Becoming a government search-up: the journey of the Colombian Public Innovation Team

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The Equipo de Innovación Pública (EiP) is the innovation team within the Colombian National Department of Planning (DNP). DNP is a ministry-level agency that supports policy development and evaluation across the entire government of Colombia. The EiP is mandated to support the experimental design of approaches and processes that increase the ability to create user-centred, effective and efficient policies, for the benefit of the Colombian people.

With support from the Newton Fund and the British Council in Colombia, Nesta has been working with the EiP and DNP as part of the States of Change initiative to support the team's efforts to develop the wider innovation capacity of the Colombian government. We caught up with the EiP's leader, Javier Guillot, to have a conversation about the team's transformation process and learning journey on how best to create shared value as an innovation team in the Colombian government.

Jesper: At Nesta, we have so many different examples of innovation teams and one thing is for certain: they always develop and grow as a unique 'product' of

their environment. What would you say are some of the unique elements of the Colombian context that influence your everyday work and operations?

Javier: Our everyday activities are mostly influenced by our immediate organisational context, but there are some elements of the Colombian context that have been key for us since the creation of the team, in mid 2015. Here I would like to highlight two. First, Colombia seems to be facing a 'critical juncture', a situation in which our shared 'institutional path' can be significantly reshaped. The recent signing of the peace agreement with FARC may be the most important manifestation of this juncture. It spurred polarisation, was then rejected by a narrow margin in a national referendum with very low voter turnout, and was finally passed through Congress. Regardless of the discussion on the agreement itself, the situation has led many of us, especially those in the younger generations, to dare imagine a Colombia that is not submerged in the tragedies of war. This opens up fresh opportunities to understand, promote and practice innovation for the public good in the path towards building a stable and lasting peace.

Second, the density of diversity in Colombia is

very high. This is true for many different angles of "diversity", and it implies complex policy challenges when it comes to promoting equity, inclusion and sustainable development. We have a very complex geography, with territories that vary widely in socioeconomic, cultural and ecological dimensions. This is very inspiring in terms of the potential to generate creative responses to social and environmental challenges. But also a formidable force, as specificities of local contexts cannot be ignored.

In the EiP, we believe that more effective responses from government can be delivered only if those who experience challenges first-hand are more actively included in the design (or re-design) of public policies, programmes and services. Because the DNP helps to structure policy design and evaluation processes, we have the opportunity to inspire and support public servants in experimenting with new ways to engage with citizens (including their own peers!) in the pursuit of public value.

From the outset, we have also been inspired and encouraged by the emergent social innovation ecosystem in Colombia – in many corners, both within and beyond government organisations, we have met individuals and teams seeking to lead social change. Indeed, the EiP was born in the context of a collaborative effort to develop a national policy for social innovation in Colombia. Early on, the idea came about of government not just supporting social innovation approaches, but also applying them within. A couple of forward-looking, mid-level officials in DNP created the team with one main question: what does social innovation mean and how could more of it happen in government?

The social innovation policy-building effort met several challenges and was ultimately put on hold. With time, we learned that two issues pose perhaps the most difficult challenges. The first is the lack of a shared language around social innovation, a term that in government often leads to fuzzy conceptual debates that hinder the creation of shared narratives and visions. The second is the fact that social innovation policy is not yet seen as a top priority for the public

agenda at the national level, which reflects a relatively weak interest from top-level officials in the field.

A shared language that translates into action and sustained outcomes cannot be enforced, but needs to emerge through conversation and in practice. In the past two years, we have confirmed in multiple workshops and activities that veering first towards the concept of 'public innovation' can be a strategic move for building a wider vision of social innovation. We have perceived that 'public innovation' generates more traction and interest in some open-minded top-level officials that we can access. Thus, we are at present experimenting with the vocabulary and practice of public innovation, a field in which government organisations have begun to see their role more clearly.

Jesper: There are many versions of so-called "policy labs" around the world. They are different in ways of operating and in their priorities but are at the same time quite aligned in their overall purpose: systematically attempting to productively disrupt or 'hack' existing policy and decision-making procedures, processes and practices. Some focus heavily on providing new insights and perspectives on issues through user-research and various kinds of generative data. Some tend to be more focused on prototyping and testing new service and systems design using experimental tools and processes. Others again are focusing more on improving the strategy and practice of policy-making through training and mentoring activities focused on learning new methods and building capability. In any case, it does not seem to be an 'either or', but more a question of finding your own theory for change within the context you are working in. What has been your journey and which direction are you heading now?

Javier: A lot of our journey so far has consisted of understanding what level of ambition we need to have as a team, in order to manage scarce resources strategically. We have invested a lot of energy into understanding our institutional context – gathering insights from projects, workshops and conversations – to figure out which role we can play in it. We are grateful to have this privilege at DNP—bureaucracies rarely

	SEARCH UP	START UP	SCALE UP
FUNCTION	Search a new value	Build new value	Systemise new value
ROLE	Experimenter	Founder	Entrepreneur
METAPHOR			
GOAL	The goal of the Search Up is to run experiments on each of the different building blocks (customer segment, customer jobs to be done, value proposition, business model etc.). The goal is to kill what doesn't work, iterate on early signs of success, or scale what works.	The goal of a StartUP is to take what works and turn it into a series of outcomes (funding, revenue, product, team, pivot)	The goal of the ScaleUP is the systemise value for all the players in their ecosystem (employees, customers, investors, supply chain, etc.)
MICRO-FIT	Customer Jobs to be done fit	Jobs to be done Solution fit value Solution fit Solution	Problem Purpose fit Purpose People fit
MICRO-FIT	Problem-Market Fit	Product-Market Fit	Company-Market Fit

Credit: Zavae Zaheer 'Search-ups before start-ups'

provide the opportunity to reflect and act upon an examined role.

With the help of Nesta, we have recently confirmed that 'experimentation' is a term with a lot of potential to bring the concept of innovation into practice, in a language that everyone – citizens, bureaucrats and politicians – could share. What does experimenting mean? To some it seems to suggest improvisation, like "going crazy and seeing what happens". However, we are promoting an alternative interpretation, closer in spirit to its scientific roots, that sees experiments as structured processes in which ideas are generated and tested. How can we build a common understanding of experimentation in this sense, do more of it, and better grasp its value for the public sector?

The problem is not just about promoting specific methods and tools for experimenting, but also about the principles and conditions that enable it, including the required 'mind-set'.

Lately, "policy labs" have been recognised as spaces where experimentation happens in government. However, we hesitate to use the word 'lab' to describe the EiP because we think it tends to be linked closely to the goal of delivery. Rather, we believe our role is closer to that of an enabler of experimentation. In this sense, we have come to define our unit as a government "search-up", following the terminology of Zavae Zaheer and his argument around search-ups vs. start-ups within the private sector. By "government search-up", we mean a team that gathers and shares evidence on processes, outputs and outcomes of public initiatives, based on an experimental

mindset. We do this to foster collective learning and enable experimentation to happen more, and generate more public value, in government.

Jesper: It is interesting that you choose to use this terminology for your future role at EiP. Particularly exploring the potential of seeing 'search-up' as a role for an innovation team in government, rather than a phase of development. One overall challenge is to make use of the unique potential of innovation teams to systematically identify and legitimise new value-propositions that develop better fit between problems (as rediscovered) and potential ways of closing gaps in the market (citizens' needs and experiences). One of the things that Zaheer highlights is the problematic tendency of rushing to come up with scalable ideas that results in premature uptake of ideas that fail or do not go anywhere. Our experience suggests that there is a similar problem in government and public organisations – both in developing policies or programmes and even when setting up innovation labs and teams. While innovation teams and labs in theory are supposed to bridge the gaps between exploration, development and implementation, they often get caught in "start-up" mode, promising new "repeatable, scalable business models" too soon. Zaheer's argument and language puts this challenge into a useful perspective, introducing "search-up" as an experimental phase that explores and searches for new value-propositions and definitions of the "job to be done". How do you see this in the context of your role?

Javier: We have understood that our role is to enable a more strategic and systematic use of experimentation in government, in order to achieve more effective and efficient responses to complex public challenges. A first and major step in the journey has been working with other public servants to carry out projects that address relevant policy issues through experimental approaches. We have worked in fields such as urban air pollution, corruption in the provision of school meals and knowledge management processes in government. The purpose is always to demonstrate the value of experimentation as a means for learning and developing better approaches.

In these projects we are identifying, through

practice, the capabilities that individuals, teams and organisations need to embody an experimental mindset. We are now using this experience to engage our organisation, DNP, on a strategic level, to foster an experimental mind-set across government. We have also begun cooperating with other key allies in the Colombian innovation ecosystem to develop a long-term strategy for promoting public innovation in our country.

Jesper: Your systematic focus on learning – both learning from activities internally as well as from people and organisations locally, nationally and internationally – is something that is often missing within government organisations. But my concern is that you end up becoming an interesting but detached and non-influential think-tank inside the Colombian bureaucracy. In a way, you risk ending up with the quite common challenge of making new knowledge and insight practically useful in political and bureaucratic decision-making processes. How are you thinking about dealing with this sort of challenge in relation to your value-creation? And how do you go beyond research to help develop, legitimise and operationalise the insights and evidence that you have created or identified?

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Javier: It is a great challenge. We have tried to follow many of our colleagues' advice: in order to maximize the likelihood of impact, first observe and understand how public organisations work in our context, then design policy approaches or instruments. Doing so, we have identified one critical policy instrument: the National Development Plan, a policy document that frames government action to implement the presidential administration's political programme, and that is structured and

written under the leadership of DNP every four years. We are now working on compiling a set of policy recommendations for promoting public innovation in Colombia to be considered in the drafting of the next National Development Plan, which will occur later this year, after August, when a new President comes to office.

In any case, connecting the evidence that results from experimentation with decision-making processes in government is not an easy feat. This is especially true when evidence comes from "failure", a word that top-level officials, politicians and public servants find hard to digest. However, in our eyes, truly failed experiments are only those from which we do not learn. Questions we are tackling in practice are how to turn "failure" into lessons and insights, and how then to bring them to the eyes and ears of decision-makers across different levels of government. This needs to happen at the same time as new ways of engaging citizens are explored and promoted, to involve them as key allies of government agencies in experimental processes.

For example, we recently concluded an innovation project with the UK's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), in which we were experimenting with behavioural approaches to confront corruption in Colombia's school meals programme (PAE). The project was driven collaboratively by a team involving people from BIT, the Office of the Secretary of Transparency, the Ministries of Education and ICTs, territorial governments and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). We tried to bring an experimental mindset to all of the project's phases. In the final validation phase, we conducted a randomised controlled trial (RCT) that yielded no statistically significant results. In other words, the effectiveness of the intervention that we were testing, which included sending two-way SMS messages to parents to increase their engagement with the programme and hence improve the quantity and quality of the meals, could not be demonstrated with the experimental design that we rolled out. Nonetheless, the project has brought substantive value in terms of lessons and insights gained regarding the operation of the programme, and the need to increase the effective participation of local school

communities in its oversight.

Because the project with BIT involved using behavioural insights, and because we implemented it with the support of UK cooperation and the IADB, we were able to engage top-level officials at DNP, some of whom are young economists interested in global trends related to behavioural economics. However, working together with citizens to design and test the intervention was genuinely hard in practice. There are many obstacles, and deep institutional inertias, that still prevent effective citizen engagement in government action. This project, as well as other examples, continues to prove the need to connect public innovation closely with citizen participation.

Nesta and EiP teams identify tangible action opportunities

Jesper: Speaking of impact and value-creation, your new model seems to significantly challenge how innovation teams and labs are typically held accountable by their host organisations. For example, one tendency is that innovation teams are used as delivery units, doing projects that apply new methods within government. This ensures that organisations can uphold an activity-based, input-output accountability. But it often also results in creating 'innovation project silos' for new approaches rather than embedding new ways of working strategically in the organisational models and practices of policy

development. Interestingly, you have chosen to prioritise focusing on embedding experimentation more broadly in the organisation as part of your search-up approach. What challenges do you see in taking this approach?

Javier: In practically all the scenarios where we have presented the potential of experimentation for creating public value, we have heard about the fear of the "ías". The "ías" is short for the set of control and oversight agencies in the Colombian government: the contraloría, procuraduría and fiscalía, which work at national and local levels. The fear of being singled out for misusing public funds as a consequence of experimenting is an important obstacle for consolidating a practice consistent with an experimental mindset in government. In Colombia, that fear is attached to a perception that the law will be strictly and narrowly interpreted by the "ías", which are expected to pay close attention to deviations from the status quo. Therefore, there is pressure to collectively build an understanding of the value of experimentation together with the "ías", and ultimately also with the citizens who demand change. This is tough! Because what is normally seen as sensible or responsible often differs from what might be required to innovate and generate more value.

So, in a place like Colombia, innovation in the public sector seems to be most like a paradox. Public servants tend to feel as if they are prohibited from doing anything that is not explicitly allowed. However, experimentation requires recognising uncertainty, and acknowledging that to achieve sustained change in the face of complex problems, we need to explore, test and methodically validate ideas before bringing them to scale. Experimentation brings value, insofar as it helps to face uncertainty productively. It does so, as Marco Steinberg would describe it, by helping us to transform uncertainty into risk management. We think that having a conversation on what having an experimental mindset means, and bringing experimentation into practice in ways in which the value of learning can be assessed, are likely approaches to dissolve this paradox.

But what is the evidence from which we can learn? We need to have a public discussion on the kinds of evidence that are deemed acceptable and legitimate for public decision-making. Because innovation goes hand-in-hand with experimentation, addressing the question of the nature of evidence is key for the promotion of public innovation.

We have come to see innovation and learning as very close concepts. An organisation that is not ready for learning will not be ready to innovate. Experimenting will render no lasting value, or will become just one more buzzword if it is not coupled with learning. However, in government learning feels uncomfortable and seems to be very costly, especially given the current structure of political incentives and the normative constraints embedded in the law.

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Jesper: It has been so interesting to work with your team focusing on three core elements of the innovation ecosystem at the same time: supporting the development and implementation of a new role for the team, working with you to support and learn from innovation pilot projects, and supporting the development of a new strategy for the Colombian government on public innovation. But what is next for you and your team? And where do you hope to be three years from now?

Javier: The first big milestone in the road ahead will be to co-create a strategy for promoting public innovation in Colombia. This is the strategy that we hope will be reflected in the next National Development Plan. Co-creating is more easily said than done, but we hope to engage peer public servants at the national and territorial levels, as well as citizens and private stakeholders, in a broad conversation about the

policy elements that should be prioritised within the strategy.

Also, we are aiming to consolidate our enabling role as a government search-up by working on two new projects, where we are combining the use of behavioural insights and design approaches. In these projects, we work as an extended team with public servants from agencies focused on delivery of products or services, and peers from other DNP units involved in the policy-making processes of their respective policy fields. One of them seeks to design and test interventions for promoting better access to housing through a public bank, the Fondo Nacional del Ahorro (FNA). The other intends to design and test interventions to optimise a key administrative procedure for the food industry: the sanitary registration overseen by INVIMA (the comparative agency to the FDA in the U.S.).

However, our most pressing challenge still comes from within: we are a team of four facing enormous demands, complexity and resource constraints. Working together as a team to productively promote public innovation requires

recognising what our capabilities are, nurturing them, and working with others to complement them and create value together. One of our main references is the competency framework for public innovators developed by Nesta, which we have found useful to face this challenge in practice.

On a related note, we believe in the need for intensifying collaboration. We are quite excited to be an active member in the States of Change learning collective that can help mobilise and orchestrate our collective learning process in Latin America and beyond. We think we have a lot of potential to learn from and with other public innovation initiatives that have emerged in Latin America in recent years, many of which have become internationally visible. Further down the line, we hope to see the EiP as a node in a vibrant network of teams devoted to promoting public and social innovation in Colombia. Actual structural change will only come if we work in coordinated fashion, and the conversation becomes genuinely inclusive.