government Innovation

Quinton Mayne (Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University)

Local governments increasingly turn to innovation to improve basic services and address complex policy challenges. In public policy and administration research, innovation has long been recognized as a key driver of organizational learning, adaptation, and performance. How local governments approach innovation varies significantly across contexts within and between countries, reflecting differences in organizational structures, available resources, and multi-level governance dynamics. Yet, despite growing attention to public-sector innovation, much existing research on municipal innovation focuses on a single city or country, thereby limiting a systematic understanding of how contextual variables shape municipal innovation practices.

This exploratory study addresses this limitation through a cross-national comparative design, based on interviews with 66 practitioners from 12 countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Oceania. The interview data are analyzed using a mix of deductive and inductive coding methods to identify the key dimensions that characterize variations in local-government approaches to public-sector innovation (PSI).

Our data indicate that local governments differ in their PSI approach along two main meso-level dimensions: (1) the institutionalization of the work of innovators within local governments; and (2) the support that local governments receive from the broader environment in which they operate. Regarding the first dimension, local governments differ in how they structure innovation-related leadership and management responsibilities, as reflected in the formalization of innovation roles and the level of involvement of senior managers and politicians. Regarding the second dimension, our data indicate that two external conditions shape local governments' approaches to innovation: (1) normative understandings of innovation within the public sector; and (2) the role of external actors (including central governments, local government associations, and universities) in supporting local governments in their innovation efforts.

Based on these two dimensions, we develop a set of exploratory "ideal types" of local systems of PSI: (i) ad-hoc entrepreneurialism, (ii) structured-yet-atomized innovation, (iii) supportive experimentation, and (iv) innovation in concert. These ideal types capture distinct configurations of organizational and environmental conditions that shape how PSI plays out at the local level.

In a subsequent analytical step, we situate documented cases of municipal innovation from the academic literature within each ideal type to explore how leadership skills and behaviors vary across different local innovation contexts, and to develop propositions about how political and institutional variables shape local systems of innovation.

The paper contributes directly to the workshop's aim of advancing a contextualized understanding of public-sector innovation. It does so by conceptualizing local systems of PSI as a meso-level construct that links local organizational arrangements with supra-local environmental conditions. In doing so, the paper also offers a comparative, cross-level framework for understanding how contextual factors shape innovation-related leadership practices.

From Symbolic Reform to Enduring Innovation: Organizational Capacity and the Context of Equity-Centered Change

Katie Friedman (Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development)

Kathleen Yang-Clayton (Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development)

Dhruv Shah (Cept university)

Public sector innovation scholarship has grown, yet it still struggles to explain why many reforms remain symbolic while others scale and endure. This paper argues that equity-centered innovations stall less because of political resistance and more because equity is treated as a normative commitment rather than developed as an organizational capacity that can also address the instrumental logics of public administrators. Our work draws deeply from Daniel Moynihan's work in public administration and the application of Joan Tronto's ethics of care work in public administration (Moynihan 2002; Tronto 1998; Engster 2020). We specify the mechanism that bridges normative and instrumental thinking: the alignment of equity, effectiveness, and efficiency as co-constitutive elements of organizational performance and innovation rather than competing values. We also address the internal organizational context of procedural "neutrality" which often reproduces domination at the point of policy implementation and why equity-centered innovation requires institutionalized practices of attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and competence. This ethics of care provides a concrete specification of what equity requires inside organizational routines, especially in the discretionary spaces where symbolic reforms often collapse.

Our unique theoretical contribution is a meso-level explanation of innovation durability that connects directly to the workshop's context question. From an organizational sociology perspective, we elaborate on how legitimacy is produced through equity-centered organizational practice and outline a theory of change on how targeted innovation successfully transforms the rules, incentives, and informal norms that structure what administrators can actually do (Ray, 2019; Engster 2020; Sewell 1992; Dantzler and Yang-Clayton 2022). Thus, we are able to explore the link between organizational capacity to the barriers and tactics literature on public sector innovation and to research on frames, narratives, and readiness in public management innovation. We also position leadership and collaboration findings as necessary inputs that remain insufficient when organizations lack the internal capacity to institutionalize learning, absorb costs of collaboration, and routinize equity criteria into operational decision-making. Our paper explores why internal innovations can thrive and scale when equity is not appended to bureaucratic routines, but built into the organizational infrastructure that governs learning, legitimacy, and performance.

To specifically address the issue of context, we draw on qualitative evidence from municipal reform initiatives and examine how equity work stalls when it is treated as an external value layered onto existing bureaucratic routines, rather than as a practice learned through iterative problem-solving, role negotiation, and internal feedback. We analyze a set of twenty pilot projects that have been generated by participants in two programs: Reimagining Equity through Dynamic Inquiry (REDI) and Learning to Operationalize and Realize Equity (LORE) partner sites. We do not make any claims of representativeness, but instead utilize them as case studies that help to maximize the visibility of internal processes and also offer opportunities for discovery of both anticipated and unanticipated mechanisms of internal organizational change. Our empirical contribution is to show how and when professional city manager systems can initiate and sustain equity-based organizational performance innovations in a highly risk averse and resource constrained organizational environment.

Examining the Capacity of Municipal Governments to Innovate: Typologies, Tools and Scale

Zachary Spicer (York University)

Joseph Lyons (University of Western Ontario)

The capacity to innovate is a critical characteristic that often defines the success of many organizations. The ability to create, develop, and implement practical ideas that achieve some benefit is at the heart of these efforts. Previously thought of as an exercise of the private sector to maximize profit, remain competitive, and appeal to new customers, the pursuit of innovation has become equally important for public organizations. More recently, efforts to pursue innovation have become an increasingly local endeavour to improve public service provision and the ability to navigate unanticipated challenges. However, our current understanding of local governments' innovation capacity remains relatively limited. This paper aims to address this gap by

identifying and describing the innovation capacity of municipalities throughout Western democracies. Our research adds to a growing body of literature on public sector innovation in three ways. First, we examine competing interpretations of the innovation concept to present the need for a unified definition and a more comprehensive classification system. Second, we synthesize the previously theorized challenges public sector organizations and local governments, more specifically, encounter when attempting to pursue various forms of innovation. Third, we construct a novel data set based on over 300 case studies to identify the most common innovation types and the associated drivers, barriers, and lessons emerging from municipalities in various countries. Broadly, our findings demonstrate that local governments have become critical initiators and implementors of innovation activities, often in ways that may challenge existing typologies attempting to capture the nature of public sector innovations.

From Users to Co-Creators: Policy Feedback and Active Citizenship in the Multi-Level Governance of the EUDI Wallet

Stefan Handke (Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Dresden (FH))

Marianna Rovner (Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Dresden (FH))

Digitalization is often framed as a neutral, technical necessity for administrative efficiency. It seems to be a "top priority" to free up resources for a modern state. Yet, a persistent paradox remains: despite the ubiquitous rollout of AI and other digital tools and services, the "implementation (innovation) gap" in the public sector is widening. Technically sound innovations by political or administrative authorities frequently fail to achieve long-term sustainability and societal acceptance, because they are perceived as technocratic impositions rather than democratic enhancements. The central puzzle, therefore, is not whether the technology works, but how the process of its implementation either builds or erodes the civic foundation it stands upon. This paper addresses this question by examining the design and implementation of the European Digital Identity Wallet (EUDI-Wallet) through the lens of Policy Feedback Theory (PFT). Situated within a complex multi-level governance system, it argues that the success of digital government depends less on technical feasibility and more on the role of contextual factors in shaping legitimacy (cf. Governance Design Hypothesis).

In order to examine how political institutions and administrative frameworks influence innovation, we consider the EUDI-Wallet not only as a technical instrument but foremost as a societal innovation that generates significant political and social feedback effects. These effects manifest, for instance, in user adoption rates, societal (non-)acceptance, and the public framing of the policy, all of which shape its long-term legitimacy. We integrate PFT with concepts of co-production to analyze how 'state action' is filtered through specific administrative traditions. These traditions shape the governance design and dictate whether co-creation is viewed as a legitimate administrative tool or a disruption to established routines. More specifically, the objective of the analysis is to understand how established mechanisms of policy design can foster Active Citizenship. This, in turn, would serve to address issues of political alienation and strengthen resilience against legitimacy pressures.

The study examines a pioneering sub-national pilot of the EUDI-Wallet in Germany. The EUDI-Wallet is a particularly relevant case to the study of multi-level systems because it illustrates the tension and interdependence between supranational mandates (EU), national reform trajectories, and local administrative implementation. To capture the complexity of the institutional context and governance dynamics in this innovation process, a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data is employed, including document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and user feedback data from co-design workshops with "digital natives”.

Our analysis suggests that incorporating co-creation formats into the pilot phase, between citizens and administration bodies, triggers a positive policy feedback mechanism. The systematic inclusion of user perspectives resulted in tangible adjustments to service design, which in turn strengthened internal political efficacy (citizens perceiving themselves as capable co-creators) and external political efficacy (citizens perceiving the administration as responsive). By connecting individual participatory experiences to broader legitimacy, the paper offers a relational perspective on innovation processes. It demonstrates that success depends on designing implementation strategies that foster constructive feedback loops between the state and the public (, following an Active Citizenship logic). In doing so, it illuminates how multi-level governance design and collaborative structures shape innovation trajectories, offering a fresh outlook on how innovative digital policies succeed and endure within specific contexts.

W01 / Putting public sector innovation in context

Chair : Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)

Second Chair : Ali Guenduez (University of St. Gallen)

Third Chair : Mehmet Akif Demircioglu (Carleton University)

Fourth Chair : Roberto Vivona (University of St. Gallen)

Session 5

Wednesday, July 8th 09:00 to 12:15 (3202)

The New Spirit of SNCF: Digital Transformation as a Multi-Level Ideological Operator (2018–2021)

Tiffany Matias (Université de Montpellier I)

Why do some public sector innovations take hold while others remain symbolic? This paper addresses this question through an in-depth ethnographic study of digital transformation at SNCF, the French national railway company, conducted between 2018 and 2021. Drawing on

54 semi-structured interviews, two years of participant observation (CIFRE doctoral fellowship), and extensive analysis of internal documents, it examines digital transformation not as a technical process but as a multi-level ideological operator — simultaneously shaped by, and reshaping, organizational, meso-, and macro-level contextual conditions.

At the organizational level, the 2015 creation of the General Directorate for Digital Affairs (DGN) restructured internal hierarchies, producing a new professional space staffed by external recruits insulated from traditional cheminot career paths. A typology of digital transformation promoters — change architects, convinced modernizers, and default modernizers — reveals how differential trajectories and degrees of reform adherence shaped internal power struggles. Lacking formal authority, these actors compensated through cultural hegemony strategies, and can be grasped as enrolled enrollers: while actively constructing what the paper conceptualizes as the "new spirit of SNCF," they were themselves caught within the cognitive and normative frames they helped circulate.

At the meso level, organized circuits of international norm circulation — Silicon Valley learning expeditions, the Fab Open Innovation unit, the digital champions network, and the Passeport Numérique training programme — functioned as structured enrollment devices importing Silicon Valley standards and converting employees to a new organizational ideology. Articulating with Jobard et al.'s (2020) sociology of norm brokers, this diffusion strategy illustrates how innovation readiness can be manufactured top-down through deliberate cultural investment rather than emerging organically. The paper engages here with Guenduez and Mettler's (2023) analysis of strategically constructed narratives in public sector AI policies, extending their framework to the organizational level: at SNCF, the digital narrative constructs DGN leadership as champions of modernization, tech giants as models to emulate, and confines trade unions to the downstream social effects of reform — a recognizable plot structure that was actively engineered rather than spontaneous.

At the macro level, the paper embeds SNCF's digital transformation within its long-run neo-managerial trajectory — from 1990s NPM waves through the 2018 railway reform and conversion to a Société Anonyme. Digital transformation introduces what the paper calls neo-commodification (data monetization, platform logic, speculative asset valuation) and neo-rationalization (algorithmic work control, data-driven management), deepening what Bezès

(2020) conceptualizes as a second-order bureaucratization rather than superseding prior reform rationalities. This configuration, where TPA legacies, NPM logics, and post-NPM imaginaries coexist and mutually reinforce each other, provides empirical grounding for Cinar and Johnston's (2026) argument that governance paradigms operate as layered institutional logics mobilized pragmatically to accomplish reform agendas.

A final contribution concerns power and its silences. Despite the scale of organizational transformation, trade unions did not contest the reform's ideological premises — a finding explained by structural

constraints and the reformers' deliberate strategy of confining union contestation to downstream social effects. The most consequential dimension of contextualizing innovation may lie not in what actors do, but in what remains depoliticized — and in the conditions that render certain questions unavailable for political challenge.

Methodologically, the ethnographic design conducted from inside the organization over three years provides rare access to the ordinary registers of ideological adherence that survey-based approaches cannot capture, and contributes to ongoing reflection on how to study innovation processes from within the organizations that produce them.

Still not there: The Government of Canada and Digital Service Transformation

Jacky Tweedie (Carleton University)

In 2025, the Government of Canada (GC) announced that it would create the Office of Digital Transformation to deliver ‘faster, simpler and easier’ digital services. This is a familiar call for those who monitor the GC digital transformation file, as is the call for Artificial intelligence (AI) and other enabling technologies to be part of the solution in delivering those digital services. As ever, the goal is faster and more effective service delivery of digital services – something the federal government has been working towards for decades with, however, diminishing success. In 2010, Canada ranked 3rd in the UN E-Government Survey; as of 2024, it ranked 47th – a seemingly precipitous drop that suggests something has gone seriously wrong with the GC approach to digital government.

Is the proposed Office of Digital Transformation the federal response to its (seeming) decline? In what way will it differ from the numerous other ‘digital first’ initiatives that have been rolled out, particularly in the last 10 years in the GC? What factors help explain the current situation? What precisely is there to be concerned about? After all, ‘concerns’ on the digital file have been raised since the Glassco Commission in the 1960s; nonetheless, the federal government has muddled along. Indeed, it was quite successful in rolling out emergency benefits to Canadians – using digital service delivery – at lightning speed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are over 300 entities and almost 400 000 staff today that comprise the federal public service. There is no homogeneous federal government, instead there is a constellation of organisations with their own histories, cultures, norms and practices operating under an overarching set of values. Each has organised its digital transformation functions according to local contexts. A few of those organisations provide enabling services to the whole of government (e.g., the Office of the Chief Information Office at Treasury Board Secretariat providing policy direction, Shared Services Canada providing service delivery to federal departments such as cloud services).

To make sense of this complex sociotechnical system in a transparent, open and accessible manner, the Public Sector Ecosystem Framework (PSE) developed by Osborne et al (2022) is used to understand macro and meso level phenomena on GC digital transformation in select organisations. This paper will share research findings from empirical qualitative research, where two main research objectives are reported on: first, mapping the historical and current context of the GC digital transformation file at macro and meso levels; second, the utility (relevance, effectiveness and efficiency) of the PSE as a tool to understand public sector organisations as instances of complex systems. Emphasis is given to findings that are of relevance to public service practitioners as well as scholars and are amenable to comparative analysis.

Digital Public Services as Context-Conditioned Innovation: Institutional Dynamics, Governance Constraints, and Reform Durability in a Transitional State

Davit Oboladze (University of Nottingham)

Public sector innovation is frequently conceptualised through the lenses of leadership, organisational capability, or technological advancement. Comparatively less attention, however, has been directed toward understanding how institutional and governance contexts actively condition the emergence, trajectory, and durability of innovation processes. This paper advances a context-conditioned interpretation of digital public service reform, reconceptualising digitalisation not merely as technological modernisation but as a form of governance innovation embedded within administrative structures, organisational routines, and political–institutional environments, particularly within transitional governance contexts characterised by evolving institutional consolidation and administrative fragmentation.

Empirically, the analysis is situated within a transitional governance setting and draws on the case of Georgia’s national digital service platform (MY.GOV.GE) through a qualitative, process-tracing research

design combining senior policy actor interviews and documentary analysis. Departing from technology-centric explanations, the paper demonstrates that digital public services operate as institutional innovations that recon?gure authority relations, coordination practices, and citizen–state interaction architectures. The analysis identi?es three interrelated causal dynamics shaping innovation outcomes: (i) institutional frictions generated by fragmented governance arrangements and bureaucratic path dependencies, constraining integration and scalability; (ii) organisational adaptation and learning processes mediating the operational stabilisation of reforms; and (iii) political and administrative context as a structuring force in?uencing the durability and consolidation of innovation effects over time.

By foregrounding context as an active causal force rather than a background environment, the paper contributes to public sector innovation scholarship and institutional governance theory. Conceptually, it bridges governance and innovation literatures by demonstrating that innovation trajectories are inseparable from institutional con?gurations, administrative traditions, and incentive structures. The ?ndings offer comparative insights into why structurally comparable digital reforms generate divergent effects across transitional and capacity-constrained governance systems, highlighting the centrality of context in shaping innovation sustainability and reform durability.

From Algorithms to Institutional and relational Capabilities: How Organizational and Governance Conditions Shape AI Adoption in Health Public Services

Robin Castro Gil (Universidad ICESI)

Public sector innovations are often constrained less by the absence of technological solutions than by intricated organizational routines, misaligned institutional capabilities, complex inter-organizational relationships, unstable political environments, and non-adaptive legal frameworks. This paper, grounded in a case study approach, examines how such contextual conditions may shape the adoption, sustainability, and scaling of digital and artificial intelligence (AI)–based innovations in public health in Cali, Colombia within multi-level governance setting. This work directly contributes empirical evidence related to the workshop’s aim of “putting public sector innovation in context” promoting broader debates on Data and IA governance of local public health systems.

In 2024, the city faced a historical dengue incidence exceeding 34,700 reported cases and 16 deaths generating considerable pressure on the local health system. In response, the District Secretary of Health and the Mayor’s Office initiated a strategic reorientation of public sector innovation centered on the use of AI-driven tools. A key element of this strategy is the involvement of academia as a long-term institutional partner, capable of providing continuity beyond electoral cycles and administrative turnovers. A central example of this approach is the Dengue.AI project, which aims to reduce dengue incidence by 20–30% in high-risk areas during the firsts year of implementation by generating AI predictive models at the sub-municipality scale city with a forecasting horizon of three or four weeks.

From a legal and technological governance perspective, the case also illustrates how AI adoption in public health comprise not only the capacity of public institutions to align AI-driven interventions with existing data protection frameworks, transparency requirements, and standards of public responsibility, but also with the organizational and relational capabilities. This highlights the emergence of algorithmic legitimacy as a critical dimension of public sector innovation in health.

On the other hand, at the organizational level, the study analyzes how the introduction of AI challenged existing bureaucratic routines within Cali’s Secretary of Public Health and the tensions between a "culture of learning" and a "culture of results" driven by political pressure. In this context, these AI models functioned as boundary objects, compelling epidemiologists, public administrators, IA engineers, data scientists, and policymakers to negotiate shared meanings, protocols, and ways of building this technology. Finally, at the meso-level, the paper analyzes these intra-organizational dynamics ruled mainly for a rigid legal framework of cooperation, a transactional system for request–response interactions in public administrative procedures, and a non-formal personal network of public institutions personnel. Regarding this meso-level, previous research in the region showed that the competitiveness system is characterized by a high "relational endogamy," where 81.7% of public organizations interact primarily with peers rather than cross-sector partners, 9.6% with academia, and 8,7% with other actors of the quadruple helix (Agudelo-Casanova, García-Dávalos & Caicedo Asprilla, 2022).

Findings suggest that while formal mechanisms were often paralyzed by administrative rigidity, "informal networks" were critical for bypassing bottlenecks. Nevertheless, transformations in intra-organizational culture for collaboration are required for consolidating a resilient inter-institutional e-Health ecosystem that converts contextual constraints into drivers of adaptive change

W01 / Putting public sector innovation in context

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Session 6

Wednesday, July 8th 14:00 to 16:00 (3202)

Collective Discussion and Future Plans
Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)
Ali Guenduez (University of St. Gallen)
Mehmet Akif Demircioglu (Carleton University)
Roberto Vivona (University of St. Gallen)

Collective Discussion and Future Plans