Foreword

The broad topic addressed in this book – innovation in public services – is extremely important and little studied. Most of the research on innovation has been focused on innovation by private for-profit firms, and the innovations studied have tended to be physical products or the technological processes used to produce them. Recent research, for example, that concerned with innovation in medicine or in education has widened the scope somewhat, bringing organizations like hospitals and schools into the picture and new professional practices. There is a small literature on innovations in organizational forms and styles of management. There is some on the development of new government policies and programmes. But this literature is not extensive.

This is not to say that there has been little research on public services. There is a vast literature in political science and some in economics on the mechanisms and factors that determine the government policies and programmes that are in place at any time. Many government programmes, and the services that they provide, have been subjected to searching cost–benefit analyses. There is an extensive literature on how public agencies are organized, on the nature of public bureaucracies and on public administration. There are many sophisticated normative writings concerned with how to do good policy analysis and the canons of good administration. But very little of this literature has been concerned self-consciously with innovation in public services.

It must be understood that innovation is a term of art. In the general orientation of research concerned with innovation, innovating is seen as a purposive act or set of acts aiming to do something better, to meet a new need or respond to new circumstances. The conception of trying something new, and not simply making a different choice among prevailing and well perceived alternatives, is an essential part of the innovation concept. While the objective of doing things differently so as to improve performance is very much part of the literature on the evaluation of public programmes and organizational and managerial reform of government agencies, most of that literature sees the issue as making better decisions, as contrasted with trying something new and different.

This book is built around the concept of improving public services through innovation in the sense of trying something new and different

rather than through better analysis and decision making. The latter draws one's attention to doing careful cost–benefit studies of perceived alternatives, and following the canons of good organizational structure and management. The focus on innovation draws one's attention to the ability of those involved in public programmes to be creative, entrepreneurial, risk taking, and capable of learning from experience how to improve new programmes. This is very much what this book is about.

This perspective on how to improve public programmes is much needed and, as I have said, unfortunately relatively rare. Up until relatively recently, the writing and teaching about how to improve the performance of business firms was largely focused on doing better analysis and making better decisions. Over the past decade, however, the importance of being able to innovate effectively, and of entrepreneurship, has come to the fore both in business schools and the press. This book may start the ball rolling in the same direction regarding how to improve the provision of public services.

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