

Agile Governance in Practice: Stories of Agile Successes of the Government of Samoa

Rafia Naz and Eric Groves, National University of Samoa

Abstract

Globally nations have had to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and Governments have been pressed on the need to be agile and adaptive. The Government of Samoa is a classic example of agile success predominantly in regards to the timing of its policy measures, the autonomy of resolutions and the steadiness amid transformation and stability. In this research paper, based on the secondary review of the Government of Samoa's responses, it is observed that it is reflective of the agility and adaptive governance and provides the real picture where agility is displayed mainly via the swiftness of Government's response to various agile successes mentioned in the paper as well as a result of the adaptability of the government as a response to COVID-19. This study therefore draws on the stories of agile successes of the Government of Samoa that its citizens should be proud of.

Keywords: Adaptive governance, agile governance, COVID-19, Government of Samoa, agile success

Introduction

The 21st Century has presented significant and increasing numbers of challenges to governance practices like never before. Governance practices and systems are under more stress in comparison to past years (OECD, 2001). Governance practices are now prone and subjected to increasing criticism and change. The role and system of governance is becoming ever more complex and sensitive to the circumstances in its surroundings (Hartzog, 2004). This is due to globalization and the enhancement of technology which have connected people and provided platforms to stimulate change. This has increased the need for governance practices and systems to be quick and adaptive to the changing and complex environment. The Government of Samoa has been prominently leading in its efforts to reevaluate governance in the context of the responses to the COVID-19 outbreak and has been challenged to achieve durable solutions in attaining its national goals. The Government has been the one under pressure to deliver enhanced services to their stakeholders and the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to interactive models like "agile governance." The agile success stories of the Government showcase the capability of agile governance in responding to changing public needs in an efficient way. It is commonly known that customary models of government are weakening to the changing necessities and anticipations of citizens and it is quite astonishing that government agencies are habitually slow to adapt. However, with the Government of Samoa an agile culture has highhandedly facilitated agile success.

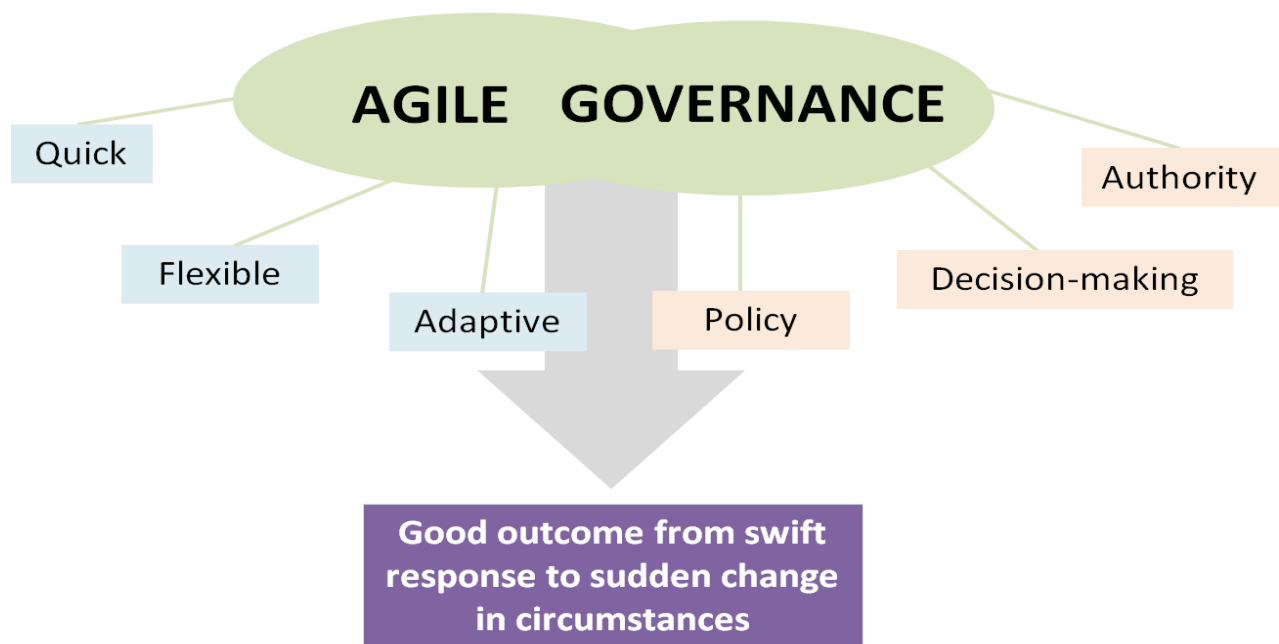
Agile Governance Literature Review

The terminology and concept of agile governance is better understood when the two words (agile, governance) are separated. According to the World Economic Forum (2018), governance refers 'to making decisions and exercising authority to guide the behaviour of individuals and organisations'. The forum goes on to describe that 'governance is achieved by the creation and enforcement of explicit rules, less explicit social norms, guidelines, policies or the creation of defined command structures' (World Economic Forum, 2018). The term agile is better defined and understood in the form of 'agility'. 'Agility implies an action or method of nimbleness, fluidity, flexibility' or adaptive (World Economic Forum, 2018). From defining the individual terms, the understanding of the concept 'agile governance' is better achieved. Agile governance is a system of authority that is quick and adaptable to sudden change in a positive manner. Governance systems that do react quickly but negatively to circumstance is not a demonstration of agile governance. Agile Governance is relativity

a new concept being captured and taken up in education and direct state government practice around the world (Novak, 2017). With the modern advancement and changes in technology, the governance and economies of the world are connected. With the increasing trade, travel and digital exchange, the economies and governance systems worldwide are dependent on one another. Although the international interdependence has more positive implication compared to the negative, it makes the economies and governance systems of the world more vulnerable. This has significantly increased the probability for sudden change in circumstances which will put governance systems under pressure to perform and make decision quickly. In many circumstances, this has led to the breakdown in communication which ultimately leads to bad decision making.

Governments and organisations from time to time fail in adapting to a sudden change in circumstances. This is mainly because traditional structures of governance are quite bureaucratic in nature (Novak, 2017). This makes the organisation predictable and slows its response. Traditional governance structures also, in most cases, have management staff with traditional leadership traits. Agile governances require flexible and different styles of leadership and management (Novak, 2017). This is a challenge to traditional governance structures as it contests the standing governance hierarchy. This is why adopting the agile governance methodology requires a significant change in organisation culture. Novak (2017) argues that this change in culture has to be driven from a bottom-up approach, from person to person. This argument is countered by Luna et al. (2013) who suggests in his study that agile governance has to be driven by management through avenues provided by information and communication technologies (ICT) and flexible modes. Figure 1 below defines the concept of agile governance:

Figure 5: Agile Governance Definition



A major component of agile governance is the shift in ICT and digital infrastructure decreasing the need to physical travel and speeding up transactions and ultimately decision making (Lehto and Kristian, 2009). In Salem’s (2016) case study of the city of Dubai, it demonstrates the fast transactions of information and decisions in a blink of an eye pace. The study suggests that as organisations and governments take on new technology, they will naturally shift through the digital transformation, as seen in many organisations today to eventually becoming agile governed (Salem, 2016). Thanks to digital transformation and the advancement of technology, there is an increasing movement of

government agencies adapting to the agile governance concept and methodology to increase security. State government and organisational governance structures that adapt to an agile environment have been proven to be more secure in comparison to their traditional governed counterparts (Rindell et al, 2016). This is because the agile governance concept and methodology allows the country or institution to respond relatively quickly to threats and avoiding catastrophic damage towards the confidence in leadership.

Samoa has been on the ends of both cases (traditional governance vs. agile governance response) in responding to sudden changes and threats. The 2019-2020 measles epidemic in Samoa that claimed the lives of 86 individuals, mainly children, tested the Government of Samoa. The Government of Samoa's response to the measles epidemic that raged through the country in late 2019 can be described as a traditional response. The Government of Samoa's slow response to the measles epidemic received criticism nationally and internationally (Mayron, 2020a). The Government of Samoa's slow response to the measles epidemic fits the traditional governance structural response as described by Novak (2017). It seems that the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the traditional governance model of the Government of Samoa prevented it from responding quickly and efficiently to the change in circumstances brought by the measles pandemic. The Government of Samoa measles epidemic failures brought about lessons, and provided the perfect grounds for a shift to the agile governance concept and methodology. According to Boodoosingh et al. (2020) the tragedy of the measles epidemic was key to the quick response of the Government of Samoa to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The Government of Samoa's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is praised in this paper as a reflection of agile governance. Although the response of the Government of Samoa is quick and timely, it is inevitable that it will receive some criticism (Mayron, 2020b).

Methodology

This study has undertaken an exploratory review of the secondary literature sourced from mainly journals and the Government of Samoa's Facebook page and various websites of its ministries. Primary data has not been collected.

Discussion: Stories of Agile Success of the Government of Samoa

Case 1

The first case of agile success is the case of the Samoa Information Technology Association (SITA) that reacted swiftly to assist the Government of Samoa and its people. SITA Team highlighted the Education sector as one of the fundamental areas that was being profoundly impacted by the lockdown. Similar to the internal response of the National University of Samoa, the team ventured onto developing an e-learning platform which was intended for the kids, to permit sustained learning while studying from their homes. The 24th of April 2020 marked an important milestone for SITA as it launched the e-learning platform which was piloted at Avele College. Other schools were also in the pipeline to be piloted when other digital preparations from their end were completed. This e-learning platform was established by the Association with no cost to the school. SITA also would be offering cloud hosting for 1 year to schools that are supposed to be coming on board (The Government of Samoa, 25th April 2020). Good agile governance and by sharing knowledge and through collaboration this e-learning platform was created and implemented.

Case 2

The second case of agile success is the Government of Samoa's inventiveness and essence of improvement and partnership in ensuring that the learning journey of students was not halted. The

Government of Samoa retorted to the COVID-19 pandemic using diverse technologies that included radio, TV, internet and blended learning modalities. Schools were also reopened with particular emphasis on observing to the guidelines from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO). The Government further sanctioned 18 million tala as special assistance to sustain education, including early childhood education and 10 million tala for teachers (Government of Samoa, 26th September 2020). As the Hon Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi remarked and I quote: “education is an essential lever for an inclusive and sustainable recovery of all nations. Samoa will mobilise additional resources to build back more resilient, inclusive and gender-responsive education systems, with emphasis on measures to support the learning continuity of the most marginalised” (Government of Samoa, 26th September 2020). It is apparent that the Government has displayed agile leadership in its vision which paved the pathway for success. It was also evident that UNESCO’s direction was the key in the mobilisation of the UN and regional organisations, the private sector, the civil society, media as well as academia to inaugurate the Global Education Coalition which is a multi-sectoral partnership aimed at supporting nations in mounting satisfactory education responses to COVID-19. The coalition support for Samoa comprises of a tripartite amongst UNESCO, Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture and Vodafone to deliver students free online access to educational resources, free data which was limited to curated online learning sites and hosting of teaching and learning resources to permit instantaneous access by students in big numbers. This Global Partnership for Education has not only reinforced in Samoa the distance learning prospects for students but also enhanced teachers’ training and education resources production through regional engagements with the backing of the Moodle Foundation, Khan Academy and Lark (Government of Samoa, 26th September 2020). This agility has been fully unleashed as a result of the Government of Samoa being more open and engrossed via meaningful with potential partnerships and collaborations. As a member state of UNESCO, and through its leadership drive with the partners, issues of accessibility have been appropriately addressed. Government’s agility on a national level has brought together the platform for open dialogue and partnership impacting service delivery to the students and teachers with its focus on the educational outcomes. The Government of Samoa has augmented agility by cultivating its engagement and partnership with its potential partners, particularly with regards to improving service delivery.

Case 3

The third case of the agile success pertains to the Government of Samoa’s agility in up taking remote working and yet being able to deliver fast-paced and effective policy making. The Legislative Assembly of Samoa responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and rose to the contest by swiftly acclimatizing the way it was conducting its business and moved part of its work online with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Legislative Assembly of Samoa has been amongst the very few advanced parliaments that had adopted processes and mechanisms to warrant online work methods using information and communication technologies (ICT’s). This significant enterprise, which permitted remote working of Members of the Parliament and parliamentary staff as well as virtual parliamentary committee meetings, was supported by UNDP’s Strengthening Legislatures in the Pacific Island Countries (SLIP) Project, funded by the Government of Japan. So, it is clearly evident that whilst many Parliaments in the Pacific have struggled, Samoa has taken the lead. Government of Samoa’s shift to digital mode was a classic example of its adaptability and agility to ensure that the core principles of democracy are maintained and the smooth functioning of the country is established through its policy making in parliament (Government of Samoa, 21st April 2020; UNDP, 21st April 2020). The Resident Representative for the UNDP Samoa Office, Jorn Sorensen quoted that: “the role of Parliament in a time of crisis is more vital than ever to pass and review emergency laws, allocate and scrutinize the use of public resources as well as oversee government’s action” (Government of Samoa, 21st

April 2020; UNDP, 21st April, 2020). Further, on behalf of the Legislative Assembly of Samoa, the Speaker of Parliament, Hon. Leaupepe Toleafoa Fa’afisi, communicated his appreciation and confirmed the crucial support this new equipment would accord to Members of the Parliament and their constituents. It was stated that: “it will enable our Parliamentary Committees to conduct meetings via teleconferencing and to receive online public submissions” and “furthermore, this initiative has enabled Parliamentarians to be better equipped in carrying out their duties and responsibilities in an advanced and professional way. It will also assist our Parliamentary Committees in engaging and collecting more feedback from outer districts and communities” (Hon. Leaupepe Toleafoa Fa’afisi quoted in Government of Samoa, 21st April 2020 and UNDP, 21st April 2020). Partnerships have afforded the Government of Samoa the leverage in modernization, without necessitating the investment itself. This partnership has given the Government the prospect of using established innovations and permitted it to leap-frog to new initiative.

Implications for Policy Makers

1. In any institution or Government institutional knowledge or corporate memory already exists. Government’s also store research and knowledge about the future for explicit areas. Thus, knowledge sharing across Governments, NGOs, Private companies etc helps align tacit and explicit knowledge. These can be achieved through face to face platforms, print or virtual platforms. This helps in identifying models/frameworks that work or don’t work and that can be replicated or contextualized to achieve outcomes.
2. Government’s participatory and citizen oriented approaches helps tap into the “knowledge” which helps the Government ascertain the needs of the citizens via participatory planning, design and implementation. This is the stepping stone for agility and opens up new pathways for local and regional policy, strategy and change efforts.
3. Government’s leadership, political will and drive, its strategic alignment, resource and capability enhancing efforts, and good governance helps in attaining authentic visions in lieu of the country’s and region’s needs and aspirations.
4. The capacity of the Government or of the local agencies (their organizational capacity) to adapt is also needed. The Government creates the bridge between anticipated outcomes and actualization. This is a big challenge, especially in Government’s that are under resourced.

Conclusion

Agile governance is about deploying the quickest route to being about the best value to the citizens. During COVID-19 it is evident that the Government of Samoa applied an agile focus on governance in managing the programmes and overall service delivery. The Government through its leadership and swiftness, good governance, partnerships and collaborations, was able to scale up and down to adapt quickly to the issues as it arose due to the impact of the COVID-19 environment. The Government of Samoa is a classic example of successor reflecting its ability to prioritise programmes and service delivery outcomes based on strategic alignment, its thrust for technology and the advocacy and promotion of virtual culture, coupled with organizational capacity and Government capacity to adapt created the bridge amid the outcomes anticipated and the actual support to ideally achieve results.

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