

# Foreword

What makes government effective? This is among the most important questions facing any society, because the failure of government is all too common and often catastrophic. There are numerous examples of countries that have been saddled by bad government policies, poor implementation, ethical failures, and the inability of government to change when necessary. The victims are citizens, whose lives and livelihoods suffer.

In analyzing the effectiveness of government, the tendency is to focus on the many policy choices that any government has to make. Government sets policy in a multitude of areas, ranging from macroeconomics to education to health to personal security. Each of these areas has been extensively studied. In each area, there are best practices that have emerged from theory and comparisons across countries, about which there is often wide consensus. Since so many actual policy choices diverge from best practice, this provides a comfortable explanation for government success and failure.

There are several problems with this line of thinking. First, government faces too many policy priorities to realistically address, and too few resources to make progress against all of them simultaneously. Consider the area of economic policy, where there are hundreds of local circumstances that affect competitiveness and the rate of economic development ranging from the condition of the roads, to the quality of the universities, to the efficiency of permitting. No government can ever tackle everything that needs to be improved at once. Instead, the challenge is to set good priorities, tackle issues in a sensible sequence, and sustain implementation over time.

Second, the appropriate government policies and priorities shift as a country itself changes. In economic development, physical infrastructure and rule of law are key priorities in early stage

development. Later on, many new challenges emerge in order to sustain a higher standard of living.

Third, the world outside the country changes. New opportunities emerge, neighboring countries improve or decline, international legal structures and institutions realign, and so on. These external changes mean that the appropriate government policy choices change, priorities shift, and standards for performance usually rise.

These complexities shatter any notion that good government is a static concept, and that government success depends on any individual decision. Instead, the essential challenges of government are dynamic, cut across many decisions, involve the need for continuous learning, and rest on effective and rapid implementation.

This book, *Dynamic Governance*, addresses these subtler and now decisive challenges of government. The book provides a revealing framework for thinking about how government *is able to make good decisions*, carry them out, and revise them without a crisis.

Singapore provides a marvelous case study with which to examine these questions. When it comes to government, Singapore often seems to defy the law of gravity. It has government organizations that are highly efficient. Decisions in Singapore usually get made on the merits, not because of corruption, ideology, or self aggrandizement. Government ministries are intensely self critical. Singapore changes its mind on highly charged questions, such as whether to legalize gambling.

How does this happen? All of it requires a set of government institutions that, to use Neo and Chen's framework, can think ahead, think again, and think across. This book offers a rich and interesting portrait of how this occurs, and the underlying causes. The lessons in *Dynamic Governance* apply to governments anywhere. Applying the ideas in this book gives us reason to be hopeful that governments in many countries can work, and that citizens' lives can get better.

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