



The integration of environmental practices and tools in the Portuguese local public administration



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ABSTRACT

The adoption of environmental practices and tools in overall management is an increasing occurrence in local public organisations. These institutions are shifting their management towards sustainability, although local governments are moving faster than other public sector levels regarding the integration of environmental and sustainability aspects in operations and strategies. The main goal of this research was to identify the environmental profile of local public administration using Portuguese municipalities as a case-study. This paper assesses how environmental and sustainability practices and tools have been adopted in this sector based on self-assessment by the local public services. To accomplish this aim, a questionnaire survey was forwarded to all of the municipalities in the country in order to identify and analyse the environmental practices in the local public sector. An aggregate evaluation of the degree of implementation of certain environmental practices was also produced based on an index that was developed based on the data obtained from ten selected environmental practices variables in the national survey. The overall results demonstrate a low adoption level of environmental practices and tools, concluding that new practices and public policies need to be adopted to invert the current trend. Nevertheless, there are positive signs of rising environmental integration and awareness, although many of the processes are in the early stages of implementation or changing. This research can support municipalities in reviewing and analysing their environmental management, assessment and communication practices to improve their environmental performance.

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1. Introduction

The public administration faces multiple challenges that compel it to continually make an effort to adapt to new organisational forms capable of responding to the constant requirements of society. [Curristine et al. \(2007\)](#) state that governments of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries are under pressure to improve public sector performance, while at the same time contain expenditure growth. Although the majority of OECD countries have engaged in some institutional reforms through the adoption of several good practices and new approaches, the demonstration of their results remains unclear.

Public sector performance could include several dimensions beyond the economic, financial and human resources aspects, including the environmental pillar, improving the public sector

efficiency and effectiveness, as endorsed by several authors (e.g., [GRI, 2004, 2010](#); [PMSGO, 1999](#); [Burritt and Welch, 1997](#)). However, as demonstrated by [Ramos et al. \(2007a\)](#) and further discussed by [Lundberg et al. \(2009\)](#), environmental assessment and management practices have most often been applied to manufacturing industries and tangible products, while public organisations usually neglect and/or omit their own environmental problems, excluding themselves from environmental integration in their own activities. Overall, the public sector has frequently been left out in research on the environmental and sustainability performance follow-up of their different activities and operations, despite few attempts, such as the one conducted by [Lundberg \(2011\)](#). These few studies can be justified in part by the natural attention that is given to sectors with a longer/greater history of environmental impacts, e.g., industry, agriculture and transport and with more pressure from stakeholders, customers in particular. However, the overall impacts of government operations can exceed those of individual industry sectors in a national context, as public agencies are major employers, providers of services and consumers of resources, as argued by [GRI \(2004\)](#).

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However, despite the abovementioned reality on environmental and sustainability research initiatives in the public sector, local government is part of a wider sustainability culture change movement and is becoming widely recognised as an environmental leader, advocating to other levels of government (Strengers, 2004). Local public institutions could play a central role in adopting sustainable initiatives, as discussed by Williams et al. (2011). Local governments are realising that they need to be part of the change towards sustainability and integrate good practices to improve their own performance and inform stakeholders. Nevertheless, as also indicated by Strengers (2004), the reasons justifying these changes are less clear, as well as the ways and means in which these changes are occurring and the permanency of these changes.

The relevant amount of work conducted in the area of environmental and sustainability practices and tools being implemented by local governments (e.g., Dumay et al., 2010; Michelsen and de Boer, 2009; Lozano and Vallés, 2007) contains many experiences and case studies, demonstrating that many local public administrations worldwide already provide good examples for integrating environmental initiatives into their operational activities and strategic instruments. Despite the numerous theoretical and empirical research initiatives discussing new approaches, methods or case study applications, the majority primarily focus on only one main practice or issue (e.g., Environmental Management System – EMS; sustainability reporting; Local Agenda 21 – LA21) (see chapter 2). Therefore, there is a dearth of research on initiatives that offer a coherent integrated environmental picture of a relevant set of adopted practices and tools by local governments.

This dearth is even more evident within the context of the Portuguese local government. Despite certain known initiatives conducted by the Portuguese local administration on environmental and sustainability issues, as identified by Fidélis and Moreno-Pires (2009) or Schmidt et al. (2006), little research has focused on the joint assessment of a set of significant practices and tools adopted or lead by the local governments of this Southern European country. To fill this research gap, a tailored local public administration assessment was conducted in this research, trying to assess the extent to which Portuguese municipalities are adopting key environmental actions and procedures.

The main goal of this research was to identify the environmental profile of local public administration through an analysis of the environmental practices and tools in Portuguese municipalities based on a self-assessment. To accomplish this aim, a national survey of all of the Portuguese municipalities was performed specifically to ascertain the following research questions: What is the general state of environmental integration and engagement in the Portuguese municipalities? What is the extent of implementation for a set of specific environmental practices and tools in the Portuguese municipalities? These practices include the appointment of a designated environmental professional responsible for environmental issues, the environmental training of personnel, EMS implementation, environmental and sustainability indicators and reporting, environmental standards for suppliers and LA21 implementation, among others.

2. Overview of environmental practices and tools in the local public administration

As introduced in the previous section, public institutions are moving towards to the integration of environmental and sustainability issues in their management (GRI, 2004; Ramos et al., 2007a, b). An important turning point was the recommendation of OECD (1996), stating that governments should develop and apply strategies to continually improve environmental performance, integrating environmental considerations into all government

operations and facilities, including related decision-making processes. This recommendation was followed by other OECD initiatives, such as the Workshop on Environmental Management Systems (EMS) for Government Agencies (OECD, 1998), the Recommendation of the Council on Improving the Environmental Performance of Public Procurement (OECD, 2002) and the Recommendation of the Council on Good Practices for Public Environmental Expenditure Management (OECD, 2006). It was understood that, like any other organisation, public services should have environmental objectives, goals and targets.

Local governments are responsible for providing a large number of services to their populations, independent of organisation size, territory location and social-cultural factors (USEPA, 1999). As focused on in this work of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, a main issue when analysing local public administration is the different types of local authority, the scope of their activities and operations, the related environmental aspects and impacts (many of them are indirectly associated) and the regulatory requirements. These organisations face different roles beyond the usual specific daily activities of their facilities, which take place within each of these organisations. These organisations usually participate in many other tasks, e.g., local planning, regulation, surveillance and monitoring in the respective environmental, social/cultural, economic and institutional systems operating within their jurisdiction. As highlighted by GRI (2004), indirect impacts can result from policies, plans and programs implemented by local authorities that can have major strategic effects on society and the environment.

Various studies have surveyed and identified the adoption of environmental practices and management/assessment tools by companies, especially addressing EMSs, eco-design, sustainability performance indicators, reporting practices and other corporate responsibility-related research issues (e.g., Comoglio and Botta, 2012; Lozano, 2012). Following the rising private sector trend, similar studies have been conducted for local public organisations, and several cases provide examples of these practices, many voluntary, where local governments are becoming aware and/or research is being produced (Table 1).

Despite being quantitatively less representative, other research attempts to produce wider integrated analyses, not focussing only one single practice or tool, such as those previously mentioned (e.g., EMS), cover a broader scope. For example, Montesinos and Brusca (2009) surveyed Spanish local governments aiming to identify which options are being used to improve local management in terms of financial and economic quality and environmental management. Enticott and Walker (2008) conducted a survey to analyse the association between sustainable management and performance in local English governments. Furthermore, the survey that traced the environmental profile of the local government operations in the United States (USEPA, 1999) was presented earlier in this chapter.

Other integrated approaches attempt to analyse the integration of environmental or sustainability practices by local public administration using an index-based approach through the aggregation of different variables that provide an overall profile or picture (e.g., Wilson and Grant, 2009; Barrera-Roldan and Saldivar-Valdes, 2002). Some authors, such as Frame and Vale (2006) and Pulsellia et al. (2006), discussed applications of this type of approach, stressing some known advantages and limitations.

3. The Portuguese local administration

There are three distinct layers of government within Portugal: the national/central government; the two autonomous regions, which have their own political and administrative systems and

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