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JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT
AND HUMAN RESOURCES

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Public Knowledge Management: Myth or Sustainable Innovation?

Gestión del conocimiento público: ¿Mito o innovación sostenible?

Verónica Vargas · Loyola Guadalupe García

Abstract This study critically examined the viability of knowledge management in the public sector as a sustainable innovation, versus the possibility that it may constitute an administrative myth with no concrete effects. A qualitative study was conducted, incorporating a systematic review of indexed academic literature and a comparative analysis of five relevant case studies from Uruguay, Colombia, Spain, Brazil, and Sweden. The goal was to identify the institutional, technological, cultural, and organizational conditions that determine the effectiveness of these strategies in state contexts. Based on an analytical matrix constructed with five key dimensions — institutionalization, technological capabilities, organizational culture, human talent participation, and sustainability-based evaluation —the cases were classified into three types: sustainable models, fragmented models, and symbolic models. The results showed that the most successful experiences occurred in countries with stable regulatory frameworks, committed political leadership, interoperable technological infrastructure, and an institutional culture oriented toward collective learning. In contrast, in contexts where reforms were implemented through imitation without support structures or continuity, knowledge management operated as a ritual practice with no transformative impact. It was concluded that for this tool to become a proper mechanism for innovation in public management, it must be integrated into state policy, accompanied by resources, evaluation mechanisms, and a strategic vision that values institutional knowledge as a central asset of democratic governance and the generation of public value.

Keywords knowledge management, public sector, innovation, organizational culture, sustainability.

Resumen Este estudio examinó la viabilidad de la gestión del conocimiento en el sector público como una innovación sostenible frente a la posibilidad de que constituya un mito administrativo sin efectos concretos. Se desarrolló una investigación cualitativa con revisión sistemática de literatura académica indexada y análisis comparativo de cinco estudios de caso relevantes: Uruguay, Colombia, España, Brasil y Suecia. El objetivo fue identificar las condiciones institucionales, tecnológicas, culturales y organizacionales que determinan la efectividad de estas estrategias en contextos estatales. A partir de una matriz analítica construida con cinco dimensiones clave —institucionalización, capacidades tecnológicas, cultura organizacional, participación del talento humano y evaluación con sostenibilidad— se clasificaron los casos en tres tipos: modelos sostenibles, modelos fragmentados y modelos simbólicos. Los resultados mostraron que las experiencias más exitosas se dieron en países con marcos normativos estables, liderazgo político comprometido, infraestructura tecnológica interoperable y una cultura institucional orientada al aprendizaje colectivo. En los contextos donde las reformas se implementaron por imitación, sin estructuras de apoyo ni continuidad, la gestión del conocimiento operó como una práctica ritual sin impacto transformador. Para que esta herramienta se convierta en un verdadero mecanismo de innovación en la gestión pública, es necesario integrarla como política de Estado, acompañada de recursos, mecanismos de evaluación y una visión estratégica que valore el saber institucional como activo central de la gobernanza democrática y la generación de valor público.

Palabras clave gestión del conocimiento, sector público, innovación, cultura organizacional, sostenibilidad.

✉ Verónica Vargas
maria.vargas@utm.edu.ec

Universidad Técnica de Manabí, Portoviejo, Ecuador.

Universidad Técnica de Manabí, Portoviejo, Ecuador.

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Introduction

Today, digital transformation and citizens' demands for greater efficiency and transparency have driven growing attention to knowledge management in the public sector. Unlike private organizations, where this approach has been widely adopted to optimize processes and generate innovation, at the state level, ambiguities, structural difficulties, and an institutional culture that often hinders continuous organizational learning persist. This tension has led to a fundamental theoretical-practical dilemma: is public knowledge management a transformative tool with the potential for sustainable innovation, or a discursive construct that fails to translate into real, systematic action?

Knowledge management is defined as a set of organizational practices aimed at identifying, capturing, structuring, sharing, and applying individual and collective knowledge to improve institutional performance (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wiig, 2002). In the state context, this definition is complicated by institutional fragmentation, regulatory rigidity, and decision-making processes characterized by multiple actors with divergent interests. Despite this, from international organizations to local governments, discourse on the need to build "smart administrations" capable of generating, using, and preserving knowledge as a strategic resource has proliferated.

Numerous studies have shown that public systems face cultural and structural barriers that hinder the establishment of a genuine knowledge culture. These difficulties include high staff turnover, poor long-term planning, the politicization of management positions, resistance to change, and a lack of incentives to share knowledge (Cavalcante, 2019; Zárate, 2021). Despite this, some international experiences—such as the Knowledge Management System in the Digital Government of Uruguay, the National Institute of Health of Colombia, or the knowledge model in the Swedish administration—have demonstrated that it is possible to move towards institutional models that promote sustained organizational learning (OECD/CAF, 2023).

From a critical perspective, some authors argue that public knowledge management has been dominated by a managerialist rhetoric that promotes the adoption of organizational trends without questioning the structural conditions of administrative systems (Osborne, 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Thus, the idea of knowledge as a strategic resource can result in symbolic practices rather than profound transformations, reproducing modernizing myths that legitimize management without necessarily improving it (Brunsson & Olsen, 2018). Therefore, it is pertinent to investigate: to what extent does public knowledge management respond to genuine innovation, or is it merely an administrative myth in contemporary reformist discourse?

Within this framework, this article aims to critically analyze knowledge management in the public sector, exploring its viability as a sustainable innovation. Through a qualitative approach based on a review of indexed literature and case studies, the paper identifies critical factors affecting its implementation, examines its most persistent challenges, and evaluates experiences that have effectively institutionalized it. The central thesis is that, although public knowledge management still faces significant obstacles, it can constitute a sustainable innovation if articulated in conjunction with broader institutional transformation processes and conceived from a systemic, participatory, and learning-oriented organizational perspective.

The academic relevance of this study lies in its contribution to a rarely addressed discussion in the field of Latin American public administration: the problematization of knowledge management beyond technology transfer and modernization discourses, focusing on the political and institutional conditions that make its sustainability viable—or not. From a practical perspective, the article guides public decision-makers, institutional managers, and international organizations in designing public policies that foster a genuine culture of knowledge, rather than merely adopting the concept superficially.

To this end, the article is structured into five sections. The first presents the introductory framework, the problems, and the objective of the study. The second describes the methodology used, which combines a systematic review and comparative qualitative analysis. The third offers the main results derived from case studies and the literature analyzed, highlighting both effective practices and institutional failures. The fourth section critically discusses these findings in light of organizational theories and approaches to public innovation. Finally, the fifth section summarizes the main conclusions and proposes recommendations for moving toward sustainable, institutionalized, and impact-oriented public knowledge management.

This approach assumes greater relevance in Latin American contexts, where weak state capacities, institutional volatility, and a limited tradition of evaluation hinder the consolidation of organizational learning processes. As Peci et al. (2020) have pointed out, in Latin America, knowledge management is often disconnected from the fundamental dynamics of the production and use of public knowledge, adopting prescriptive approaches that fail to consider the complexity of the institutional environment. In this sense,

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understanding the factors of success and failure in comparative experiences is crucial for avoiding the reproduction of administrative myths and promoting effective reforms tailored to the context.

This article also reflects the growing interest in the role of knowledge in public governance and its relationship to legitimacy, innovation, and accountability. As Dunleavy et al. (2006) argue, in a context marked by uncertainty and complexity, states must evolve from traditional bureaucratic structures to models based on learning, institutional intelligence, and intersectoral collaboration. Knowledge management, in this context, is not merely a technique but a political commitment to redefine how the state produces, circulates, and uses knowledge to solve public problems.

Ultimately, this study begins with a provocative but urgent question: Is public knowledge management a myth or a sustainable innovation? The answer, far from being dichotomous, requires a critical and situated approach that recognizes its potential, limits, and conditions of possibility.

Methodology

The study was structured in three phases: first, a systematic review of indexed academic literature to identify the state of the art in public sector knowledge management, its main theoretical approaches, and relevant empirical findings; second, the selection and analysis of five representative case studies of public administrations—Uruguay's National Digital Government System, Colombia's National Institute of Health, Spain's Ministry of Finance Public Innovation Network, Brazil's National School of Public Administration (ENAP), and Sweden's Innovation Agency Vinnova—chosen for their institutional diversity, geographic distribution, and varying levels of model consolidation; and third, the theoretical contrast and development of an explanatory typology on whether these experiences reflect genuine innovation or symbolic mythologizing.

The literature review applied a systematic search in Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect using combined descriptors in English and Spanish, applying inclusion criteria for peer-reviewed works (2010–2024) with empirical or theoretical-analytical focus in public contexts, resulting in a final corpus of 57 high-quality articles. The case study analysis combined primary sources (official reports and institutional documents) with secondary sources (academic articles and external evaluations), allowing for triangulation and enhanced internal validity. Phase three employed Ragin's (1987) systematic qualitative comparison to build an analytical matrix of five dimensions—institutionalization, techno-

logical capabilities, organizational culture, human talent engagement, and evaluation/sustainability—categorizing each into qualitative levels to compare proximity to the ideal of innovative, sustainable knowledge management versus symbolic practices.

The research adopted a constructivist epistemological stance, emphasizing the political, symbolic, and strategic dimensions of knowledge while avoiding its reduction to a neutral input. Although limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the non-generalizability of findings, the study contributes a critical reflection on the contextual conditions that enable or hinder the consolidation of knowledge management as a sustainable public sector innovation.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the five case studies identified recurring patterns, structural differences, and critical dimensions that influence the innovative or symbolic nature of knowledge management in public contexts. A comparative matrix summarizes the main findings according to the five dimensions analyzed below.

The following radar chart (Figure 1) visualization provides an integrated and comparative view of each country's relative performance across five key dimensions: institutionalization, technological capabilities, organizational culture, human talent engagement, and sustainability. This representation enables the identification of implementation profiles and differentiation between cases that are closest to the ideal of sustainable innovation and those with partial or token implementation.
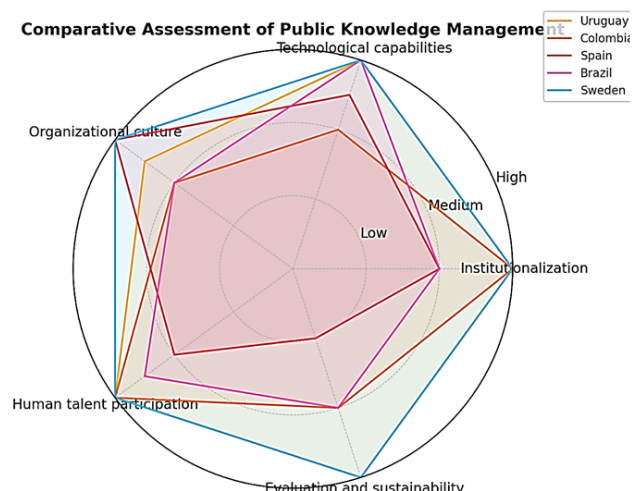

Figure 1. Comparative radar of public knowledge management dimensions by country

To review successful experiences, we looked at the case of Uruguay. The knowledge management model implement-

ed by the Agency for Electronic Government and the Information and Knowledge Society (AGESIC) has established itself as a strategic initiative to strengthen institutional capacities and foster a sustainable digital culture. According to the 2022 Annual Report (published in May 2023), during that year AGESIC worked with public agencies, the private sector, academia, and civil society on initiatives aimed at "advancing and consolidating a public policy for digital transformation." Thus, this knowledge management model is integrated transversally into the design of public policies, the training of public officials, and inter-institutional coordination, being a central pillar of its digital government strategy (AGESIC, 2023).

One of the pillars of this model is the knowledge architecture approach, based on interoperable systems, open repositories, and a substantial investment in staff digital skills. Uruguay has developed platforms, such as the "Digital Government Observatory," which enables the systematization of best practices, institutional maturity indicators, and continuous assessment processes.

This case demonstrates how high institutionalization, supported by regulatory frameworks and sustained political leadership, can transform knowledge management into a real and sustainable innovation tool OECD/(CAF, 2023)

Another success story is the Vinnova Agency in Sweden, which operates under a systemic innovation logic, where knowledge is understood not only as a resource, but also as a continuous flow of learning, collaboration, and experimentation (Hartley, 2021). The knowledge management strategy is integrated with innovation governance, promoting communities of practice, public-private partnerships, and co-creation networks.

What is remarkable about this model is the high degree of coherence between discourse and practice, supported by an institutional culture that values professional autonomy, lifelong learning, and accountability. Unlike other contexts, knowledge is not captured by rigid hierarchies; instead, it is managed as a distributed common good (Borins, 2014).

As a partial implementation, the Colombian case was reviewed, which addressed advances in public health and scalability challenges. Since 2015, the Colombian National Institute of Health has implemented a knowledge management policy focused on generating, transferring, and applying scientific knowledge in public health. Through strategies such as the National Laboratory Network, virtual training courses, and open data banks, the circulation of technical knowledge among health system stakeholders has been strengthened (INS, 2022).

However, the model has limitations in terms of scalability to other areas of the public sector. The lack of a national knowledge management policy limits inter-institutional coordination, and the system relies heavily on the ad hoc

leadership of certain agencies. This reflects a successful but fragmented sectoral implementation that has yet to be translated into a comprehensive state policy (Cano Jiménez et al., 2021).

In other cases, such as the Spanish context, the Public Innovation Network, promoted by the Ministry of Finance, has sought to foster a culture of shared knowledge through horizontal networks, co-creation platforms, and training spaces (Cortés Abad, 2022). However, experience shows that institutionalization is weak, marked by political discontinuity and the absence of a regulatory framework to support these efforts in the long term.

Knowledge strategy is presented as a modern discourse, carrying a strong symbolic charge, but it lacks organic integration into human resource management, institutional planning, or policy evaluation systems. This disconnect gives rise to superficial practices that reinforce the notion of the "organizational myth" in contexts of administrative modernization (Brunsson & Olsen, 2018).

The case of the National School of Public Administration (ENAP) in Brazil was reviewed. This has led to important initiatives in training and public knowledge management through platforms such as EV.G and institutional repositories (Cavalcante, 2019). However, these practices coexist with significant institutional fragmentation and limited coordination between different levels of government.

Despite possessing advanced technological resources, the Brazilian system exhibits a weak organizational culture that is not oriented toward learning. Knowledge is often captured by vertical bureaucratic structures, which hinders its transversal circulation and strategic use. Furthermore, frequent changes in government policy affect the sustainability of knowledge programs.

Empirical evidence suggests that public knowledge management can take three structural forms:

- Sustainable innovation: This is observed in cases such as Uruguay and Sweden, where there is effective coordination between regulatory frameworks, institutional culture, and technologies. Knowledge is treated as a strategic asset for governance and continuous improvement.

- Partial innovation: Cases such as Colombia and Brazil show significant progress in specific sectors, but lack national and inclusive policies.

- Administrative myth: In contexts like Spain, knowledge management discourse remains rhetorical without generating structural changes, functioning as a legitimizing narrative rather than a transformative tool.

These findings are consistent with Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2017) proposal, which argues that many administrative reforms adopt a symbolic logic that simulates moderniza-

tion without altering the core of bureaucratic power. In this sense, knowledge management can become a "rationalized myth"—in the words of Meyer and Rowan (1977)—when adopted under institutional pressure but without generating real operational structures.

However, it is also true that successful experiences demonstrate that it is possible to reverse this trend through coherent policies, committed leadership, and a culture of evaluation. Innovation depends not only on technological resources, but also on the existence of an institutional ecosystem that values knowledge as an input for designing public policies and transforming the State.

Public knowledge management, therefore, cannot be reduced to a managerial tool. It must be understood as a state policy, aimed at democratizing institutional knowledge, promoting collective learning, and generating public value (OECD, 2021). The sustainability of this approach implies overcoming short-term logic, investing in human capabilities, and fostering an organizational culture that rewards innovation and collaboration.

This study offers an analytical contribution to the debate on state modernization by showing that knowledge management is neither a panacea nor a myth in itself, but rather a contested field. Its transformative potential depends on multiple factors: institutional design, political leadership, technological infrastructure, organizational culture, and evaluation mechanisms.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that knowledge practices in the public sector are neither neutral nor apolitical. Power relations, bureaucratic interests, and tensions between innovation and control influence them. Therefore, a sustainable knowledge management model must be based on the values of openness, collaboration, transparency, and accountability, rather than just operational efficiency.

Conclusions

Public knowledge management has emerged as a key component of state modernization, driven by technological advances, demands for transparency, and citizen expectations for efficient services; however, its consolidation remains uneven, oscillating between genuine innovation and symbolic reform. Comparative analysis of five cases reveals three scenarios: institutionalized and stable models that integrate knowledge into governance (e.g., Uruguay, Sweden); sectoral or fragmented models with localized success but lacking systemic articulation (e.g., Colombia's public health sector); and symbolic models that adopt the rhetoric and structures of innovation without transforming core practices (e.g., segments of Spain and Brazil). The study identifies five interdependent dimensions critical for sustainable knowledge

strategies: institutionalization, technological capacity, learning-oriented culture, human talent engagement, and evaluation mechanisms. It underscores that knowledge in the public sector is both a technical and a political asset, shaped by power relations and institutional interests. Actual consolidation requires elevating knowledge management to state policy status, fostering public servants as active knowledge producers, and embedding it across all government subsystems to create open, adaptive, and citizen-focused administrations capable of sustaining democratic legitimacy and continuous improvement.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Data curation:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Formal analysis:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. Research: Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Methodology:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Supervision:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Validation:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Visualization:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Writing the original draft:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G. **Writing, review and editing:** Vargas, V., & García, L. G.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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