

# GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK

AN EXPERIMENT IN GLOBAL, COLLECTIVE LEARNING

REFLECTING ON AND  
LEARNING FROM THE  
IMPLICATIONS OF A CRISIS

**THIS REPORT SHARES INITIAL INSIGHTS FROM THE GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK GLOBAL DIALOGUE AND HIGH-LEVEL FORUM HELD FROM 17 – 18 NOVEMBER 2020.**

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# GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK – AN EXPERIMENT IN GLOBAL, COLLECTIVE LEARNING

*Government After Shock* was an opportunity for collective learning; to think critically about the implications of the COVID-19 crisis, and to explore how to steer government and society towards preferred futures rather than reverting to the status quo. The *Government After Shock* event was co-designed to bring local and global relevance to this conversation on the future of government and society. The event convened over 5500 citizens, practitioners, stakeholders, and government leaders in over 65 local and thematic conversations. This was followed by a global forum with government leaders and practitioners to discuss the global implications of crisis, and to explore a path forward as we emerge from the crisis. The goal: to reflect on, and learn from, the hard-won lessons of 2020 and steer towards better futures rather than reverting to the old “normal.”

This crisis has forced every member of society to adapt their lives in the face of circumstances outside of their control. It has demonstrated the ability of government to move and act quickly and has shown how government and society can come together in the face of a crisis. It has also brought the world to a critical juncture; showing the complexity of the challenges that are facing us at a global scale- challenges which require immediate action from government and society. It has acted as a call to action for governments; highlighting the need to revisit how we “do” government, and demonstrating that the policies, practices and institutions of government are not currently suited for the uncertain and complex futures that await.

## GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK AT A GLANCE



Co-designed globally  
with 60+ stakeholders



65+ local events with over  
5500 participants



1250+ participants in the global  
forum from 115 countries



100 speakers including  
heads of state and ministers



1015 #GovAfterShock Tweets,  
12 million impressions



118 #GovAfterShock  
LinkedIn posts

*“Going back to normal is the last thing we want, because the normal that we had before was not good enough.”*

– **Angel Gurría**, Secretary General, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

The enthusiastic participation in *Government After Shock* of stakeholders around the world illustrated that people truly do care and see this moment in time as a turning point for government and for society. The insights gathered at this event will feed into a Call to Action for governments; pushing for change and transformation based on the lessons learned from this crisis.

## THROUGH THESE DISCUSSIONS, A NUMBER OF KEY THEMES EMERGED:



### IN THE FACE OF CRISIS, GOVERNMENTS CAN WORK EFFICIENTLY AND MOVE BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

Governments can innovate, be agile, adapt, act quickly, adopt new technologies, work remotely, collaborate across silos, and move beyond rigid hierarchies. How can this way of working be maintained, sustained and supported beyond crisis situations?



### GOVERNMENTS MUST EMBRACE AND EXPLORE UNCERTAINTY IN THE FACE OF COMPLEX FUTURES

This crisis has highlighted the need for new approaches in the face of uncertainty and complex futures. Governments need to use methods that support experimentation, allow for failure, promote continuous learning and openly explore uncertainty. How can governments take a more anticipatory approach?



### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION BUILD TRUST IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Clear, inclusive communication, coupled with active listening, engagement and participation is more important now than ever. Trust between government and society needs to be built over time and sustained and strengthened through times of crisis. How can governments continue to engage more openly with people and involve citizens in decision-making?



### RAPID DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND INCREASED DATA GOVERNANCE HAVE POSITIVE POTENTIAL WHEN THE 'HUMAN' IS AT THE CENTRE

Governments and society have "digitised" at an unprecedented rate: this has been a largely positive development but needs to be tempered with an emphasis on the human elements, such as inclusion, respect of privacy concerns, ethical use of data and social connection. How can government be both digital and centre the 'human' elements of government?



### COMPLEX PROBLEMS REQUIRE INCREASED COLLABORATION ACROSS SECTORS, GOVERNMENTS AND COUNTRY BOUNDARIES

The crisis has united the public, private and civil society sectors, as well as all levels of government around common challenges. It has demonstrated the need for continued cross-sectoral, intergovernmental and intragovernmental collaboration, and has shown the essential role these actors play in the modern policy context. How can this be sustained when the common goal is not as urgent, immediate and obvious as during a crisis?



### GOVERNMENTS MUST PLACE CITIZENS AND INCLUSION AT THE CENTRE OF POLICY MAKING AS THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY EVOLVE RAPIDLY

Policy gaps and shifts in the needs and desires of citizens have emerged throughout this year: government needs to invest more in inclusive and sustainable economies, infrastructure and societies and recognise that the priorities of citizens have changed. How can governments ensure that there is a focus on overall well-being instead of goals that should be subordinate: economic growth and efficiency?

# REFLECTING ON THE CRISIS AND THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

*“Just because we are afraid of something, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t deal with it. If we don’t, we have a danger of it being really explosive.”*

– **Aaron Maniam**, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore

*Government After Shock* focused on three key questions when reflecting on what the crisis has revealed and its implications the future of government:

- **WHAT DO WE NEED TO KEEP?**
- **WHAT SHOULD WE LEAVE BEHIND?**
- **WHAT SHOULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY?**

These questions unlocked diverse and far-reaching conversations producing a range of insights, some of which are highlighted in the following sections.

## REVISITING AND REASSESSING THE WORKING METHODS OF GOVERNMENT

This time of crisis has demonstrated the capacity of government to move quickly, work beyond the traditional hierarchies and silos, and adapt to changing conditions. Beyond the obvious examples of telework and digitisation of working methods and processes, governments have also worked more collaboratively: working across silos and hierarchies to solve interconnected problems.

Governments demonstrated that they could work in agile, adaptive, innovative and collaborative ways, including telework, flexible human resource practices and using new tools, methods and practices. This suggests that governments can and should leave behind the over-emphasis on silos, risk-aversion, over-hierarchical structures and processes, and closed decision-making. It is also clear that governments cannot simply transpose the physical world into the digital world (or vice versa).

Governments need to be exploring how to embrace more open, digital and innovative practices and ways of working, and mirroring these in structures, processes and decision-making.

## TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

*“Trust is something like oxygen, it’s difficult to increase but not impossible, and you only recognize it when it’s running out.”*

– **Jyrki Katainen**, President of Sitra and Former Prime Minister of Finland

In this time of uncertainty, trust has been critical to the success of government responses to COVID-19. The crisis has demonstrated the need for clear communication that reaches across segments of society, honesty and openness that governments are not always right and are making decisions on limited information, and transparency as government experiments with solutions that depend on the compliance of citizens.

*“Trust is what makes the difference between the success and un-success of our measures in this time of pandemic crisis. Trust begins with communication, communication and participation.”*

– Secretary of State **Maria de Fátima Fonseca**, Government of Portugal

Openness and transparency also allow governments to try new things, and willingly share with society that new approaches might not always work, but are still necessary. Governments need to be open with citizens about how they do not have all the answers, which means there must be a readiness and willingness to experiment and to test approaches.

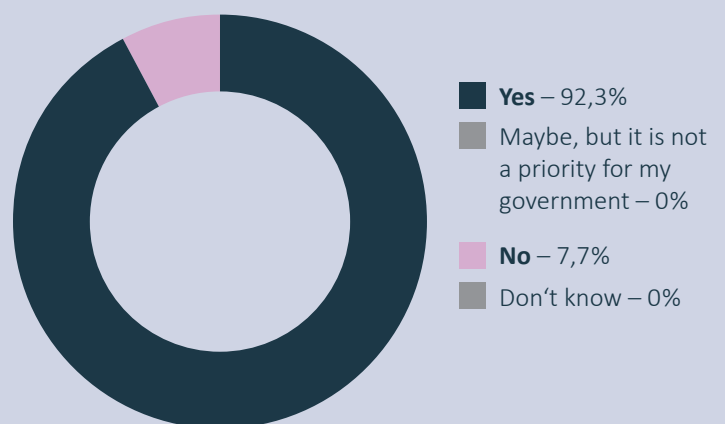
## PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES AND STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

We have seen over the months of crisis response that participation cannot be an add-on: citizens need to be involved in decision-making, deliberation and consultation to shape the policies and services that affect them. This participation is critical to ensuring compliance and trust in government decision making and policies.

## COLLABORATION ACROSS SECTORS AND GOVERNMENTS

This time of crisis has brought actors together from across the private, public, and civil society sectors, along with actors across all levels government to solve common problems. This has taken shape in the form of hackathons, challenge-based and innovative procurement

### IS THERE A NEED TO ENGAGE WITH CITIZENS MORE NOW THAN BEFORE THE ONSET OF COVID-19?\*



\* The poll results shown are taken directly from questions asked to the audience at the Government After Shock event on 18 November 2020



approaches, and a diversity of public-private partnerships. There is a growing recognition that collaboration across sectors is necessary for the complex futures ahead: governments need to ensure that frameworks and mechanisms are in place to build these collaborative relationships.

The role of local governments and authorities has also proven critical. Local governments are sometimes best placed to respond to and address citizen needs; they are often connected with civil-society, private sector and community-based actors who are well situated to support governments at a local level. Moreover, local governments can also be a source of innovative ideas, and test-beds for new approaches. Building networks of collaboration across levels of government and flexibility in program and service delivery is critical.

*“We have a unified approach with national requirements and advice, but it’s also important that local governments have the authority and the means to adapt these measures to their context.”*

– Minister **Nikolai Astrup**, Norway

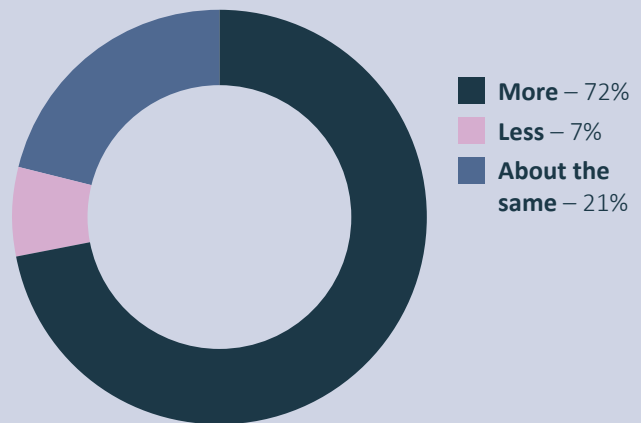
There has similarly been an increase in global collaboration out of recognition that our modern problems span across communities, countries and the world with both local and global impacts. Additionally, collaboration is crucial in the face of increasingly interdependent global trade, supply change and digital economies.

This crisis has highlighted that relationships matter: on the citizen, sectoral, and international levels. Solidarity and the intentional support and fostering of communities has been crucial to addressing this truly collective crisis. Society is more interconnected than ever before: this comes with a need and obligation to focus on relationship and network-building, collective problem-solving and global collaboration.

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND DATA GOVERNANCE

Government and society have “digitalised” at an unprecedented rate; demonstrating agility and innovation both in working methods and technology. This has unearthed a wide range of benefits to government and society: in many cases speeding up the pace of service delivery, improving participatory processes, and creating new economic opportunities. This includes the development of data management and exchange systems, and the con-

**HAS THE CRISIS MADE IT MORE OR LESS IMPORTANT FOR NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS TO WORK WITH EACH OTHER? \***



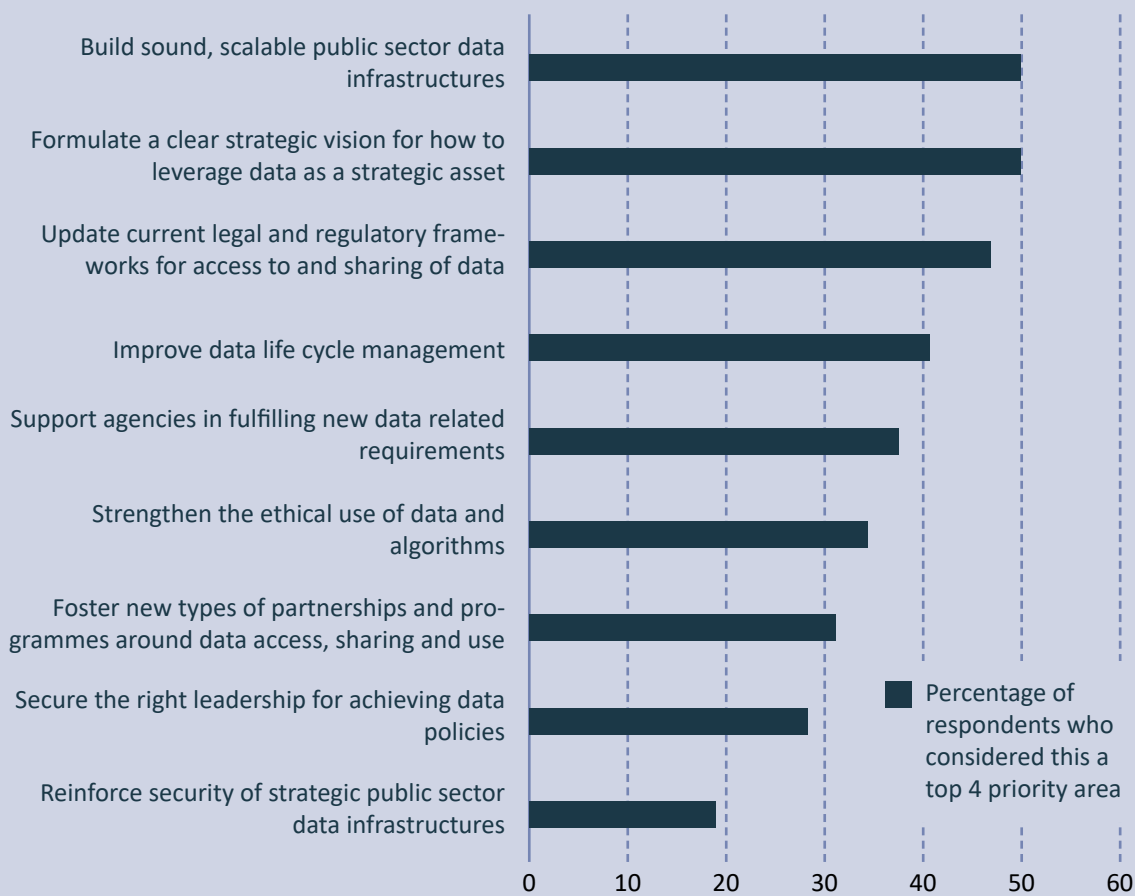
*“Human-centric regulations must go hand in hand with digitization approaches from the government: data privacy, transparency and digital rights must be at the core of every strategy.”*

– **Jesús Cordero**, Data Privacy Protection Officer, Lawyer and expert on Digital Rights; LegalTech

\* The poll results shown are taken directly from questions asked to the audience at the Government After Shock event on 18 November 2020

struction of robust networks and infrastructure for data use, processing and sharing. However, government needs to consider how data can be used as a strategic asset while also developing strong legal and regulatory frameworks that protect privacy, rights and personal information. Moreover, the digitization of government services needs to be accompanied with an assessment to ensure that digital processes and services are inclusive. Finally, the increased interdependence of sectors and countries on digital systems requires increased collaboration across sector and national borders.

**IN VIEW OF WHAT HAS BEEN SEEN DURING THE CRISIS, WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS PRIORITISE TO ACHIEVE A DATA-DRIVEN PUBLIC SECTOR?\***  
(CHOOSE MAX 4 OPTIONS)



\* The poll results shown are taken directly from questions asked to the audience at the Government After Shock event on 18 November 2020

## EMBRACING COMPLEX FUTURES AND UNCERTAINTY

COVID-19 has shocked our view of “normal” and highlighted the gaps in preparedness across government. It has also demonstrated the complexity of future crises that await us, and the need to explore potential futures and to steer towards them.

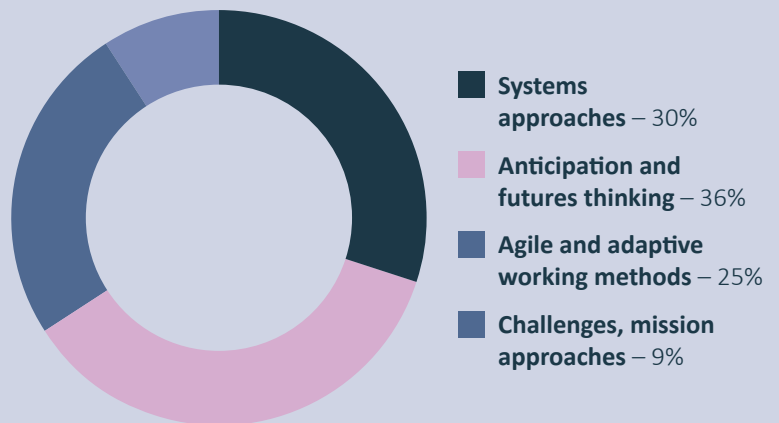
*“We need to have the ability to imagine futures that do not exist yet and paths that take us there so that we are not bound by the current reality”*

– **Tytti Yli-Viikari**, Auditor General, Finland

The need for new approaches to governance, uncertainty and complex futures have emerged through this time of crisis. There is a strong argument that governments need to embrace approaches that allow for experimentation, risk taking, constant learning, and deliberate engagement with uncertainty.

Governments are known to be risk-averse. However, the time has come for governments to recognise that the risk of inaction is often greater than the risk of action. Taking risks, and accepting failure is an important part of learning, experimentation, and development of better policies, services and regulations for the future.

### WHICH INNOVATION METHODS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE GETTING MORE TRACTION BEYOND COVID-19?\*



*“We must admit that the biggest risk to us all, one that is solidly based on evidence, is doing too little, too late.”*

– **Jesús Cordero**, Data Privacy Officer, Lawyer and expert on Digital Rights; LegalTech

In an era of increased complexity, governments need to deliberately engage with and explore uncertainty to be better prepared, resilient, and steer towards preferred futures. New approaches have emerged in this space, including anticipatory innovation governance, strategic foresight, and methods for experimentation and deep listening amongst others that deliberately engage with uncertainty. These approaches are critical to ensuring that governments are prepared for the future.

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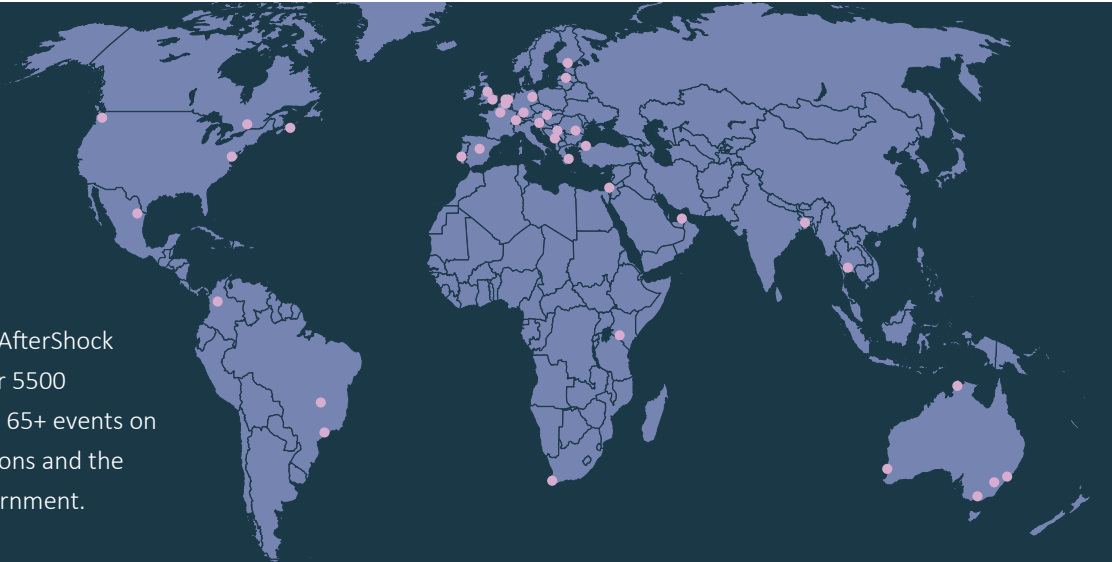
## POLICY PRIORITIES AND INCLUSION

*“COVID-19 challenged our system, it has surfaced complex, deep social issues.”*

– **Ana Fernanda Hierro**, Consejo Nuevo León

The COVID-19 crisis has unearthed deep inequalities, and highlighted gaps in many government policies, notably in the domain of social welfare. Moreover, deep and persistent societal issues have also gained visibility throughout this year, including gender-based violence, and the persistent issues of inequality, racism and police brutality. While these issues rarely gather the same media attention as a global pandemic, there has been an undeniable call upon governments to address many of the deep-seated inequalities and challenges within society.

As governments set new priorities, adapt policies, and respond to the needs of citizens, deep listening and engagement must be pillars in the development process. Services and policies should be built with people at the centre, and a focus on well-being, particularly as governments use this opportunity to drive a more inclusive economic recovery.



Day 1 of #GovAfterShock convened over 5500 participants in 65+ events on crisis implications and the future of government.

*“The only way that things will change is if enough people care.”*

– **Dr. Tracy Ledger**, Senior Researcher at the Public Affairs Research Institute in Johannesburg, South Africa

# MOVING THE GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK REFLECTIONS INTO ACTION

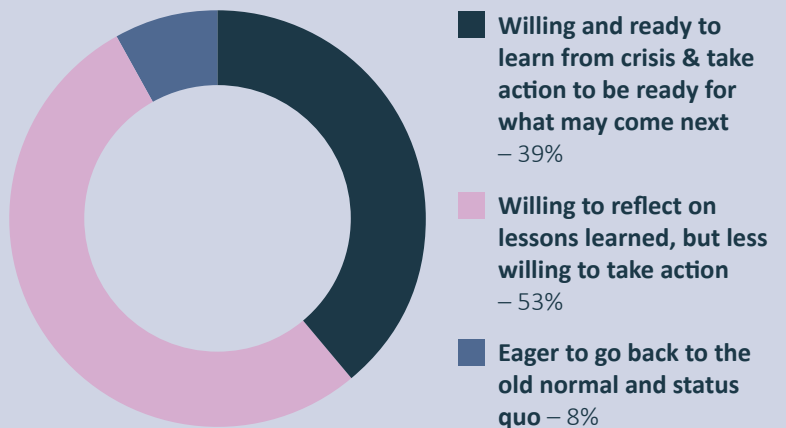
The COVID-19 crisis will not be our last global crisis. We are already facing the climate crisis and many other urgent challenges that demand immediate action and transformation in the way that governments operate, as well as government priorities. Governments have often demonstrated strength, resilience and adaptability in response to this crisis. However, these capabilities need to be built upon and sustained beyond a crisis context, even when the urgency is less tangible and apparent. In many cases, this calls for an overhaul of government systems that are historically path dependent, siloed and hierarchical. Government needs to be prepared to use this opportunity as a launchpad for change; making concrete efforts to implement systems approaches within government, and to adopt new methods for managing complexity and uncertainty.

*“Urgent action is also required to combat the next global crisis, which is climate change.... The most important intergenerational responsibility we have is with the climate.”*

– Angel Gurría, Secretary General, OECD

During the global forum of *Government After Shock*, Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of RSA highlighted three conditions which have been present historically when crisis has led to change: *“Was there capacity before the crisis, did we glimpse the future in the crisis, and did we take the opportunity at the end of the crisis?”* The crisis has demonstrated that indeed, governments do have capacity for change, adaptation and agility. The crisis has also shown a glimpse of the complexity that governments are facing. The last question remains to be seen: are governments ready to acknowledge the need for lasting change or will 2020 be merely be a quick detour from the status quo path dependency of governments and the associated institutions? We observed in the conclusion of *Government After Shock* that there was hope but also scepticism about the willingness for governments to act and to make the most of this window of opportunity for change. We will need to work collectively across national and jurisdictional borders to make change happen: it is time for a paradigm and practice shift in government.

## AFTER A DAY OF EXPLORING GOVERNMENT AFTER SHOCK, WOULD YOU CONCLUDE THAT GOVERNMENT IS:\*



\* The poll results shown are taken directly from questions asked to the audience at the Government After Shock event on 18 November 2020

It is for that reason that *Government After Shock* will feed into a Call to Action for governments and all of us: one that builds on the insights of the thousands of people involved in this initiative, but also co-developed with stakeholders across countries and sectors.

Moving beyond *Government After Shock* towards the uncertain futures that await, we are equipped with the knowledge that government can respond quickly and effectively, however, this is by no means guaranteed. We are at a critical juncture where governments must decide how they will build back – whether the public service will revert to status quo and the economy back to its defaults, or whether investments will be made in building stronger, inclusive economies, and better, more resilient yet agile and anticipatory public services. There is a collective need to work towards a new vision of government, one matched to the world revealed by the global crisis of 2020.

### A WORD OF RECOGNITION:

This event was made possible through the dedication and commitment of over 60 co-designers, 65 event hosts, 100 speakers and over 5500 participants. This collaborative spirit allowed these conversations to span across country borders, thematic boundaries and jurisdictions. The following organisations hosted a local event as part of *Government After Shock*:





## ABOUT THE OBSERVATORY OF PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

The Observatory of Public Sector Innovation is part of the Open and Innovative Government in the Public Governance Directorate of the OECD. We support OECD member governments in taking a more deliberate, systemic and consistent approach to innovation, through learning from each other and exploring the new. We have been working to support governments in the areas of behavioural insights, anticipatory innovation governance, innovation portfolio management and exploration, futures and foresight, innovation management and emerging technologies and approaches such as Blockchain and Rules as Code. *Government After Shock* was an experimental endeavour in collective learning and sense-making of a truly global crisis, and an opportunity to build new ways of working and sharing. This event was led by the OPSI with the support of the Public Governance Directorate.