

## Concept Note

The **IASIA 2023 Conference** will be held from **July 31 to August 4, 2023, at the University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, Metro Manila, the Philippines**, organized by IASIA/IIAS in close collaboration with:

- The University of the Philippines (UP);
- The University of the Philippines - National College of Public Administration and Governance (UP NCPAG);
- The Philippine Society of Public Administration (PSPA);
- Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration Inc. (EROPA);
- Association of Schools of Public Administration in the Philippines (ASPAP);
- De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB);
- School of Diplomacy and Governance (SDG);
- University of Makati (UMak);
- Philippine Councilors League-Legislative Academy (PCL-LA);
- Local Government Academy;
- Department of Interior and Local Government;
- Philippine Futures Thinking Society (PhilFutures) and
- Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Valenzuela (PLV);

### On the theme:

**"Building Better Futures of Governance towards Achieving the SDGs  
in a VUCA World."**

*As we think about the possible futures of government, we face two possibilities a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous or a world with vision, understanding, clarity, and agility.*

*"May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears."*

*Nelson Mandela*

António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, stated in 2022 that shaping the future of government is more important than ever. This comes at a time of growing mistrust in government by citizens, increased conflicts and diverse forms of violence, climate change and natural disasters, the socio-economic crisis around the world, bankrupt



global financial system, challenges and impacts related to the Covid-19 pandemic, increased inequality, poverty and vulnerability, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Agendas for the World We Want by 2030 slipping out of reach (Guterres 2022). The United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 with the aim of creating a more sustainable world. However, the characteristics relevant to the VUCA world put the achievement of the SDGs at risk. It is very well possible that the progress that many countries made in achieving the SDGs can be lost. In this regard, the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report (2022) states that "cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave danger, along with humanity's very own survival". This leads to a critical question - how do we plan for the achievement of the SDGs and the future of government if we are uncertain of what the future will include from one moment to the next in a VUCA world? Without a doubt, a myriad of challenges is faced by governments in a challenging and unpredictable world environment. According to Johansen (2020), this new, uncontrolled, and complex environment can be described using the "VUCA" acronym, i.e., "Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous." Although it has become popular to put a spin on the negativity of VUCA by rather focusing on the positive by creating an environment focused on "Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Agility".

The acronym VUCA was developed in 1985 when economists and Professors Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus published their book "Leaders. Strategies for taking charge". VUCA was introduced to the US Army in 1987 to describe a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous multilateral world (VUCA World 2022). In more recent years, this acronym gained popularity in a corporate and business environment due to constant technological changes and developments resulting from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the acronym VUCA has been used more frequently by authors (for example, Murugan, Rajavel, Aggarwal, and Singh, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Singhal, 2021; Lee and Moon, 2022) in a government context. Governments face an environment of increased uncertainty, a lack of stability, and familiarity as the rate of change and complexity of challenges increase. Apart from the Covid-19 pandemic, governments experience a VUCA environment that can be devastating, for example, destabilising communities and local governments while jeopardising livelihoods, the interruption of planning processes, development cycles, and service delivery challenges. In many instances leaders (politicians and technocrats) no longer know how to respond to the expectations, needs, and priorities of citizens, populations, and communities, while the Global and African agendas call for the transformation of Leadership.

The Public Service, one of the main pillars of any sustainable and resilient government, is affected negatively, with many career public servants experiencing frustration since training and retraining are constantly required to keep up with a volatile working environment (WEF 2020). Public servants experience a lack of motivation while being

paralysed by an environment that makes decisions complex and overwhelming, with differing needs and expectations from citizens. In addition, public servants have to become digital experts while working remotely.

The VUCA world requires high adaptability and provides low control over the environment, therefore, it can be assumed that leaders and public servants will experience constant stress in their work environment that could negatively impact public service performance. Processes in the public service, for example, planning, budgeting, HRM, policy implementation, public sector reforms, regulation, control and audit, evaluation, and sustainable development, are affected negatively, take longer, and become increasingly complex to manage.

Apart from the negative impact of the traditional VUCA world, governments can consider a more dynamic action-orientated approach to the current environment being experienced. VUCA could provide a positive challenge and opportunity to governments by:

- focusing and planning for a clear future **Vision** instead of only facing volatility;
- creating greater **Understanding** instead of focusing on uncertainty;
- seeking **Clarity** instead of struggling with complexity; and
- developing **Agility** instead of ambiguity.

Naturally, this will require a new way of thinking that will require governments to be flexible, adaptable, agile, motivated, purposeful, innovative, entrepreneurial, independent thinking and problem-solving oriented, technology-driven and to view change as a constant and implement a fluid management style in terms of control and hierarchical structures (Johansen 2020). Determining how governments should plan to be ready for a positive or negative VUCA environment remains challenging. Naturally, a key aspect is to ensure that leaders and public servants are aware of the environment in which they will be required to work. VUCA, regardless of whether viewed as an opportunity and positive or a negative threat, forms part of the 'new normal' that governments will have to plan for and adapt to.

At the Conference, we challenge you to be forward-thinking. We would like to look at experiences from around the world to gain a better understanding of the possible futures of government and governance in a VUCA world. This includes challenges experienced by governments due to the impact of the VUCA world and positive strategies being planned and implemented by governments to counteract a negative VUCA environment. Contributions can include examples of how the public service is currently dealing with or intend to avert a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. This Conference's core is the education, training, and capacity development, and building of future public servants. How will we ensure that future public servants are ready for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous



environment or have the skills to be visionary, understanding, human, and search for clarity and agility? How will current public servants be reskilled and motivated to adjust to a VUCA environment? The aspects of VUCA, affect not only the vision and mandate of IASIA but also all its Working Groups and Accreditation processes through ICAPA.

We look forward to your contributions, debates, and views on how to **shape the futures of governments and governance**. Key questions to consider:

- How can we put a spin on the VUCA world to be positive about the future of government instead of negative.
- What is the future of government and governance in a VUCA world?
- What can be done to ensure that the SDGs are achieved in a VUCA world?
- How should the impact of the VUCA environment (positive or negative) be addressed in the public service?
- Is it possible for governments to implement steps to change a negative VUCA world into a positive VUCA world?
- How relevant are the SDGs in a VUCA world? Should the SDGs be adapted to the VUCA world?
- What leadership styles are required in the VUCA world?
- What can be done to ensure that public servants are ready for the world of work affected by a positive or negative VUCA environment?
- What mentalities, values, skills, and knowledge should form part of a public administration curriculum in a VUCA world?
- How should the success of government be determined in a VUCA world?
- How could the decision-making and policy process be adapted for the VUCA environment?
- How will a VUCA world (positive or negative) affect issues of diversity, gender, and equity?
- What is the role of public HRM departments in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment?
- What is the role of Schools and Institutes of Administration, Academia and Research Centers in a VUCA world (positive or negative) and what kind of methodology do we need in this regard?
- How does the VUCA world affect Research (publications, case studies, communities of practices, benchmarks)?
- How does the VUCA world (positive or negative) affect the accreditation process?



- How will conflicts be affected by the uncertainty and volatility of a VUCA world?

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