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Impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic on essential workers in the public sector

Issues in public sector workforce management in the recovery from the coronavirus disease pandemic

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee members Ora-orn Poocharoen, Regina Silvia Pacheco, Upma Chawdhry, Emmanuelle d'Achon, Bridget Katsriku, Ma Hezu and Linus Toussaint Mendjana.

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Issues in public sector workforce management in the recovery from the coronavirus disease pandemic

Summary

At its nineteenth session,¹ the Committee of Experts on Public Administration observed that many countries might not be prepared to implement the Sustainable Development Goals at the desired scale and speed because of a general undervaluing of the public sector in economic theories of past decades and a disregard for the contribution that the sector can make to society when equipped with adequate capacity and the appropriate skills and mindsets. Combating corruption also remained a crucial precondition of effective governance for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Committee was of the view that the pandemic had exposed risks and vulnerabilities of Governments, for example, in terms of their unpreparedness for crises, inadequacies in public infrastructure and investment, including in health systems, and imbalances in economic and social development. Particular attention should be paid to recognizing essential workers in the public sector, strengthening public sector capabilities for the Goals, investing in the future public sector workforce, expanding the use of digital technologies and addressing digital divides.

In the present paper, the authors elaborate on evolving trends in public sector workforce management, discuss their implications and offer recommendations on workforce reform to support efforts to recover better from the effects of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The introduction provides a backdrop for the paper. In section II, the authors discuss ideas about the future of work in the public sector, signal the growing relevance of modalities such as flexible work arrangements and consider changes in the nature of workplace interaction and in civil service cultures. The authors argue that a more humanistic style of leadership in government, putting a premium on empathy skills and emotional intelligence, is needed to address the complex challenges of sustainable development and achieve results under these conditions. In section III, the authors highlight the rise of contract-based employment and the merits of innovative recruitment and training programmes that are in alignment with such an approach. In section IV, they recall the critical role that frontline workers play in the public sector, and have amply demonstrated during the pandemic, while highlighting related challenges that may call for attention. The final section contains a proposal for a set of policy recommendations that the authors suggest the Committee consider taking up at the twentieth session.

¹ See report on the nineteenth session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (E/2020/44-E/C.16/2020/8).

I. Introduction

1. Owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the world is facing problems on a global scale that affect everyone regardless of nationality, geographical location, age, socioeconomic status, level of education, religion, gender or degree of vulnerability. The impact affects physical and mental health and economic and social well-being. Technological development, combined with evolving social and political dynamics, remain the underlying drivers of the future of public sector workforce management. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated existing trends and drawn attention to certain aspects of public sector workforce development that call for particular attention in building a responsive and capable public sector workforce for the future.

2. The pandemic has taken most Governments by surprise in the magnitude of its severity. It has revealed differences in the capacity of Governments at all levels to deal with such a crisis. At the initial stage, many public health experts, including those in international organizations, made decisions and recommendations based on limited information. The recommendations included basic hygiene measures, such as wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining physical distance from others. Travel was restricted, shops and services were closed and large gatherings such as concerts, sports events and religious ceremonies were put on hold. In times of crisis, decisions such as these call for leadership from the Government. They are decisions that can neither be delegated nor outsourced because of their considerable impact on the general public. Governments have to mobilize resources and partnerships to respond swiftly and use their powers responsibly.

3. In the next stage, of moving beyond crisis mode, many Governments will be tested for their ability to stimulate and guide economic and social recovery. We could be seeing the rise of State power, with greater expectations placed on the Government and the public sector workforce to accelerate progress towards a sustainable recovery from the pandemic. The neoliberal ideal of small government seems less desirable in this context. At the same time, Governments could be expected to be at the centre of rebuilding efforts, partnering with the private and non-profit sectors.

4. At its eighteenth session, the Committee considered the emergence of five basic paradigms of public administration, which were described as ancient public administration, traditional public administration, new public management, new public governance and smart sustainable governance.² Against the backdrop of the pandemic, Governments could benefit from re-examining their role and find ways to shift towards new public governance and smart sustainable governance approaches, in which Governments are collaborative and constructive problem solvers. Public sector leaders and managers may find it useful, more so than in times past, to have strong empathy skills and emotional intelligence and to apply them in what is referred to in the present paper as a “humanistic style” of management.

5. Many public authorities found innovative ways to deal with challenges and take advantage of opportunities during the crisis, for example through the digitization of public services, as well as internal processes, expanded use of online meeting platforms and electronic approval mechanisms and experimentation with new methods of work. Some Governments may find it productive to expand on these innovations, while undertaking the needed legal, regulatory, technical and administrative groundwork to minimize risks and avoid unintended consequences.

² See the report of the Committee on enhancing the capacity of the public sector in a fast-changing world for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (E/C.16/2019/2).

II. Public sector work and leadership

A. Importance of governance that is citizen-centric

6. The Committee's principles of effective governance for sustainable development can be highly relevant as guidance in making policy and administrative decisions in all sectors and at all levels. This includes policies pertaining to human resource management processes, work modalities and the composition and skill sets of the public sector workforce. For example, the principles suggest that public sector work needs to be based on sound public policies that are determined by responsible and well-prepared decision-makers – politicians, civil servants and other policy influencers. Decisions should be based on data, information, knowledge, science and a holistic understanding of the problem and possible solutions.

7. By way of illustration, if the public sector is to be more agile and adaptive to uncertainties, it seems to follow that employment processes also need to be agile and adaptive, when often they are not. For example, lengthy recruitment processes and stringent rules can hinder fast hiring and impede action by public authorities when it is most urgently needed. Another example relates to the use of digital files. Some Governments, despite digitalization policies, still require the printing of hard copies of documents. To emerge stronger, more efficient and more effective from the pandemic, the public sector must carefully implement its modernization and digitalization plans.

8. The pandemic has catalysed digitalization processes worldwide. Governments can benefit greatly from digitalized services in promoting a strong online presence, acting in a timely fashion and expanding coverage of public services to all groups and all geographic areas. A high level of productivity is needed due to the recovery costs of the pandemic. Efficiency and effectiveness in expenditures will be paramount. Reductions in spending and the elimination of wastage could substantially improve the affordability and cost-effectiveness of public services. This may include addressing redundancies in the public sector workforce, where applicable.

9. In the digital era, we are witnessing a rapid rise of a “citizen-centric culture”. Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, deployed with adequate regulatory, administrative and security safeguards and the capacity to manage and analyse information, can help Governments improve their understanding of people's needs and aspirations. Policies and services should always be designed from the users' perspective and help to fulfil their needs.

10. Technology should also be used to promote social inclusion and leave no one behind. For instance, e-services should also benefit the most vulnerable and not exacerbate inequalities. Technology can help Governments offer fast, reliable and more personalized services. While there is still room for the development of a digital identification architecture that is safe, trustworthy and easy to use, digital identification opens up opportunities for direct participation in the design and delivery of services. With reliable data and evidence that can be audited, decisions are expected to be sounder. Customization, or tailored and targeted delivery, can be carried out at the community, city and regional levels or for targeted groups of people, including the most vulnerable and those who are marginalized. Such micro-level, technology-based approaches to public service delivery have been referred to as hyper-customization within the context of a smart sustainable governance paradigm.

11. The present and near future of public sector work is about empowering citizens. This can be done by sharing openly important public data and information that enables people to arrive at more informed opinions about government services, levels of well-being and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Data is a valuable

commodity with correct use, and when in the right hands could bring enormous benefits. When citizens have full and free access to data and information through various platforms, citizen-centricity can be strengthened. This may help Governments to be more responsive in situations where it is needed and open up opportunities for expanded partnerships in the co-creation of public services. A well-informed and empowered citizenry can in turn foster greater transparency and accountability. When people play active roles in the governance system, public sector responsiveness, effectiveness, inclusiveness and integrity are enhanced. An active role for people could also enable two-way learning, the sharing of experiences and knowledge management involving Governments and people.

B. Humanistic leadership and management

12. In achieving sound public policies and empowering people, the role played by public sector leaders and managers is crucial, in particular for sustainable recovery from the effects of the pandemic. Public sector leaders and managers are expected to respond to political mandates and transform objectives into action. To that traditional role, one could now add, with a focus on citizen-centricity, workforce management in harmony with people's expectations of public services. In solving routine problems of the organization, they are expected to listen to all sides, be able to understand people's hopes and fears, build trust and improve engagement with a wide range of individual and organizational actors.

13. Public sector leaders must thus combine a sense of urgency and problem-solving with collaborative methods. With a commitment to results, they should have a clear vision and sense of direction and the ability to build networks. They need to carefully balance the need to maintain integrity and standardization with the need to take risks, experiment and innovate. Most importantly, public leaders and managers must have a profound sense of empathy.

14. There is already a growing lack of trust between Governments and citizens around the world in the wake of the pandemic. In the face of the outbreak, Governments in many countries did not react appropriately to contain the spread. Some politicians and government officials did not abide by stay-at-home rules made by their own Governments, which gave rise to doubts and may have undermined guidance from public health authorities. Government should regain public trust through leadership, devotion, empathy and professionalism. It is therefore vital for Governments to listen to people and understand what they are feeling. This is what the authors refer to as a humanistic style of leadership linked to a passion for delivering results. Public sector leaders and managers should realize that they are expected to take on the task of rebuilding pathways to the future and give renewed hope to communities, with an eye to peaceful, just and inclusive societies for the long term.

15. In being citizen-centric and humanistic, the role of public sector leaders and managers will continually evolve into that of facilitator. Public sector work will focus on the facilitation of people, ideas and data to find new solutions and new collaborative models, including the co-creation of services with the private and non-profit sectors. Good facilitators are patient, knowledgeable and mindful and always aim for constructive solutions. These qualities are highly relevant for public sector leaders and managers today.

C. Flexible work arrangements as a new modality in the public sector

16. Social distancing, lockdowns, mandatory quarantines and the need to protect employees' health are all reasons for moving as many public services as possible online to prevent the spread of the virus during the pandemic. This necessity impelled many public sector agencies (and other sectors) to adapt very fast by adopting technology, in the form of online tools and platforms, in order to continue business as usual. This global reaction was swift and positive. Public sector workers suddenly discovered new ways of convening meetings online, managing projects, organizing working time with flexible hours, staying in contact with fellow workers and delivering services online. These services include online teaching and training, online medical consultations, business registrations, online tax payments and online cash transfers. It can thus be said that a key trend in public sector work that has emerged out of the pandemic is flexible work. Such arrangements comprise "work from home", "work from anywhere", "remote working" and modalities for flexible working hours.

17. The pandemic has motivated many Governments to invest extensively in digital capacity. The Government of Ghana, for instance, utilized its Smart Workplace digital platform to promote work online for civil servants.³ Other Governments, such as that of Thailand, changed their laws or made exemptions overnight pertaining to working from home and online arrangements. Prior to the pandemic, working from home or from anywhere may have been considered unprofessional, lazy or simply a violation of organizational rules. It was usually approved on an exceptional basis when truly needed. In Europe, the concept of work from home or from anywhere was adopted in a framework agreement at the European Union level and has been defined in national laws, such as a French law of 2012.⁴ Its usage, however, has been limited. In most African and Asian countries, the practice was virtually non-existent as a formal practice. In some cases, flexible working hours or working from home would be practised on an ad hoc basis by senior officials to avoid distractions in the office for a few days or hours in order to complete critical assignments or meet impending deadlines.

18. However, in the wake of the pandemic, flexible work arrangements seem to be a new norm, with high acceptance among many public sector workforces. In France, for instance, the number of public officials working from home or remotely had increased in recent years from less than 1 per cent to approximately 5 per cent of the 2.4 million State-level workforce (excluding local public services and hospital workers). It has now surged to 25 per cent full remote working and approximately 50 per cent working partly from home or anywhere. Also in France, according to a recent survey of 8,675 public service workers, 88 per cent wish to continue some kind of flexible work after the pandemic.⁵ Positive results mentioned in the survey were health safety, lower transportation costs (with the added benefit of reduced carbon emissions), greater autonomy in their work and less stress. In Thailand, new regulations allow for high-level meetings to be held online and for work from home arrangements. In Ghana, public agencies have implemented flexible hours, staff rotation and work from home regimes.

³ See <https://smartworkplace.gov.gh/>.

⁴ See European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, "Labour Code covers teleworking" (20 Jun 2012). Available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2012/labour-code-covers-teleworking.

⁵ Survey by the National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions (ANACT), French Ministry of Labour, Employment and Economic Inclusion, June 2020.

D. Implications of flexible work for the workplace, culture and inequalities

19. There are some implications of flexible work to be considered. The present paper sets out three issues: the new workplace; the evolving civil service culture; and the need to further remedy digital divide gaps in the public sector. First is the possibility for workplaces to change from desks, cubicles and fixed offices not only to working from home but also to sharing co-working spaces or working in public spaces and ad-hoc facilities in a variety of locations. These are realities for both the private and the non-profit sectors. However, in the public sector, there has been inertia with regard to change. This may no longer be the case, in view of the concept of flexible work. Public sector agencies will have to rethink the level of resources and amenities needed for fixed workplaces. Such new amenities may include resources for work itself, including for those working in the field, and for promoting work-life balance, such as gyms, showers, nurseries and medical facilities. There may also be a need to reassess arrangements for building management and maintenance of public offices.

20. Second, these new modalities of work in the public sector will ignite changes in the civil service culture that are yet to be understood. As the public sector digitizes, there is expected to be growth of high-tech jobs in the public sector. Tension may arise in the workplace between younger generations, who are characterized as technologically aware, mobile and agile, and older generations, who are more typically seen as favouring rules and precedents and may expect management to conform to more hierarchical styles of governance. In addition, work from anywhere practices will have implications for organizational culture, ways of solving problems and communication styles. A few side effects of remote work include: isolation and lack of human contact, leading to possible negative consequences for psychological well-being; difficulties in balancing professional and private life at home; lack of social interaction with peers and the public, resulting in misunderstandings; and inadequate opportunities for face-to-face learning. These issues must be addressed in order to build a positive civil service culture in the recovery from the pandemic.

21. Third, there are still many types of inequalities and digital divides across the public sector workforce that need to be addressed. Some civil servants do not have access to remote working opportunities because of inadequate equipment and infrastructure, such as desks, computers, microphones, speakers, lighting and appropriate space. There are also inequalities that arise from income and geographic location, for example relating to the reach of electricity and the availability and cost of Internet access in many areas. Some civil servants have raised the issue of higher electricity bills while working from home, which raises the question as to how work-related costs should be apportioned and accounted for in a new distributed work environment.

22. There is also uneven readiness across administrative levels and among ministries. The authors observe that more top-level public managers are better equipped to work remotely than lower-ranking officials. However, in some contexts, higher-ranking officials who are older, have lower levels of digital skills and thus prefer to go to the office to receive technical support from junior staff. There can thus be inequality between hierarchical levels. Lastly, there may be inequality between genders. Women working from home are often performing the triple task of being a housekeeper, supervising children (who might also be learning online) and carrying out their duties as a civil servant at the same time. Women run the risk of losing part of the freedom they have had previously in leaving the home to go to work. There are reports of increased domestic violence during periods of lockdown. It is therefore important to ensure that work from home schemes benefit both genders equally and

should be considered a positive trend for the organization, the family and the individual.

III. Issues pertaining to essential workers in the public sector

23. The pandemic has drawn attention to the dedicated groups of public sector workforce who are frontline workers providing essential services. These frontline workers are public service workers who directly interact with citizens in the course of their jobs. They may include health and medical personnel, first aid personnel, firefighters, postal workers, sanitation workers and refuse collectors, public transit drivers and social workers. While the pandemic has left 1.5 billion children without access to formal schooling,⁶ frontline workers also include many teachers who carry on coming to work when public schools are open in order for children to continue to have physical access to education. The police are also frontline workers in charge of public order and national or regional security.

24. Frontline workers provide essential services in all communities around the world, even in time of crisis. Their work often cannot be transferred online, nor can it easily be contracted out. The nature of their work is such that it cannot be performed behind a desk or protected by glass barriers, or from home or by remote working. They do their jobs on the ground, in direct contact with the public. Some of them are risking their lives around the clock to provide basic services. For example, a large number of public health officials have tested positive for the coronavirus in countries where infection rates are high. Their dedication and continuous presence during the pandemic have been of the essence, not only to the public health care necessary to fight the disease and reduce mortality in the general population, but also to help the most vulnerable, who are at risk of being left behind in these difficult times.

25. Local frontline workers, by virtue of their proximity, are thought to be more in tune with citizens and are better able to identify areas of difficulty and obstacles to development, as well as identify and interact with vulnerable groups in a community. In some respects, they may also be considered more directly accountable to the communities that they serve. During the pandemic, in many countries, community health workers, who are accountable to local governments, have experience in communication strategies with the local population. In China, for example, community workers in urban and rural localities were engaged in monitoring the situation, taking body temperatures, screening for infection and sanitizing buildings and public spaces, while civilian police have handled tasks such as guarding hospitals, transporting patients and patrolling the streets.

26. It is in the health care sector that the pandemic has caused the most visible pressure on frontline workers in some countries, because of the need to respond to an increased and unpredictable workload during the pandemic. The pandemic has placed pressure on the structures and personnel of hospitals in some countries. When infection rates are at their highest, hospitals have been overloaded and doctors and nurses have been subject to intense stress. The trend of privatizing health care or cutting budgets for the health sector is no longer the case after the pandemic. Governments must continue to make wise investments in health care systems that are affordable, just and sustainable in the long term by leaving no one behind.

27. The pandemic has proved the crucial importance of the frontline public sector workforce and the need to preserve the attractiveness of their jobs. In some countries many are leaving their jobs owing to unfavourable wages and work conditions. More

⁶ UNICEF, press release, 26 August 2020. Available at www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-least-third-worlds-schoolchildren-unable-access-remote-learning-during.

should be done to alleviate the physical strain experienced by frontline workers due to long hours or lifting heavy objects. Advances in robotics and automation could help alleviate such burdens. On the other hand, technology will not completely replace the need to have human assistance. Public sector workforce managers should therefore attend to the needs of low-skilled workers, as well as improve their well-being and working conditions so that they can provide needed services to the public.

28. To sum up, Governments should take care to design benefits and compensation schemes and reasonable work contracts for all types of frontline workers that reflect the changing nature of public sector work and the risks that public employees face. Frontline workers deserve to be treated with fairness and equity. This is vital for the continuity of public services, especially in times of turmoil or crisis. Management quality must be developed, and attention paid to physical and mental well-being. Psychological assistance and resting areas and time to rest could be given attention by the leadership.

29. It is important for Governments to innovate and identify good practices for managing frontline workers that would ensure a swift response that is effective and suitable for each locality. Such services include police, firefighters, emergency services, disaster management, parking, traffic control, stray animals, streetlights, burials and many more. Lastly, it is suggested that Governments continue to streamline procedures, provide adequate training and modernize the public sector workforce. Recruitment and career development should be managed with care if the public sector is to attract and nurture new skills and competencies.

IV. Policy recommendations

30. Looking into the near future, where flexible work and online communication will be the default in both the public and private sectors in many countries, and in particular high- and middle-income countries, more and more public services will be provided online. Examples include contact tracing applications in the health field, the processing of applications for social security benefits, employment services and many more. To ensure that no one is left behind, more public services centres should be put in place and service protocols should be introduced, to provide a more customized service to the vulnerable and to targeted groups of citizens. COVID-19 is a litmus test for the competence and integrity of the public sector. While the authors observe that, in general, government officials are competent and dedicated to their work, lessons can be learned from the pandemic specifically relating to new types of employment contract, innovations in recruitment and provision of training relevant to the anticipated transition in administrative procedures and workplace norms.

New types of employment contract

31. The trend of flexible work is not only in line with the emerging trend from the pandemic due to necessity, but is also aligned with broader trends in the private sector where the “gig economy” is growing in size. It also reflects the preference of younger generations, who are less concerned with finding lifetime employment but rather seek continuous challenges in their vocations. Governments need to develop appropriate schemes for managing flexible and contract work for the public sector workforce. Labour laws will need to be reviewed to reflect the conditions of flexible work. A balance has to be struck between the protection of workers’ rights and the delivery of public services. Office hours and rules will need to be revised to be in line with new practices. Unintended consequences of flexible work, flexible contracts and other new work modalities in the public sector must be prevented. Also to be addressed are

issues such as the feeling of inequality between old and new contract holders and worries about job security.

32. It is therefore possible that we will observe a more “mixed” workforce in the near future, consisting of some with life-long employment, some with fixed terms and some with very short-term contracts. The design of new arrangements must take into consideration: the fit of people in government structures and cultures; interactions between the “traditional” and “new age” workforce; career advancement paths; and social protection benefits. All this, in addition to the possibility of work from home or from anywhere arrangements, makes the future of the public sector workforce exciting and full of possibilities.

33. All public organizations will also need to review traditional human resource management policies, rules and regulations, to include flexible work. These may include office hours, official mailing addresses, workstations and equipment that is tied to the physical office, such as coffee machines, printers and desktop computers. These policies are to be dealt with in detail for different types of public sector work and workforce. Lastly, Governments should develop protocols and guidelines for performance assessment in the new flexible work regimes. This will help align expectations of the public sector workforce by superiors, employees, citizens and politicians.

Innovative recruitment processes

34. The public sector workforce needs to have skills beyond basic reading, writing, numeracy and literacy, including emotional intelligence, the ability to empathize, innovation and entrepreneurial skills. Digital literacy is also essential in the public sector. This includes not only basic computer skills but also those related to the detection of fake news, online communication techniques, data visualization, data analysis, online meeting and conference management and other online tools to enhance effective team and project management. The recruitment process should therefore also incorporate ways to test or measure the level of these skills to successfully build a high-capacity public sector workforce.

35. Governments should invest further in technology for recruitment processes, such as job advertisements, examinations and interviews. Digital data or footprints can also be used to assess job suitability. Regardless of employment type, overall recruitment processes should be fair, transparent, accountable and efficient. Lastly, in view of the above discussion on the revitalization of frontline workers and localizing the public sector workforce, it is important to pay special attention to the recruitment of competent frontline workers at the local level.

Continuous relevant training

36. The managerial culture of the public sector may now include handling remote working with empathy and learning to share responsibilities with staff, giving more autonomy to members of their teams while maintaining contact with them. Some Governments have circulated instructions for managers on better use of remote working. All Governments can learn from one another and together adopt new guidelines. Training on these new skill sets must be conducted and should be aimed at building capacity to use videoconferencing tools for meetings, professional training and sharing critical information in real time. This will increase the number of participants in training, meetings and conferences. It will help reduce the cost for participants and institutions in terms of venue and logistics. When handled well, it can also enhance information-sharing. New networking tactics can be introduced via online platforms. This can potentially enhance collaborative work among agencies.

In short, working methods can evolve in a positive way for the public sector workforce.

37. The public sector must create equal opportunities for the provision of digital capacity, regardless of geographical location, gender, age and rank. Special attention should also be paid to the local level, where many government officials lag behind the national level public sector workforce in terms of digital literacy. Alongside investment in the digitalization process – strengthening infrastructure and safeguarding data – there should therefore be training for the whole public service workforce. Now that online training is widely practised, Governments could consider collaborating to provide such training together. Such training programmes could be carried out by specialized schools of public administration and public policy.

V. Conclusion

38. The pandemic has revealed parts of the public sector that require capacity development such as coordination in times of crisis, health systems capacity and economic and social recovery policies. More importantly, it has accelerated the trend of digitalization and flexible work in the public sector. It has opened up possibilities for new work modalities, with the use of technology, and new types of contracts in the public sector. It has also reminded us of the pivotal role of frontline workers in the health sector and other sectors, and how important it is to strengthen the capacity of the public sector workforce at the local level.

39. Governments will be better positioned to respond to future crises by designing the future of its public sector work and workforce, carefully building on recent lessons. We must take into consideration the digital divide within the workforce, the new “mixed” workforce, the advantages and disadvantages of the new work modalities, and the need to reinvest in frontline workers and local public sector workforces. Lastly, the world has suffered large-scale dislocation owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Going forward, all leaders and managers will need a high level of awareness in order to practise a humanistic style of leadership to guide the world to a steady recovery and get back on track with the 2030 Agenda.
