

CITIZEN-CENTERED PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Introduction

If men and women were to be left on their own, to compete for individual survival on earth, without an authority to regulate their behavior in public space, the world would be a very chaotic place. This is the basis upon which philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke recommended governments to us. More recently, Garrett Hardin's expression 'the tragedy of the commons' in an article published in *Science* (1968) has emphasized the critical role that governments play in controlling the use of valuable but scarce resources to which all people could have access in the absence of a regulator. Government, as it were, is a necessary evil that, strongly enough, we accept for our survival.

In the present day, citizens only have confidence in governments that can, among other things, provide them with essential services such as internal security and territorial integrity and social services in education, health and the amenities of life. A key determining factor of the confidence that people place in governments is the extent to which government services meet their own needs and requirements. Governments unable to meet basic expectations of the people often suffer crises of legitimacy and face fierce internal opposition.

This paper examines the concept of 'Citizen Centered Public Service Delivery' and the potential for its application in the African governance context, pointing out successes, challenges and the potentials for the future.

The first part of the paper covers a general background to public administration in Africa and traces the milestones in public service reforms on the continent since independence in the 1960s to date. In the second part, we describe the concept of citizen centred public service delivery as we understand it and its applications to African countries, examining in details how it works or fails in the African terrain and the prospects for future applications. Some attention is also paid to the unique situation of the post-financial crisis period. In the third and last part, the paper draws conclusions and some lessons for future reforms in public service delivery in Africa.

1. BACKGROUND.

Most African countries inherited public administration systems of the former colonial governments at independence. In most instances, the orientation and structure of such vital organs of government as the judiciary, legislature and the general civil service remained the same as they were under colonialism. However, these new governments had to contend with the new hopes of a liberated people. This necessitated the re-orientation of the public administration system from serving the colonial interests to delivering on the promises of independence. Priorities shifted from the security concerns of colonial regimes to a pre-occupation with productivity in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the new economies. These had to be accompanied by expansion of infrastructural facilities and social services to communities. To achieve this, many newly independent African governments created semi-autonomous state agencies (parastatals) to drive processes in respective economic and social sectors. At the sub-national levels of governance, focus also had to shift from the security concerns to community development. Schools, hospitals and roads had to be built, and the few who qualified for higher education in local universities and colleges enjoyed full support of the state in financing their education and ensuring their comfort as they studied in preparation to play their roles in nation building. Individual politicians and government agencies arranged for academic and professional training of many young people abroad.

1.1. Public Service Reforms in Africa

In the 1970s and 1980s, fathers of African nations turned into iron-fist dictators in many countries, while in others, power struggles led to political *coup d'états* and the coming into power of military regimes. Patronage became a key feature of politics, opening the floodgates for

massive corruption in public administration. There was little concern and much less resources for national and community development as politics of survival took centre stage. In the mid 1980s, following these declines in public service delivery, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pushed for changes in public service delivery systems in Africa as part of the infamous Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Public service reforms at the time, sought to reduce the state's involvement in public service delivery by rationalizing state functions and activities and ending the government's involvement in 'non-core operations', laying off staff from government ministries and departments and freezing further employment in some areas of the civil service. This later had profound negative effect on the ability of the state to deliver social services and to build infrastructure.

This is what was christened 'rolling back the state from development' which heralded the involvement of the private sector in service provision in some key areas of the economy and social services. Where the government continued to offer services, like in education and health, 'cost sharing' was introduced. In Uganda, for example, the number of ministries was reduced from 39 to 17 and about 180,000 government employees were retrenched from the public service between 1990 and 1997. In many countries, the results were disastrous. People lost lives for being unable to meet their 'share' of the costs of medication at public health facilities while many children stayed at home for lack of school fees for the twin reasons that the governments had introduced cost sharing in public schools and at the same time sent some people away from the civil service, some of whom had wide dependency networks extending beyond their immediate families.

Rolling back the state public service delivery initiatives resulted in rampant poverty and declining living standards, which the World Bank and IMF had to deal with through a different

programme of reforms in public service delivery starting in the mid 1990s. the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) aimed at ‘capacity building’ in the public service by improving the work environment for public servants, enhancing staff skills, improving management systems and structures and improving incentives in the public service. But rampant corruption in the public service remained. In a country like Kenya, the government’s approval of civil servants’ involvement in private business eroded the benefits of these reforms. Furthermore, the political phenomenon of a dominant all-powerful ruling party only made the public service more opaque and non-responsive to citizens. Indeed, the ruling party and the public service were often conflated in the management of public affairs. In this conflation, the importance of people as the object of development was lost by the state, and the result of this alienation was growing popular resistance against the established political order.

2. CITIZEN-CENTERED PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Lately, focus in public service delivery has shifted to ‘results’. Without targets, performance benchmarks and standards, it is difficult to evaluate results. Yet standards for public service delivery cannot be set by the public service itself. The clients, i.e. the public, need to be involved in setting expectations. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are particularly involved in stirring the demand side of public service delivery to make known their expectations to the service providers. It is no wonder that NGOs and the broader civil society have come to be acknowledged as important pillars of governance. The roles of citizens in public service delivery should however not be limited to demand generation for a *quid pro quo* for their taxes. The citizen should indeed be at the ‘centre’ of the service delivery system – receiving the services and participating in formulation of the agenda for public service delivery. As Mwalimu Julius

Nyerere once noted, “development is about people; it must have effects in people’s lives by changing them for better.”

‘Good governance’ entails many ideals, including, among others pluralism, subsidiarity, transparency, equity, access, partnership and efficiency. But the key principle in governance is that of ‘participation’. In various ways, the other elements either work singly or in combination to promote participation or they flow from it.

What then does citizen-centred governance mean? We want to argue that it is a new euphemism for ‘participation with results’, which encompasses representation at all levels of public service delivery and provides opportunity for the positive application of local knowledge in solving everyday challenges. In my review of literature on ‘citizen centred governance’, especially the works of western scholars and practitioners in public administration, it seems to me that the concept is equated to e-governance. But e-governance is simply a way of realizing citizen-centred governance; the end result must be as important as the means of getting there.

2.1. Challenges and Opportunities of Citizen- Centred Public Service Delivery in Africa.

If indeed citizen-centered governance and e- governance were synonymous or just two sides of the same coin, then the constraints to the realization of citizen- centred public service delivery in most African countries would be straight forward. Internet connectivity, bandwidth, networks, portals and other infrastructure for on-line communication are not as developed in African countries as they are in the developed world. The bottom line here is that most African governments cannot afford highly developed systems of online public service delivery as is the

case in developed countries. But some are making commendable progress, even in the face of resource limitations. In Kenya, registration of taxpayers and the filing of tax returns by individuals and corporate bodies can now be done online, and many government documents previously issued across the counter in public offices can now be downloaded from the websites of respective governments departments. The police department and the public service commission are examples of government agencies that are fast adopting online service provision. These are perhaps harbingers of an ICT revolution in public service delivery by the Kenyan government. But there is a big room for improvement.

Without attenuating the place of e-governance in promoting citizen – centred public service delivery, we should examine the socio- economic and political context in African countries to see how these circumstances promote or hinder a citizen-centred service delivery. In many African countries, ‘development ‘still comes to communities as a gift from the ruling elite who decide where state- financed development projects are initiated. This is the nature of politics of development under the authoritarian presidential systems that reign in most of the countries. However, devolution of state functions and resources is perhaps the single most important initiative towards the promotion of citizen- centred service delivery in present day African states. The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) in Kenya is a leading example of devolved development financing and implementation. In this programme, 2.5% of all government ordinary revenue collected is shared among the country’s 210 electoral constituencies equitably using a formular that takes into consideration population and poverty levels in the constituencies.

Development activities under the fund are largely initiated and implemented with full participation of citizens. For this, the safeguards are in the law- the Act of Parliament governing the Fund, which provides for the participation of various segments of society- including youth,

women, and religious leaders, among others. There are other devolved funds in Kenya, but the CDF will suffice for the illustrations we intend to make here.

The relationship between political systems and public service delivery cannot be overemphasized. In democratic societies, where elections of people's representatives are conducted regularly, citizen centred public service delivery is more likely to be achieved. A Member of Parliament's success or failure in implementing CDF projects with the community is one of the leading considerations that Kenyan voters examine when choosing their representatives to the National Assembly. New MPs are afforded the opportunity by voters, often to replace non-performing ones. Political recourse in a democratic system is therefore critical in promoting citizen centred service delivery.

Social groups such as ethnic communities and religions are themselves determinants of the nature of services that citizens demand from their governments. Diversity is not a problem in itself if a sense of cohesion and nationalism runs through the national psyche. But where diversity amounts to polarization, as in the case of most African countries where ethnic polarization runs deep, citizen demand is not easily discernible and the discord in voices blurs the standards for public service delivery. Even in ethnically homogeneous politics, like the majority of constituencies, other social dividing lines impact on the service delivery process almost the same way. Clans and age groups are among the most common dividing lines in ethnically homogeneous politics in Africa.

The *UN World Public Sector Report, 2003* notes "participation must be well informed and skilled". Education, including literacy, general knowledge and civic awareness are extremely important for citizen-centered public service delivery. If a majority of citizens cannot

comprehend and meaningfully contribute to the formulation and implementation of programmes, then even the windows open for participation do not amount to real opportunities. Even though literacy rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are on an impressive rise due to implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE), the new average 74% literacy rate on the continent reported by UNESCO (2009) reflect basic reading and writing abilities that do not translate to the levels of civic competence necessary for citizen-centered governance. Granted that ‘local knowledge’ is not necessarily expressed academically, a deeper understanding of societal problems and ideas for their resolution require a certain minimum level of intellectual ability. Despite good literacy levels, such civic competence is still lacking in most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially among those living in rural areas.

2.2. The Post-Crisis Period and the Future

As liberal democracy gains root in most African countries, together with its attendant features of a vibrant civil society and a watchful media, two things will most likely follow. On one hand, governments are scaling up performance in public service delivery and paying greater attention to the drivers of client satisfaction. The timeliness and fairness of public service continue to improve. As already pointed out, quality will be determined by the extent to which the service provided meets the expectations of the public. That is why demand side catalyzation by the civil society will remain important. Unfortunately, this is likely to suffer the results of the global financial crisis as less resources are made available to southern NGOs by their traditional benefactors from the north.

On the impacts of the global financial crisis on public service delivery in Africa, the chains of influence are quite clear. Decline in aid volumes implies similar declines in public services financed by aid. It may also mean less support for donor funded civil society actors. To the extent that the global financial crisis affects sales revenues for firms in Africa as well as savings of households for investments, its impacts on public service delivery by reducing private participation in Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) for service delivery can be easily understood.

If there is a big lesson to be learnt by public administration professionals from the global financial crisis, then it is on the limitations of the private sector as a driver of development. The state needs to return as a major player in development. In Africa, the state will itself need fundamental restructuring to face these new challenges. Devolution of state power will be necessary in a political system that is politically democratic, national in its social content and ethos, and developmental economically.

2.2.1. Devolution

Decentralization of fiscal government functions has realized plausible achievements in improving efficiency in public service delivery in the last two decades or so. Whereas this can still be improved, devolved government is now the way to achieve citizen-centered service delivery in African countries. Devolution is essentially self governance at the sub-national levels. We do not simply mean devolution of resources by a benevolent central authority, but devolution of power to sub-national authorities which will be more accountable to those they govern and more sensitive to their needs. Power to confer power and to remove that power should be vested in the people at both national and sub-national levels.

The details of devolution structures can be worked out in different countries depending on their unique circumstances. In Kenya, a vibrant debate is currently going on this matter. Whereas some people feel that governance should be devolved only to the county levels, others support the creation of regional governments in between the national and county governments, in a three-tier rather than a two-tier devolution. Demographic factors, national cohesion and equality will be leading factors in the Kenyan discussion, and indeed any other place that the structure of devolution is under debate. But there is little doubt that sub-national governments will deliver impressively on citizen-centered public service, if assigned sufficient resources and specific tasks, and afforded requisite resources. More than the national governments, far removed from the people, and located at capital cities, sub-national governments are close enough to their clients to be able to fully understand the development challenges that face them. The scope of the business of sub-national governments is much narrower than those of national governments. Their main concern is the improvement of living standards for citizens in their jurisdiction. Sub-national governments therefore put *the people first and reach them fast* provided they, too, are run democratically and competently.

Because of they are smaller than the national government and are spread across the country, sub-national governments can engage with each other across the nation and share experiences in citizen-centered public service delivery, learning from each other to improve their respective performances. It is also much more feasible in sub-national governments, than in national governments, to allocate specific roles to different organs and individual officials to improve efficiency and innovation in service delivery. In sum, devolved governance enables the realization of the principles of citizen-centered governance.

3. CONCLUSION

The main argument in this paper is that there are several ways of realizing citizen-centered public service delivery. The methods chosen by different countries will very much depend on their levels of economic and political development. For the developed countries, e-governance serves the purpose quite well. For most African countries, the problem is not even the new challenges arising from the recent global financial crisis. The problem lies with the very nature of the state. Previous attempts, driven mainly by the international donor community have addressed issues in the bureaucratic structures of public service delivery and the programmatic content of the work of the public service. These have yielded some positive results. But the main problem, which is the nature of the state, remains. In this paper, we have discussed devolution as a major aspect of state re-engineering. There are many more areas of reforms that we could discuss. We will mention a few, including: Accountability and transparency; legitimacy through free and fair elections; checks and balances between the executive branch and the parliaments; inclusion and protecting the rights of minorities and disadvantaged groups; an environment for the active engagement for civil society and private sector and information and communication technology to promote citizens' access and participation in the development process (UN, 2007). Our focus on devolution is because of its direct link to public service delivery, which is the subject of this discussion.

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