

Preface

Complex issues seemingly abound in every sphere of society. Indeed, it is easy to form the impression that many issues are more complex than ever before. Lately, the global economic crisis has added substantially to the many issues on the agenda and their ‘wicked’ nature becomes apparent from the controversies among economists, governments and many other stakeholders about the ways to deal with the crisis and its fallout. What may have come as a surprise to many is the growing interest in a public values perspective on these social issues. For more than two decades, neo-liberal values have prevailed, and the related New Public Management (NPM) movement encouraged governments to operate as business organizations and to become more efficient, effective and innovative. However, with the reforms to the welfare state and the privatization and outsourcing of public services, the notion that the public mattered also grew, not just in the sense of individuals as clients and citizens but also in the sense of the public domain. For instance, non-profit and voluntary organizations increasingly support community work as a way to demonstrate their social responsibility. Media attention turned very critical when the banking industry was seen as having contributed significantly to the outbreak of the economic crisis and then followed this by ignoring its loss of social legitimacy by continuing its routine practices of exorbitant financial rewards for which the public was now seen to be paying through state support and subsequent austerity measures. As part of this, previous initiatives to critically reflect on the relevance of public values in society, and for the public sector in particular, expanded and grew. Parallel to these changes in society, the social sciences rediscovered the concept of public values. Whereas Schubert claimed in 1965 that the concept of ‘public interest’ had little use in empirical research because of its various interpretations, Talbot was able to proclaim in 2009 that ‘public value’ was the ‘next big thing’ in public management and at the centre of a burgeoning academic discussion.

The Utrecht University School of Governance has been well positioned to study the issues that accompany these changes in society. ‘Public Matters’, the title of a research programme, aptly conveys the spread of meanings under which ‘publicness’ is investigated. First, the programme focuses on social issues and related *public concerns* that result from important social transformations. Second, the research concentrates on organizations with *public func-*

tions. These are organizations which may be loosely defined as belonging to the public sector, such as government departments, private institutions with public tasks, interest groups, civil society organizations and profit and non-profit service organizations such as healthcare organizations and schools. Third, the programme attaches particular importance to *public responsibility* and studies the ways in which organizational actors enact this. The ‘managing social issues’ research line brings together researchers to study the ways in which organizations involved in the production of policies, in the primary processes of service delivery and in interactions with the external environment deal with social issues such as diversity, labour participation and social inclusion/exclusion. The specific research questions addressed in these studies vary but underlying them all is a general interest in finding out how organizational actors make sense of public values related to the issues with which they are confronted, and how they manage the multiplicity of public values, the potential tensions and their responsibilities to the public domain. This volume provides answers to this general question based on the studies of members of the research group and their international colleagues. Through this, we hope to make a worthwhile contribution to the scientific body of knowledge and to the wider public domain.

As part of the celebration of the Utrecht University School of Governance’s ten years of academic performance, the department hosted a conference in which some 150 researchers from various countries participated. The best papers focusing on ‘managing social issues’ were selected for inclusion in the current volume and were revised as part of an intensive review process. A number of people have assisted us in completing this project successfully. First of all we would like to thank the authors, who have responded with enthusiasm and willingness to make significant alterations to their draft chapters. We thank the department for its support in organizing the ‘Public Matters’ anniversary conference in November 2010. Ulrike Weske took care of the administrative organization of this book project and also the production of the manuscript. Her accuracy and skills prevented the production of this book turning into a complex social issue in itself. Giles Stacey checked the chapters written by non-native speakers. Finally we would like to thank Francine O’Sullivan and the other editorial assistants at Edward Elgar Publishing for their excellent support throughout the process. We hope that all who have provided assistance, and of course the many readers, will be pleased with the outcome.

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DIAN MARIE HOSKING

