

More resilient public  
administrations after COVID-19

# LESSONS FROM USING THE COMMON ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK (CAF) 2020

HIGHLIGHTS

The COVID-19 crisis has subjected public sector organisations across EU Member States to a stress test of unprecedented scale, testing their capacity to craft innovative solutions to external shocks and ensure the continuity of service delivery for citizens and firms. The crisis has also provided an opportunity for public sector organisations to test and reflect upon their resilience, that is, their abilities to absorb, adapt and learn from shocks to be better prepared for future crises. In what is increasingly being described as the era of polycrises and growing uncertainty, strengthening public sector resilience is a central priority for governments looking to achieve continued growth and wellbeing for citizens.

The paper “More resilient public administrations after COVID-19 - Lessons from using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) 2020” provides a comprehensive analysis of the responses and adaptations of public sector organisations to the COVID-19 crisis in EU Member States. It assesses the resilience of public sector organisations through the lens of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) model, a quality management tool developed to self-evaluate organisational operations and performance. In addition to a survey of over 170 CAF user organisations, 11 in-depth case studies were conducted of organisations ranging in size, level of government and sector:

- **the *Women Service of the City of Vienna* in Austria**
- **the *National Employment Office* of Belgium**
- **the *Sofia Regional Health Inspectorate* in Bulgaria**
- **the *Pension Insurance Institute* in Croatia**
- **the *Municipality of Thessaloniki* in Greece**
- **the *Italian Space Agency* in Italy**
- **the *Lubuskie Voivodship Office* in Poland**
- **the *Vouzela and Campia School Grouping* in Portugal**
- **the *Ministry of Environment* of the Slovak Republic**
- **the *Agency for Agricultural Markets and Rural Development* in Slovenia**
- **and *Madrid Salud* in Spain.**

The experiences of these organisations were invaluable to identify challenges, opportunities and lessons learned to strengthen public administrations’ resilience.

# Overview of the CAF model

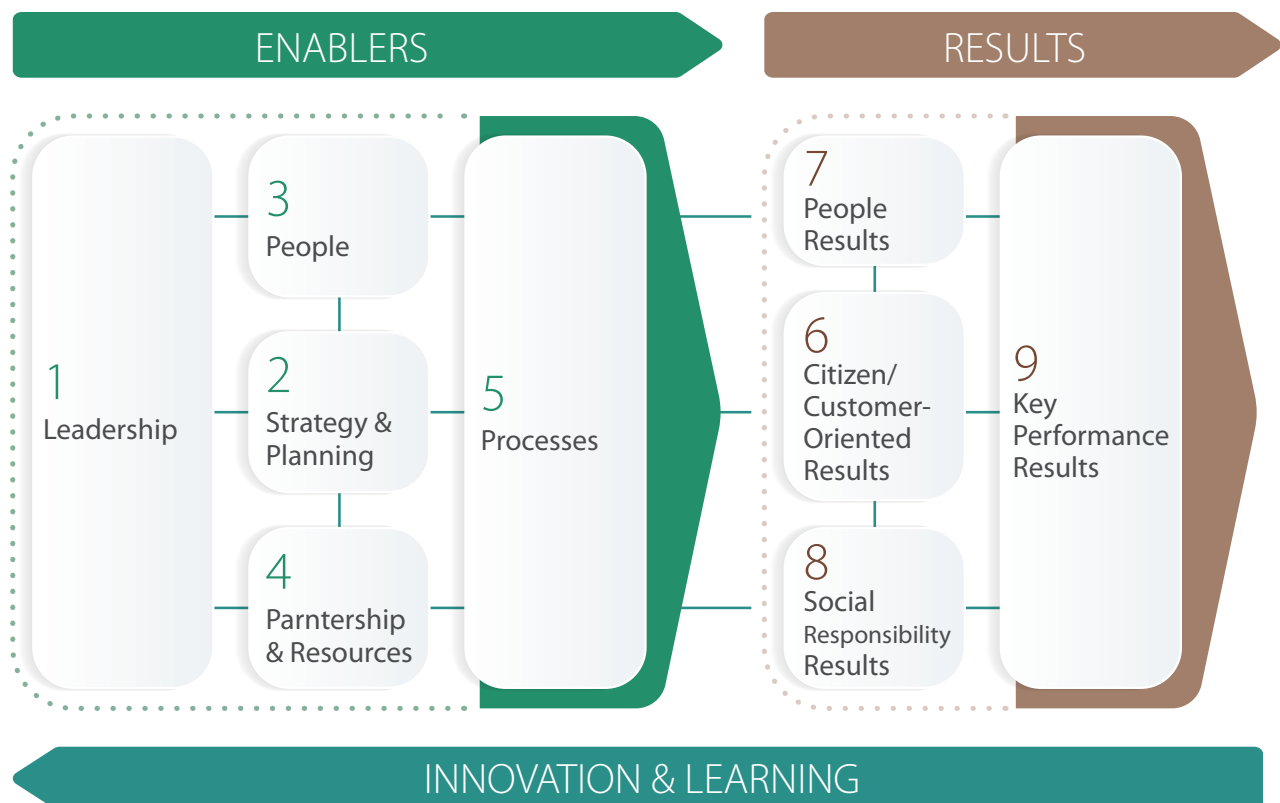
The CAF is a quality management and organisational development tool that aims to reinforce the operational performance, organisational excellence and positive societal outcomes of public sector organisations as well as their resilience. Despite not being designed from the perspective of resilience, the CAF model can nonetheless help assess the preparedness and the adaptation of public organisations to the crisis and prepare them to be more resilient by looking at measures needed across its various criteria.

The CAF has been embedded in public administrations in EU Member States for more than 20 years and is a model applicable to all types of public sector organisations. More than 2,000 CAF users are registered in

the EIPA database, representing a wide range of diverse public sector organisations.

The model, aimed to facilitate self-assessment as an initial step to trigger a process of continuous improvement, includes 9 overall criteria that are split between enablers and results (Figure 1). Each of these criteria is split into sub-criteria to make the assessment more precise and comprehensive. Eight horizontal principles of excellence are also defined and mainstreamed across the different criteria, for instance on results orientation, citizen/customer focus and on continuous learning, innovation and improvement. The model was last updated in 2020, right before the COVID-19 crisis, and included focuses on resilience, agility and digitalisation.

**Figure 1.** | Overview of the CAF model (2020)



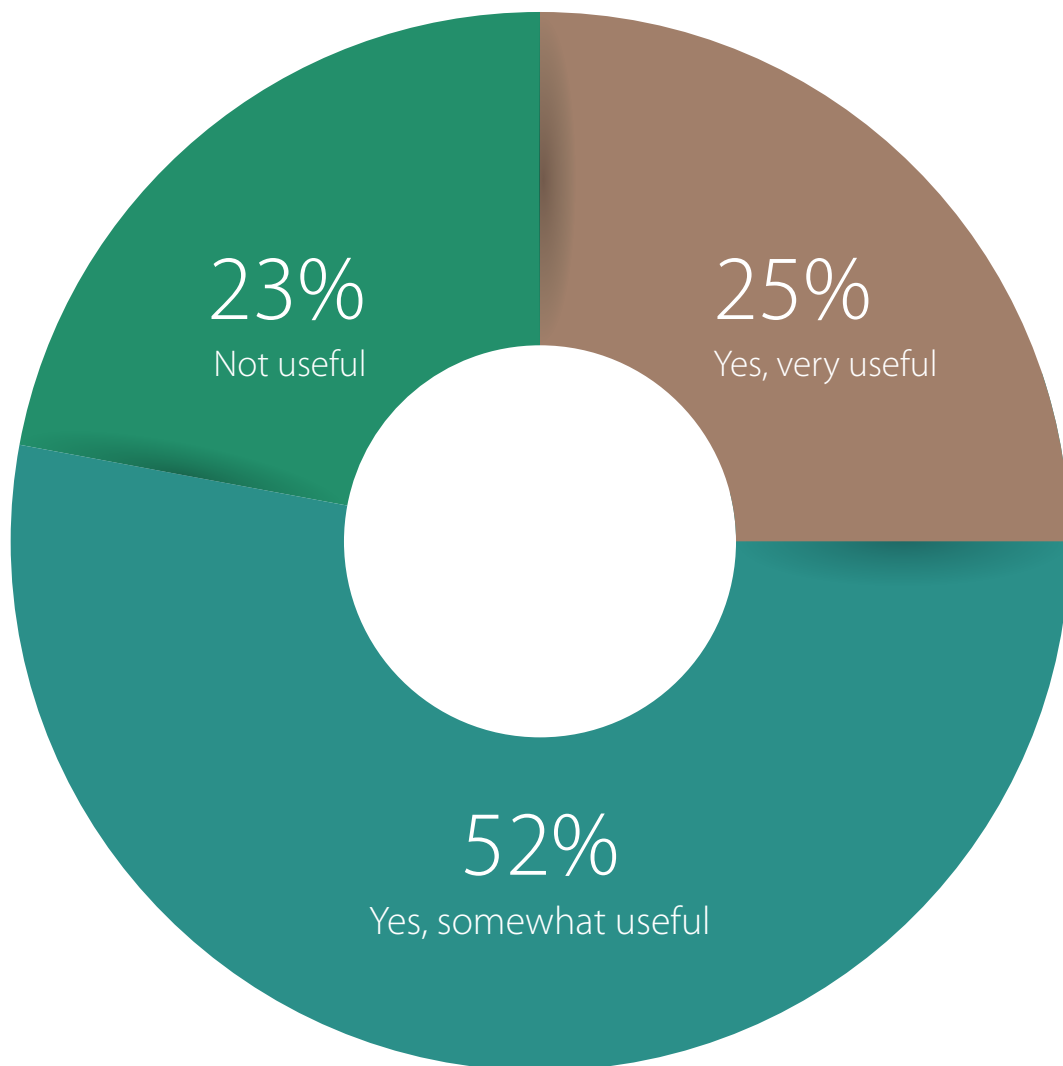
**Note:** For more details about the CAF model, please consult: <https://www.eipa.eu/caf-resource-centre/> and <https://www.eupan.eu/caf/>

**Sources:** (EUPAN, 2020[7]); (KDZ, 2023[8]).

The project showed that, in general, public sectors were able to maintain critical functions and service continuity during the pandemic, saving lives and livelihoods and allowing for a quicker post-pandemic recovery. Quality management tools, in particular the CAF (see figure 2), have helped public sector organisations better understand and continuously improve the functioning of their organisations, prepare and adapt

to unexpected events, and become more resilient. Public sector organisations that used the CAF reported that its use resulted in a more efficient response to the COVID-19 crisis. These organisations have demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt institutional arrangements and service delivery models, and introduced novel ways of working, communicating and interacting with citizens and partners.

**Figure 2.** | Most organisations found CAF useful or very useful during the crisis



Sources: OECD-EIPA Survey

The CAF proved valuable in crisis preparedness and response, notably serving as a framework for continuous organisational improvement. Public sector organisations that engage in regular and cyclical use of the CAF bring together employees from across the organisation for reflection and self-assessment, helping identify strengths and areas for improvement to make the organisation more effective and better prepared to anticipate and address future risks. During the crisis, CAF users could often draw on performance improvement initiatives already underway, for instance on digitalisation and remote working, which helped them weather the most disruptive shocks. Implementing the CAF with a wide group of employees also allowed staff to develop networks and learn about one another's work.

A number of important lessons and policy implications can be drawn from the project to increase resilience across public sector organisations:

- **The high commitment demonstrated by the people who make up public organisations - including front-line service providers - throughout the crisis has made it clear that their well-being and personal engagement lies at the heart of organisational resilience.**

However, public organisations struggled to move people to the places they were needed and to ensure employees had the working environment and tools required to maintain health and productivity throughout a fast-changing crisis. Coming out of the crisis, investments in workforce flexibility, including surge capacity, and employee well-being are likely to contribute to ongoing resilience.

- **Effective leadership is central to any crisis response and to building a culture of trust, teamwork and responsibility that values and involves staff.**

The most effective leaders during the crisis were those who possessed a deep understanding of the business and operations of their organisation and were able to provide thoughtful and coherent direction, but who also had enough trust in their managers' abilities to delegate the change and innovation required. They were also able to draw upon well-established professional networks to co-ordinate with external stakeholders and collaborators as the crisis unfolded. Recruiting and developing leaders with these leadership skills- including in foresight and crisis management- is essential to the resilience of public organisations.

- Agile and robust strategic planning processes have allowed organisations to adjust their strategies in volatile environments and achieve expected benefits for citizens and other stakeholders.

Public organisations could consider developing strategic planning capabilities to adapt strategic plans and objectives to the post-COVID-19 context and to connect contingency plans and protocols with longer-term strategic frameworks. Improving co-ordination mechanisms is also essential for responding to crises and key challenges both within an organisation and with other entities. Such mechanisms could include new consultative and advisory bodies involving civil society, the private sector, local actors and subnational entities.

- As much of the world moved online because of the pandemic, it became crucial to accelerate the digitalisation of processes within public sector organisations while addressing obstacles related to infrastructure, regulation, security, digital skills and resources.

Organisations should also extend their innovation efforts beyond digitalisation, especially as it is impossible to know how the next crisis will affect digital capabilities. Establishing an innovation ecosystem, with tools, processes and incentives, can help organisations adapt continuously and foster resilience.

- The pandemic more than ever demonstrated the value of partnerships to respond to new challenges and circumstances. Without partnerships – both new and old – public sector organisations would not have been able to have access to critical information on the impact of the pandemic on citizens and firms, including vulnerable and marginalised populations.

The pandemic showed the untapped value that can be exploited in normal times as well, and how a strategic approach should be taken to building and facilitating strong partnerships and networks to improve the quality of policies and services. Moreover, new communication and digital channels can be used to proactively inform, engage and communicate with partners.

- A focus on results and a strong evidence base, including accurate and timely data, information and indicators, have helped public sector organisations make informed decisions and remain effective and responsive during the crisis.

Developing such a base requires establishing performance frameworks and evidence-informed policymaking across the organisation and adjusting regularly to new priorities and context.

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Lessons from using the Com-  
mon Assessment Framework  
(CAF) 2020

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