

Cooperation Modalities and Benchmarking for Good Governance In The New Reality

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ABSTRACT

The new reality we live in today puts governments on the fast-paced race for prompt solutions, underlining the ever-growing significance of collaboration and benchmarking which can help every party to find “best fit” solutions for their own settings. In demanding new ways of cooperation, modern challenges show the high relevance of the multilateral platform that the Astana Civil Service Hub (ACSH, Hub) offers through various forms of partnership to its wide network of participating countries and partner institutions.¹ Eventually, benchmarking and “best-fit” solutions that governments are searching for demand adequate measurements, including international indices which, as argued in the paper, require methodological improvements to meet the current development trends.

Introduction

Geopolitical tensions, globalisation, demographic shifts, climate change, and most recently artificial intelligence (AI) place immense pressure on public administration systems around the globe nowadays. In a world of continuous and constant change, a BANI world,² the critical eyes of citizens are turned to the

¹ ACSH promotes civil service effectiveness by supporting the efforts of governments of countries of the region and beyond in building institutional and human resource capacity of national public administrations. It serves as multilateral platform for exchange of experience and knowledge sharing in the field public administration and public service delivery among 43 participating countries and over 80 institutional partners from different parts of the world.

² BANI is an acronym coined by Jamais Cascio to describe a complex world of constant change and continuous crises. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity and BANIs for brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible.

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state, expecting timely and effective responses to urgent issues, regardless of the socio-economic model in place. Thus, governments are in constant search for adequate responses to the challenges they face, a result of the fast-changing landscape, in meeting growing citizens' expectations and maintain public trust in government.

At the same time, governments can respond more effectively if they learn cases and experiences of the others through various collaboration modalities. While the significance of global partnerships and cooperation for sustainable development has already been acknowledged by the 2030 Agenda, explicitly by Goal 17,³ the recent pandemic has made it more salient that the greater the challenges humankind faces, the more important and more urgent international and regional partnerships become.⁴

In the absence of a silver bullet, exchanging ideas and sharing experiences can help governments – each operating in a unique socio-economic and cultural context – to find best fit solutions for their own settings. Yet, in a daily routine, public institutions often lack time and resources to study best practices and trends. Therefore, demanding new ways of cooperation, modern challenges show the high relevance of such multilateral platforms, as the one the Astana Civil Service Hub offers to its wide network of participating countries and partner institutions. The experience of the Hub shows, among other, the effectiveness of Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Learning Alliances as an innovative form of collaboration.

Apparently, the success of P2P Learning will increase if it is based on the right benchmarking which is considered highly helpful both at assessing the overall performance of a country in a wide range of directions and at identifying some key areas for improvement. One of the extremely useful benchmarking tools is international indices' rankings often playing a navigating role in finding the right benchmarks. Therefore, it is an imperative that these indices' methodologies are periodically reconsidered and improved taking into account new trends and growing citizens' expectations.

1. Collaboration as a way for finding best fit solutions

Governance systems around the world are actively adapting to the new realm driven by digital transformation, a part of the fifth industrial revolution that aims to improve the collaboration of humans and technologies (George Shaji and George, 2020) entailing intensive use of modern technologies, AI and Big Data analytics, and thus creating a more conducive environment to deliver proactive services, while keeping citizens' rights and values at the heart of any decisive action (Baimenov, 2021).

In this vein, countries are collecting their experience with varying degrees of success, but one thing is clear that governments can make their efforts more efficient by sharing best practices regularly among each other, especially with their neighbours and countries with similar socio-economic backgrounds, and using the lessons learnt for finding best 'fit' solutions.

A collaboration scheme or a network can be in different modalities and formed in varied degrees of commitment and involvement. Working both collaboratively and independently makes perfect sense for members of networks, as they can bring their own experiences and compare with others. According to Forrer et al. (2014), a network is a loose coalition, where partners come together to take collective actions in which they share common interests, develop, and implement public policies that are cost-effective or highly beneficial, while maintaining their own value primacy actions that will protect and advance their own interests. In this regard, Forrer et al. classified four dominant approaches of the network:

³ "SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development". It is an important Goal as the SDGs can only be realised with strong global partnerships and cooperation, as any successful development agenda requires inclusive partnerships – at the global, national, and local levels – built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the centre. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17>

⁴ UN75 Report (2020). UN75: The Future We Want; The UN We Need. Nearly 9 in 10 respondents to this UN survey, included in the Report, believe that global cooperation is vital to deal with contemporary challenges. <https://www.un.org/en/un75/presskit>

1. The ‘informational network’, where partners come together to exchange information, policies, and solutions. In this collaboration scheme, stakeholders can have voluntary and one-time membership through meetings, seminars, or conferences. This collaboration scheme also promotes flexible and open access, where members can join or leave at any time.
2. The ‘developmental network’ that unites partners to share information, knowledge, and experiences to enhance their capacities and implement solutions within their home organisations. This collaboration scheme is also voluntary, but a long-lasting one based on trust and respect between the members rather than responsibilities and pressure.
3. The ‘outreach network’, where partners develop strategies for policy and programme changes that lead to an exchange or coordination of resources. In this setting, members can have some obligations to make contribution.
4. The ‘action network’ that brings partners together to make interorganisational improvements, formally adopt action plans, and provide services, along with information exchanges and advanced technological capabilities. This type of collaboration requires to have fixed memberships, fees, commitments, and regulations.

The practice showcases that collaboration can combine more than one of these types or can be supplemented with other modalities.

A vivid example of such a multimodal and multilateral institutional platform is the Astana Civil Service Hub (ACSH).⁵ The ACSH assists governments to excel in their public service transformation through partnerships and capacity development mechanisms, as well as through the production of innovative and evidence-based research works.⁶

One of the key success factors of the ACSH is that from its very inception it promotes demand-driven and flexible agenda as the scope and pace of implementing reforms varies among countries and they are subject to change.

This platform enables governments to utilize partnerships effectively at the time, when they are needed to improve their practical purposes. The relevance of these approaches is proved by the increased number of participating countries of the ACSH from 25 to 43.

Since 2013, the ACSH has become a global platform that has implemented more than 210 research and capacity building activities, in which over 13,200 practitioners, experts, and scholars from 125 countries have participated, and it has published more than 80 research knowledge products, including case studies, journals, research papers, and publications.

One of the up-to-date partnership modalities, which is also used by the ACSH, is Peer-to-Peer (P2P) learning aimed at involving individuals with common interests or issues to interact on a long-term basis and share knowledge and experience, at the international or regional levels, and across different sectors, in order to further develop “best-fit” solutions and apply them to their own home organisations and to ensure an impact at scale on reform initiatives (Andrews and Manning, 2016).

⁵ The Astana Civil Service Hub (ACSH), established in 2013, as a joint initiative of the Government of Kazakhstan and the UNDP, currently includes 42 participating countries and 80 institutional partners.

⁶ The ACSH employs several forms of collaboration to support the governments of its participating countries and beyond in their efforts to build institutional and human capacity and promote civil service excellence overall. The ACSH realises its mission through three main pillars: (1) Partnerships and networking; (2) Capacity building and peer-to-peer learning; and (3) Research and knowledge management.

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The P2P learning is comparable to the intergovernmental network (Voets and Rynck, 2008) and the Community of Practice (Gobbi, 2010). However, its main distinguishing feature is that it gives learners more autonomy in membership, their own learning, communication, and decision-making. Thus, the P2P learning adheres to the principles of equality, trust and respect and is more focused on professionals' grouping, sharing best practices on specific issues, as well as in strengthening partnerships and developing avenues for future advancements.

In 2016, the ACSH launched the first ever P2P learning Alliance of practitioners of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kazakhstan on Public Service Delivery based on their high demand, showing the limited applicability of adopting best practices in the context of countries in the region. The successful outcomes of the P2P learning Alliance led to creation of three more alliances on (1) e-Government Development, (2) Transformation and Innovations in Governance, and (3) Artificial Intelligence and New Technologies (see Table 1). These P2P learning alliances have been created for bringing together civil servants and practitioners in specific fields of expertise in order to assist them in capturing tacit knowledge and sharing among one another, and thus devise best-fit solutions for country-specific problems, as well as develop and implement best-fit reforms.

The P2P learning alliances enable practitioners to cooperate on the basis of equality and feel that they are neither students nor teachers. Such modality is especially useful in such issues as public administration, which is sensitive in nature.

Table 1. P2P Learning Alliances of the ACSH

P2P Alliance theme	Launched in	Countries and organisations involved	Outcomes to date
One-Stop-Shop Public Service Delivery	May 2016	Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan	Three case studies on the “One-Stop-Shop” principle of public service delivery published; several meetings, workshops, and conferences conducted.
E-Government Development	June 2018	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan	Three workshops and online meetings conducted; one case study on “Smart Government” published; preparation of case studies and P2P activities (in progress).
Transformation and Innovations in Governance	June 2019	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, international experts from AAPA, OGC, and UNDP	Several online peer learning activities held; study visits and seminars (in progress).
Artificial Intelligence and New Technologies	May 2024	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan	A webinar held on the application of AI in the public sector; further activities planned (in progress)

Source: <http://www.astanacivilservicehub.org/>

For these alliances the ACSH serves as a facilitator and provides a multi-lateral platform that brings together practitioners from various government organisations and agencies and other related entities, as well as international organisations. It is worth noting that peers of the alliances are decision-makers, who interact voluntarily by participating in regular capacity building activities to discuss issues of mutual

interest, find and develop innovative solutions, and prepare research papers and case studies for advancing public sector development.

It is also important that the ACSH adapts to realities, for example, in conditions of restrictions, resulted by the COVID-19 crisis, the Hub launched a 'Virtual Alliance of Practitioners', comprising the P2P learning approach with cutting edge technology.

It is a digital platform that gathered and disseminated existing practices and innovative solutions employed by different countries and partners to cope with the effects of the pandemic. This innovative platform contains more than 40 practical materials and useful resources reflecting the experience of 10 countries and about 20 organisations in the fight against COVID-19. It is noteworthy that innovative and technological practices from Azerbaijan, Estonia, Kazakhstan, and the Republic of Korea evoked high interest among the ACSH's participating countries, leading to their replication by some of them.

Taking into account such leading countries' successful practices, it is also possible to initiate projects. In this vein, the ACSH utilised the P2P learning approach and experience of a benchmarking country and launched a joint regional project with the Government of the Republic of Korea⁷ and the UNDP. The development project (2021-2023, extended through 2026)⁸ is aimed at improving the capacity of civil servants responsible for the digitalisation of public services in twelve countries across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Asia-Pacific region namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Philippines, and Uzbekistan. The advantage of the project is that it is supported by the Government of Korea, and since the Republic of Korea is the world leader in this area, it allows participating countries to benchmark with its best practices and apply innovative solutions.

The project has already conducted a needs-assessment study of the participating countries and a number of capacity building activities in the field of digitalisation. These activities were held in congruence with the demands of the project's participating countries, in which leading experts from government agencies and institutions of Estonia, Finland, Korea and Singapore as well as international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank were involved to share their good practices and initiatives.

In promoting P2P learning, the ACSH utilises the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) methodology. The EIP is supported by, and based in, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The EIP members are public, private, multilateral, and civil society organisations, which facilitate peer learning in different ways and operate on a voluntary basis.

We believe that, in addition to this, other modalities that are used by the OECD are of great interest, for example the 'peer pressure' approach that fosters its member countries and stakeholders to implement the OECD recommendations, standards, and initiatives, leading to the unification of policies among the countries, building collective wisdom and shared values (Guilmette, 2007; Lehtonen, 2020). The OECD also uses the 'peer review' mechanism to undertake systematic evaluations of its member countries' performance to enhance their policy making, set benchmarks, and adhere to norms through mutual trust and accountability (OECD, 2003). The OECD 'peer learning', 'peer pressure' and 'peer reviews' mechanisms allow governments to analyse complex political issues and solutions to develop compiled strategies and move toward the collective goal.

⁷ Represented by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) and the National Information Society Agency (NIA).

⁸ The Government of the Republic of Korea, the ACSH, and UNDP launched their second joint regional project on Digital Transformation and Digital Governance. <https://www.astanacivilservicehub.org/articles/view/second-joint-regional-project-on-digital-transformation-and-digital-governance>

The application of these mechanisms can be spotted within the OECD's Recommendation of the Council on Digital Government Strategies (2014). This Recommendation has been applied in numerous digital government reviews to support the analysis and elaborate policies to make a shift from e-government to digital government. Moreover, this analytical work has promoted peer learning and has aided in determining the core characteristics of effective design and implementation of digital government strategies. These characteristics are encapsulated in the OECD Digital Government Policy Framework (DGPF, 2020), which is actively examined by numerous countries.

To fulfill its mission, the ACSH has established close cooperation with the relevant units of the OECD and strives to serve as a platform for the dissemination of such standards and principles among its participating countries, which in turn encourage countries to benchmark practices for good governance.

Collaboration among governments gives them an opportunity to examine a number of options when addressing their own country-specific challenges, mindful of various factors, but it also enables them to consider global and regional trends as well as best international practices to move forward. (Baimenov, 2018)

For effective collaboration it is important to network with countries not only based on common issues and similar socio-economic contexts, but interact also with the countries that are benchmarking for them. For example, in ACSH practice, countries such as Estonia and Korea are considered as frontrunners in digitalisation.

2. On the need to improve benchmarking instruments

'Peer learning', 'peer pressure' and 'peer review' mechanisms are also employed within the international frameworks, including international indices and rankings serving for some as a powerful means for stimulating a country's development process towards the right direction. In other words, these countries may use indices' scores and rankings as a benchmark for pinpointing their own strengths and weaknesses in comparison with others in their quest for improving their own policies and strategies. This kind of assessment frameworks may indeed trigger policy makers to improve their policies through collaboration, comparison, and discussion towards achieving their goals (Boeren, 2016).

Given the major role of international indices as a benchmarking tool, it is necessary that the methodologies they employ take into account current trends and ongoing changes taking place in the world, otherwise causing shortcomings in the methodology. Hence, there is always room for improvement of the assessment methodology which is important to keep adaptive and flexible.

We have come up with this idea after careful consideration of two international indices. First, analysing the Global Competitiveness Index⁹ rankings in different years, we observe the case when on the Labour Market Efficiency pillar, which, as we know, by its nature cannot change swiftly in one-two year time, a country's position falls by 17 points within two years.¹⁰ This undoubtedly raises the question of how the country achieved such a result. Authors and developers of the Global Competitiveness Report do not provide an answer, given that information is unclear in this respect.

Another international assessment framework which is worth considering is the UN E-Government Survey which evaluates the progress of e-government of the UN Member States via the UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI), consisting of three components: Online Service Index (OSI), Telecommunication

⁹ The World Competitiveness Index by World Economic Forum is a comprehensive annual assessment that serves as a global benchmark for country competitiveness.

¹⁰ Global Competitiveness Reports. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/>

Index (TII), and Human Capital Index (HCI). The EGDI is used for measuring the development of e-government at the country level, and in some cases at the city level around the world.¹¹ It is widely recognised by digital policymakers, experts, and researchers as an incentive and motivational benchmarking tool. Its significance is also emphasised by the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, established by the UN Secretary-General in July 2018, recognising the E-Government Survey as a key ranking, mapping, and measuring tool, supporting the digital transformation of countries (Kabbar, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the rise of artificial intelligence, led to a massive acceleration of using state-of-the-art technologies, with the focus on AI for enhancing the efficiency of public service delivery. This development led to the re-assessment of e-Government and its priorities. Indeed, the initial e-Government concept focused on utilisation of ICT and web-based technologies for enhancing the efficiency of public service delivery; however, it has now been replaced by a new concept emphasising, among other, a government open by default (OECD, 2020), making government data available and accessible public information, thus promoting government transparency in order to achieve a more open, accountable and responsive government. At the same time, open government encourages citizens' active participation and collaboration, in co-creating public value and supports data-driven and evidence-based decision and policy making (Charalabidis et al., 2019).¹²

Considering the EGDI current methodology, it is deemed to be crucial to increase the significance of Open Government as a key aspect of e-Government overall advancement. A close look at the composition of the EGDI reveals that the Open Government Data Index (OGDI) score makes a very small contribution to the overall EGDI countries' score.¹³ Thus, it is not possible to directly associate the value of a country's EGDI with the availability of open data,¹⁴ as the OGDI score weighs very little in the overall performance of a country.

At one time, the UN EGDI has encouraged significant progress in improving government processes and public service delivery. However, in light of recent developments in digital government, it has become more important to ensure greater openness and access to data rather than mere technological progress. Currently, some post-Soviet countries, being well positioned on the E-Government Development Index, still face big issues associated with open government data, although they score "very high" on OGDI. For instance, the Cadastre – an official record of land and property ownership – is not accessible to the public in these countries.¹⁵ In fact, there is no unified countrywide system that contains real estate ownership information, as each region develops its own information system to meet its citizens' needs.

On the contrary, there are countries, e.g., North Macedonia, that have made considerable progress in making government data available and accessible public information for many years already, but their overall EGDI score does not capture such advancement. Furthermore, unlike in some post-Soviet countries where the existing systems do not provide all the necessary information in user-friendly format, in North Macedonia, a country with a lower OGDI score, real estate ownership information is fully provided in the

¹¹ The EGDI is the ultimate outcome of the United Nations E-Government Survey covering 193 countries in its latest edition (2022). The Survey demonstrates the degree to which digital technologies play a role in advancing digital transformation across countries worldwide. <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/>

¹² Often referred as e-Government 1.0, e-Government 2.0, and e-Government 3.0 respectively.

¹³ The OGDI is part of seven sub-indices that comprise the Open Services Index (OSI); which in turn is a part of the overall EGDI along with the Human Capacity Index (HCI) and the Telecommunications Infrastructure Index (TII), each carrying an equal weight in the overall EGDI score for a country.

¹⁴ In the paper, referred to as open public sector information.

¹⁵ The root of the issue can be traced in a legacy of the Soviet past. In fact, in many post-Soviet countries, much information is subject to non-disclosure considered a state secret, due to the historical legacy of the Soviet Union totalitarian system, which was one of the most secretive states that have ever existed, as the scale of concealment was vast. Any information of government bodies, not required to be disclosed, carries a "presumption of closedness", in Kazakhstan, even today (Kidrisheva, 2021).

national cadastre, as shown below. Hence, if actual availability of basic government data is fully considered in the EGDI structure, the overall picture of the ranking would definitely differ.



Figure 1. An example of open cadastre data in North Macedonia

Source: <https://oss.katastar.gov.mk/>

A similar situation is observed with the availability of information on budgetary allocations – another critical component for open government. Notwithstanding the existence of dedicated portals, citizens in some post-Soviet countries complain about the low level of data reported on public finances (Hamidullina, 2019). Moreover, the available budget data is rather difficult for the average citizen, who does not possess any special knowledge on finance or legal matters, to comprehend. As a result, the cases when a country with a comparatively lower OGD score de-facto shows greater openness of budget data, and vice versa, are not rare.¹⁶ Thus, the weight of the open budget in the overall structure of OGD also needs to be increased.

The root of the issue can be traced back to a legacy of the Soviet past. In fact, in many post-Soviet countries extremely high importance is given to state secrets, or information subject to non-disclosure, due to the historical legacy of the Soviet totalitarian system which was one of the most secretive states that have ever existed, as the scale of concealment was vast (Harrison, 2004). On a related note, a study by Bougherra et al. (2022) suggests that e-government is better implemented in democracies rather than in autocracies, as the type of a political system influences the conceptualisation of e-government, the execution of its practices and further the assessment of its performance. Even now in some post-Soviet countries, any information in government bodies, if there was no previous order to disclose it, has a “presumption of closedness” (Kidrisheva, 2021).

At the same time, it is not surprising that countries with rich mineral resources can rank high in the current methodology, as they can afford themselves new technologies, carry out digitalisation initiatives, and allocate adequate budgets for it, thus scoring high on some of the EGDI components. In a similar vein, Bougherra et al. (2022) argue that the UN EGDI only evaluates the supply side of government outputs leaving their impact on citizens unconsidered, and thus it “does not provide a holistic view of the whole picture.” In this sense, the UN EGDI does not necessarily indicate improved e-government or citizen satisfaction through countries’ rankings. Furthermore, most variables used in calculating the OGD score

¹⁶ Can be seen in large discrepancies between OGD and Open Budget Index rankings of some post-Soviet countries. The Open Budget Survey is the world’s only comparative, independent, and regular assessment of transparency, oversight and participation in national budgets

are binary in nature, capturing either the absence or the presence of a certain feature, entailing that the obtained scores tell little about the quality of available data, i.e., the extent of openness, and thus re-consideration of the methodology is required.

To explore the openness of government data in some countries of the region, where open government portals are available, from the ordinary citizens' perspective, a number of datasets from open government portals were evaluated based on the eight principles of open government data: (i) complete, (ii) primary, (iii) timely, (iv) accessible, (v) machine-processable, (vi) non-discriminatory, (vii) non-proprietary, and (viii) license free.¹⁷ An 'ordinary citizen' observation suggests that the overwhelming majority of government datasets lack granularity (aggregation) which is the key factor for data to be considered primary. Some datasets could not be reached for technical reasons, hence failing to meet the accessibility principle, while others have little utility in furthering open government, but to allow authorities promulgating the illusion of open data provision.¹⁸ Thus, the open government data standards in the region is questionable.

Eventually, discrepancies between the EGDI rankings and the real situation in some of the areas it measures could negatively affect government policy development (Skargren, 2020). Policymakers and politicians can unintentionally misinterpret or intentionally misuse benchmarking and ranking results (Wang and Shepherd, 2020). For instance, when countries are ranked high according to a particular benchmark, in this case the EGDI, policymakers can use this as an argument for no longer putting more effort into further developing their countries' open data initiatives. They may also intentionally or unintentionally ignore other benchmarks in which their country is ranked lower and neglect the opportunity to identify measures for improving their countries' progress in open government data publication and use (Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to periodically rethink the methodology measuring open government data availability and increase its weight in the overall structure of the EGDI, so that it reflects the true state of open data availability and accessibility.

Conclusions

Countries all over the world continually pursue reforms in civil service, public administration, and other sectors, taking into account the challenges imposed by technological advancement, economic crises, and other factors. It is apparent that different countries have varying degrees of public service development, and set reforms based on internal conditions and political readiness to follow international trends and recommendations. Most of the countries demonstrate progress and effective solutions to different policy issues based on their own practice, while other countries face challenges and they are in constant search for effective solutions. Therefore, understanding the successes and challenges of other countries, along with the lessons learnt, is of great importance for the way forward. Although, there is no "silver bullet" to advance the public service, exchanging ideas and sharing experiences through continued partnerships can help governments to identify common interests and challenges as well as find the innovative solutions.

International collaboration is one of the main determinants of success and sustainability of any public sector transformation, and its different modalities, including P2P learning and exchanging knowledge and practices, can contribute to mutual learning and lead to positive outcomes (Baimenov and Liverakos, 2019).

¹⁷ Known as the Sebastopol principles: <https://opengovdata.org/>

¹⁸ The published data include a list of construction companies and their contact details with no references to the respective road construction projects. It can only be assumed that the listed companies are engaged in road construction in the region (Open Data Portal in Kazakhstan: <https://data.egov.kz/>)

In line with our earlier examples, collaboration through multilateral platforms and varied modalities facilitate governments and stakeholders not only to share best practices and knowledge openly and easily, but also enable them to strengthen partnership, benchmark practices and trends, and thus develop ‘best fit’ solutions for their own settings.

The advantage of these approaches is that governments can further advance the public services by comprehensive benchmarking and application or designing of “best fit” solutions, rather than blindly rely on ‘best practice’ approach” (Baimenov and Janenova, 2019).

Such cooperation modalities as the peer learning, peer review and peer pressure incentivise governments and stakeholders to network and explore best practices regularly, reconsider new trends and citizens’ expectations, as well as get recommendations from each other to develop effective solutions. In other words, these approaches work towards improving policies, bringing large-scale reform initiatives, and adhering to international frameworks.

We believe that the following findings, drawn from the aforementioned and particularly from the experience of the ACSH, can be valuable in the creation and development of various platforms for cooperation:

- Promoting a demand-driven and flexible agenda to meet practitioners’ needs and requirements of the fast-changing priorities of the governments in the new reality;
- Applying P2P learning as an efficient experience and knowledge-sharing modality, allowing practitioners to cooperate equally and feel that they are neither teachers nor students;
- Involving actively countries not only with similar socio-economic backgrounds and common issues, but also countries that are benchmarking for the participating countries;
- Combining different innovative types and modalities of cooperation. For example, the ACSH virtual platform launched on the basis of P2P learning approach and advanced technologies during the COVID-19; and its joint project with the Government of the Republic of Korea, promoting P2P learning among twelve project countries and utilising the Korean experience as a benchmarking country in digital government transformation.

The authors also consider that in the development of such platforms it is useful to refer to modalities and experience of the OECD.

The paper also argues that the use of international indices as a benchmarking tool is of great importance for directing a country’s development. But it also puts increased demands on the methodologies of the respective indices requiring periodical reconsideration. The authors have demonstrated this need using the example of two indices, that is the Global Competitiveness Index by the WEF and the UN E-Government Development Index. Eventually, it is proposed to ensure that international assessments in general take into account the current trends and ongoing changes taking place in the world.

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