

Rosiak, T., Pasieczny, J., and Postuła, A. (2024). Paradoxes in the operation of public administration: opportunity or barrier to the sustainable development of organisations? *Administratie si Management Public*, 43, 172-183. <https://doi.org/10.24818/amp/2024.43-10>

***Paradoxes in the operation of public administration:  
opportunity or barrier to the sustainable development  
of organisations?***

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**Abstract:** The Sustainable Development Goals formulated within the framework of the UN resolution “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” are a challenge for both businesses and public administrations. The authors of this article focused on the social dimension and attempted to identify the challenges and paradoxes associated with building a sustainable workplace at the State Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service. An in-depth analysis of 31 interviews with inspection employees revealed that despite the positive attitude of managers and employees toward building a sustainable work environment, the organisation faces many challenges and paradoxes along the way, including, among others, the need for sustainable development vs. limited funding or high job requirements vs. unattractive working conditions. These are largely due to its profound underfunding, which lowers the prestige of the workplace, hinders recruitment, and negatively affects working conditions and thus employee engagement.

**Keywords:** public administration, organisational paradoxes, sustainable development, paradoxical leadership.

**JEL:** L32, M10, Q01.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.24818/amp/2024.43-10>

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## **Introduction**

The pursuit of a more sustainable mode of operation has been observable in numerous organisations for many years. However, the pace of implementing these solutions has been insufficient. Therefore, on September 25, 2015, all 193 member states of the United Nations adopted the resolution of the General Assembly in New York entitled “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (hereinafter referred to as Agenda 2030). It encompasses 17 goals aimed at accelerating the path to sustainable development. This transformation should stimulate changes in the five areas of the so-called 5Ps (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership). The ambitious goals expressed in Agenda 2030 have become a guide for changes implemented at international levels (e.g., in the European Union) and nationally. In business, the focus is often on three key areas hidden under the acronym ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance), rather than the 5Ps.

Although the European Union legislation primarily focuses on non-financial reporting standards by companies, public administration can and should play a significant role in the process of transformation towards sustainable development (Dvorsky et al., 2024; Lazaroiu et al., 2022; Androniceanu et al., 2024). Intuitively, individual public administration bodies can contribute to changes in their domain of activity. For example, an environmental protection ministry supports goals centred around the letter E (Environmental), while a labour market ministry supports goals focused on the letter S (Social). Regardless of the domain of activity, according to the KPMG Report (2022), the leadership of public administration on the path to sustainable development should be centred around four prerogatives: 1) Government as a regulator; 2) Government as a policy maker; 3) Government as an operator; 4) Government as an employer.

This paper is dedicated to analysing a case study - a public administration unit in which solutions conducive to organisational learning were implemented. Focusing on the fourth prerogative, we will try to answer the extent to which the government serves as a model for other employers and the paradoxes that managers in public administration must face. This task is not easy. The aforementioned report states that about 60 percent of managing directors in public administration claim that their organisations face difficulties in attracting, engaging, and retaining younger, digitally skilled workers, while simultaneously dealing with the challenge of an aging workforce.

The objective of the article was to identify paradoxes in the process of establishing sustainable development within an organisation. Specifically, we sought to address the following research questions: What challenges does public administration face in creating a sustainable workplace? What paradoxes may public administration encounter in the pursuit of establishing a sustainable workplace? In addition to threats, when can paradoxes also create opportunities?

In the article, we present the theory of organisational paradoxes as outlined by Schad and Bansal (2018). Subsequently, we illustrate how we identified manifestations of these paradoxes in the research material. Simultaneously, we engage in a discussion regarding the opportunities and threats that the paradoxes create. The article concludes with a summary encompassing key findings and conclusions.

## **1. The theory of paradoxes**

Researchers, as well as managers and entrepreneurs, perceive numerous tensions, contradictions, and dissonances in the functioning of organisational systems. The classical approach to organisations assumed that any identified disharmonies were symptoms of dysfunctional mechanisms. The theory of paradoxes fundamentally changed the way researchers think about organisational tensions, emphasising their oppositions and interdependencies (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Tensions, contradictions, and dissonances accompany every organised activity. In the classical approach to organisations, they were treated as dysfunctions, and efforts were made to eliminate them to ensure the highest predictability of the organisation. The theory of paradoxes changed the way of thinking about organisational tensions, highlighting their oppositions and interdependencies (Schad & Bansal, 2018). It recognises the ubiquity of tensions and dissonances in the organisational activity, elucidates their causes and roles, and emphasises the need to adapt management to the inevitability of such phenomena. According to the theory of paradoxes, they are part of everyday life, not exceptional situations in an organisation. They may not, though they can, be dysfunctional. Complexity (Jay, 2013), change (Cameron, 2008; Nasim & Sushil, 2011), collaboration with other firms (Vangen, 2017), and various other internal and external factors favour paradoxes. Adopting an analytical perspective of the “lens of paradox” (Vangen, 2017) can help in a different interpretation of phenomena perceived unidimensional so far, thus contributing to the development of practice-oriented theory. Smith and Lewis (2011) categorised paradoxes into those related to learning, organising, belonging, and acting. Numerous paradoxes can also be observed in public organisations. Hood (2004) argues that in the era when “New Public Management” enters middle age, the attention of scientists has shifted to some extent from descriptive mapping and apriori criticism to the analysis of surprises and paradoxes associated with recent and contemporary public service reforms. The relationship between stability and change is a central paradox of administration that pervades all forms of organising (Nordesjö, 2023). Franken et al. (2020) argue that the tensions and contradictions underlying most work in the public sector often arise from the need to balance various stakeholders' interests. Talbot (2003) suggests two fundamental polarities in public management. The first is the paradox between centralisation and accountability on one side and decentralisation and involvement on the other. The second polarity is between rational choice and decision-making and judgment and compromise. Meanwhile, Pollitt (2000) argues that the paradox often lies in focusing on learning rather than on the loss of institutional memory.

Paradoxical leadership (Batool et al., 2023), which is the ability to balance structural and relational competitive demands over time, can be a source of organisational resilience (Franken et al., 2020; Jun & Rivera, 1997). However, it is not easy. Normand (2021), analysing the situation of French public managers, observes that their belonging to a professional group in a bureaucratic organisation does not predispose them to support managerial ideas and practices. They must, therefore, assume hybrid roles and responsibilities between administration, management, and leadership, while the organisational structure remains relatively inflexible and lacks resources, such as support. This creates a series of tensions between hierarchical structure and autonomy and between collaboration and conflict. Specific tensions accompany attempts to reform administration. Often, actions taken to improve bureaucratic organisations end up with further actions consistent with bureaucratic logic that was supposed to change (Panozzo, 2000; Benamouzig & Besançon, 2005). Value tensions arise within public organisations when traditional, market-based, and cooperation-based value systems are confronted (Kuitert et al., 2023). Excessive focus on legitimisation and promoting the logic of maximising efficiency and cost reduction also leads to tensions and can have the opposite effect to the intended one (Sonpar et al., 2010).

## **2. Research methodology**

The article relied on findings from comprehensive research carried out in the phytosanitary inspection. The overarching aim of the project was to pinpoint primary operational challenges and incorporate components of organisational learning in the inspection. This endeavour adhered to the principles of triangulation, following Denzin's approach in 2012. Eight researchers from diverse units participated in the study, ensuring a comprehensive perspective.

To maintain coherence, the research team held regular meetings, implementing measures like a pre-defined list of interview topics. Methodological triangulation was achieved through various data collection techniques, including interviews, literature reviews, legal analyses, organisational data analytics, quantitative research with service recipients, and collaborative workshops with organisation employees.

The study was grounded in two primary theoretical frameworks: action research methodology and the concept of the learning organisation. Individual analyses were interpreted from multiple theoretical perspectives. Notably, scientific consultancy was less popular in Poland due to the lengthy and risky nature of research, with management boards prioritising quick outcomes. Despite its unconventional nature for large consulting corporations, action research was chosen for its unique advantages, allowing direct researcher involvement and the development of practically significant theory. This study represents a distinctive and pioneering effort in the Polish context.

An in-depth analysis of 31 interviews conducted among inspection employees showed that despite the positive attitude of employees and management towards

introducing organisational changes, they encounter a series of paradoxes along the way.

### **3. Research results and discussions**

The conducted research allowed for the identification of a series of tensions and paradoxes related to the functioning of the organisation. Some of them have an internal character, while others are the result of external decisions and conditions.

#### **3.1 The need for sustainable development vs. limited funding**

The analysed institution is a publicly funded office, ensuring financial support in principle. However, in practice, the issue of insufficient funding is exceptionally pressing.

We have only four cars, and there are ten of us. [UNIT2EE03]  
The main problem, which we will talk about a lot, is the financial issue. Subsidies, both in terms of positions, i.e., employees and later providing these employees with various work tools, because perhaps there is a plus at the moment that when it comes to the fleet of cars, we are doing well. People have computers, and these printers are portable. Even to a lesser extent, the issue is the equipment, specifically how many people are lacking. At least for us, it is evident that we are missing the proper resources to carry out the tens of thousands of inspections that these people have to deal with. [UNIT5EE02]  
What motivates an employee, even though the salaries are low and initially, everyone said it was the salary, then, doing this task, it turned out that it is not the salary at all, but the tools of work. So that we do not have to ask for things like saws, which we also need, shovels, and good equipment, because everyone said that we should have computers, laptops with Internet access, and printers. And in our inspectorate, this is already happening, but it is not the case everywhere. We would not want to have limitations, that, oh my God, we will not go to this inspection because we have to do something else. So that we would not have to think so much about what to do on the other side to accomplish these tasks, so that there would not be a problem with that. I think that would already make a big difference. Salaries are one thing, they would certainly improve well-being, but probably in the short term, following the principle that the more I have, the more I want. However, this other part, I think, includes some additional things, for example, medical care or something like that, which many companies have signed, and offices would also give. Additional things that would bind employees more. [UNIT3EE02]

The analysed institution, unlike the commercial sector, has the guarantee of stable funding from public sources. The paradox lies in the fact that, simultaneously, it is chronically underfunded. According to Sonpar et al. (2010), such a situation is

expected to have a negative impact on the organisation's performance. While the institution fulfils its mission, financial constraints affect the scope of the carried-out activities, their quality, employee motivation, and even the overall prestige of the organisation. At times, fulfilling statutory tasks requires significant creativity from employees, indicating their identification with the organisation. However, the provision of public services should not be contingent on employees' sense of mission. Moreover, as indicated by Normand (2021), their affiliation with a professional group in a bureaucratic organisation does not predispose them to support managerial ideas and practices.

Ensuring adequate resources for the execution of crucial public tasks is a prerequisite for the development of a modern society. Simultaneously, considering the commitment and sense of mission among employees, even a slight improvement in the institution's funding could lead to a significant enhancement in the identified areas.

### **3.2 Bureaucratic formalization vs. diversified work**

Employees with a high level of qualifications generally evaluate work that involves the execution of diverse tasks positively, perceiving it as interesting and less monotonous.

The bureaucracy, because everything needs to be prepared, protocols written down, then enter everything into the system because we have one large system for the whole Poland, just divided. But there is a lot of data entry, preparation, then these attempts, well, there is a lot of bureaucracy. [...] The DORIT department has it the worst; when they go for an inspection, they have eight copies of the protocol. We have, it depends, because if it is trials, well, then four, three, but still... [UNIT2EE03]

The analysed institution is, on one hand, a typical bureaucracy. Its functioning is based on legal acts of various levels, and the execution of many tasks involves extensive reporting. Employees emphasise the high level of formalisation and the time-consuming nature of numerous bureaucratic procedures. Simultaneously, they assess the work they perform as diverse and interesting. The organisation's specificity makes employee interactions with clients challenging and prone to conflicts. However, the challenging nature of client relationships does not diminish the attractiveness of the work from the employees' perspective. The institution's leadership grapples with the paradox of simultaneous rigidity associated with the bureaucratic nature of the organisation and the variability, diversity of tasks, nature, but also working conditions (Popescu, 2011). This aligns with Nordesjö's observations (2023), acknowledging that the greatest paradox in administration is the need to reconcile stability and change. The selection of suitable employees capable of functioning under such tensions could also play a crucial role. However,

this is significantly dependent on the organisation's financial capabilities, which are highly restricted.

### **3.3 High job requirements vs. unattractive working conditions**

A prerequisite for the efficient achievement of statutory goals by the analysed institution is the possession of an experienced, highly qualified staff. Inspectors must complete studies with a relevant profile, pass a state exam, and, as the respondents claim, have at least several years of experience.

Size and qualifications. That means, well, I am not complaining about this team, which is now, because it is really a cohesive team and we understand each other well. But let us assume that there is one such position and there is constant rotation, and it is palpable. It is difficult then. If, well, I wanted someone to come, for sure someone with experience, because it seems to me that in the main inspectorate it should be a person with experience, knowing, and understanding the work. [UNIT0EE04]

With the third recruitment, we finally identified a person who could be hired. Because he already applied, and he did not withdraw. The first time, a young guy applied, but before we hired him, he found another job. I mean, he was looking in the meantime. In the second recruitment, there was no one suitable. Sometimes people come [...] to work briefly and look for another job because the salary is low. There is turnover, meaning they come and go. [UNIT1EE05]

The execution of statutory tasks requires employees to possess significant knowledge. As previously mentioned, they must complete demanding studies and later pass a challenging state exam. However, young individuals completing their studies often have numerous job offers, frequently more financially attractive than those offered by the analysed institution. Relatively few candidates express interest in undertaking low-paying work in the public office. The organisation also grapples with the outflow of experienced staff. Respondents assess that the nature of the work means that an employee attains the necessary level of quality and independence only after several years of employment. Such experienced employees are highly valued in the job market, particularly in large cities, where the commercial sector tends to attract experienced workers away from public organisations. Despite the interesting nature of the work and a sense of mission, financial factors play a decisive role in deciding to change jobs. All these aspects contribute to the described institutional memory loss, as highlighted by Pollitt (2000). Unit managers face the challenge of reconciling contradictions daily. On one hand, efficiency requires the experience associated with employees' tenure, while on the other hand, many units experience high personnel turnover. Ensuring the required continuity of operations, knowledge transfer, and good practices can be a significant challenge.

### **3.4 Demanding work vs. low wages**

Employees recruited for substantive positions must meet various requirements related to formal knowledge and motivation to work in public organisations. Depending on the area in which employees work, becoming independent and acquiring the qualifications to perform selected administrative tasks takes a considerable amount of time, measured in years.

Researcher: And in your department, how long does it take to train an employee to be reasonably independent?

Respondent: Well, to be independent in the position, at least two years. Well, they complete one cycle, then another, because something may change, not necessarily year by year, but to grasp the entirety, well, that... [UNIT1EE05] But in the Inspection, salaries on hand are very low. I do not know how it is here, but a specialist in a branch earns two thousand and it is hard physical work. [UNIT4EE06]

If someone were going to quit, they would have quit already. Everyone has been working for years. I have been here for twenty-three, one colleague for twelve, another for twenty-two, and probably another for fifteen. Everyone has some stability. We are fortunate that our significant others, all are married or in relationships, and luckily for us, their second halves... I do not want to say they work in better companies, but they are better off financially than we are. So, I do not know, looking at it from my perspective too, if the other side works longer, more, or spends more time away from home, our job still provides stability. I start at 7:30 and finish at 3:30. And if everyone has a family, children, etc., it provides some stability that someone is always at home by 4, so there are many positives to consider when contemplating a job change. If I want to earn a thousand more, that is one thing, but if I earn five, of course, I will change. But few are fortunate enough to be able to leave and have someone offer them that much. [UNIT3EE04]

The labour market situation is unfavourable for organisations functioning under stringent budgetary constraints. Especially in large urban centres, young individuals have significant opportunities to engage in attractive and well-compensated employment. Organisations offering financially unattractive employment conditions face serious difficulties in attracting job candidates (Fabiæ et al., 2016). In the case of the analysed institution, such a situation prevails. Candidates recruited for employment are not only offered salaries at the national minimum wage level, but the recruitment process itself, due to bureaucratic procedures, is lengthy and complex. These factors discourage young people from taking up employment in the organisation. Combined with high substantive requirements imposed on candidates, they create significant organisational tension. Vacancies arising from the retirement or transition to the business sector of experienced employees are not replenished with new staff. The advantages of working in administration, such as regulated working



hours, stability, and independence from current market conditions, are considered secondary from the perspective of young individuals' needs. It seems that the dissonance between requirements and low salary levels significantly contributes to tension in all four areas: learning, organising, belonging, and acting, as delineated by Smith and Lewis (2011).

### **3.5 Engagement and motivation vs. wage differentiation**

The analysed organisation has a hierarchical character. Employees with substantial knowledge and experience have the opportunity to advance to positions of higher status.

The career ladder is strictly limited here, and someone jumping from an inspector to a senior inspector does not involve something that would cause an inspector not to sleep because if I were a senior inspector, I would earn a thousand more, for example. These are such small differences that it is not significant for anyone, that it is just for one's ego, that I will jump to another position, because financially, I will not feel it anyway. The disproportion between a manager and an employee is small; the disproportion between someone who comes to work and someone who has worked for twenty years in a position, whether an inspector or a senior specialist inspector, is too small. [UNIT3EE04]

As previously indicated, the financial conditions offered to employees accepted for employment are not attractive, although the requirements for their formal qualifications are high. Another factor unfavourable to taking up and continuing work is the low pay differentiation within the organisation. The organisational hierarchy is not strongly reflected in the salary structure. A significant salary increase is only felt after advancing to a position in the organisation that is not accessible to every employee. Salary growth is also, in administration, a function of job tenure; however, this also does not adequately differentiate salaries. As a result, the pay factor is neither a motivator for taking up work nor for continuing a career in the organisation. Combined with high expectations regarding qualifications and the high substantive potential of employed workers, this creates a clear and challenging organisational tension. The bureaucratic operating system essentially minimises the discretion of superiors in the remuneration process. As a result, attempts to apply individual motivational incentives are rare, and timid actions taken to improve motivation are in line with bureaucratic logic (Profiroiu et al., 2022; Benamouzig & Besançon, 2005; Panozzo, 2000).

## **4. Conclusions**

In the functioning of public administration organisations, numerous paradoxes characterised by tensions, contradictions, and dissonances can be observed.

Complexity, change, the necessity of cooperation with other entities, and other factors contribute to these paradoxes. Additionally, public organisations have their specificity related to their bureaucratic structure and method of financing. Societal expectations of professionalism, high efficiency, and reliability, coupled with the simultaneous pressure to reduce public expenditures, generate numerous tensions in their operation.

These tensions, alongside threats, can also present opportunities. However, the effective management of these paradoxes is a prerequisite for capitalising on such opportunities. Managing an organisation with so many paradoxes requires an increased tolerance for uncertainty and the ability to reconcile the conflicting goals and interests of various stakeholders. These attributes are not typically associated with managers in bureaucratic organisations, which can be considered a paradox in itself. The numerous paradoxes that public administration faces daily do not make it an exemplary sustainable organisation. The stabilising factors in its operations include the provided (though insufficient) continuity of funding and a sense of mission and commitment from a significant portion of employees. Other conditions analysed above create tensions and disharmonies in its functioning. Simultaneously, the concept of attempting to resolve some of these paradoxes in the future may be a crucial step toward building a sustainable organisation.

Although our conclusions are based on a case study, it can be assumed that, due to underfunding being a root cause of many paradoxes, they may also apply to many other public administration bodies, not only in Poland but also in other countries.

The conducted research indicates that currently, public administration cannot serve as a reference point for other organisations in the establishment of a sustainable work environment. This assessment is not the result of negative attitudes among managers or employees toward this issue, but rather stems from the low funding of the institutions, which diminishes their attractiveness in the labour market.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Acknowledgment**

That is not the case.

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