Citizens’ Perception of the Role of Public Administration and their Assessment on the Public Services

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1. Introduction

Citizens’ perception of the role of public administration and their assessment of public services can provide valuable information for improving service delivery. This is because citizens have direct experience of public services in terms of their efficiency, adequacy, accessibility and reliability.

Perception of citizens matters, especially, as Paul and Sekhar argues, when clear patterns emerge from an analysis of the experiences of large numbers of people.1 When citizens identify specific factors of service as problematic, and they are able to articulate them as feedback through either appropriate government channels or the mass media, it offers the government the opportunity to investigate and resolve the problems, if they are real, or, if they are not to take steps to change public opinion if the perceptions are based on misunderstanding.2

2. Role of public administration

In the colonial and immediate post colonial period, it was fashionable for governments in Africa to restrict themselves to maintenance of law and order, tax collection and provision of limited social and infrastructural services. Public administration was not developmental. Issues of socio-economic development were presumably left to the private sector, which was weak and under developed.

It is not surprising that African governments inherited either weak private sector or one which was foreign dominated; and their administrative structures and institutions were not development oriented.3 These legacies, ECA contends, "constituted a serious constraints to the new governments which were all invariably committed to a policy of modernization and rapid economic development."4 It soon became obvious to independent governments that they had to take a leading role in the socio-economic development of their nations if they were to attain their development goal and fruit of independence. Consequently, governments began to take active part in charting the course of societal developments, by laying down the general policy to guide socio-economic development, including all aspects of societal development.

1 Samuel Paul and Sita Sekhar, in RDD, vol.18, N°2222, Autumn 1997, p 120.
2 Samuel Paul and Sita Sekhar, in RDD, vol.18, N°2222, Autumn 1997, p 120.
3 (ECA, the role of the public sector in the economic development of African countries p. 23 (p 22 - 30) in AAS 1983, N° 33).
4 (ECA, the role of the public sector in the economic development of African countries p. 23 (p 22 - 30) in AAS 1983, N° 33).
In addition, they became involved directly in a number of socio-economic activities to stimulate production and to enhance the social well being of the people, in health service, education, transport, electricity, agriculture, industry and social security.

Some services are provided directly, others indirectly; still some of these services are for development of infrastructural basis of the society, which are essential pre-requisites to development. It should be recognised that before the collapse of the command economies in the early 1990s, governments in Africa had become the largest employer of labour and the main engine of growth. The private sector in many instances was seen as mere exploiter of people's labour. This perception of the role of government and the private sector is changing.

The role of government is changing from being provider of services and development to promoter and facilitator of development. However, "the application of market-led policies to countries where there are fundamental infrastructural weaknesses, would not result in expected benefits because the private sector could not assume broadened responsibilities unless the infrastructural constraints were dealt with first.5 (Mutahaba 86).

However, the perception of citizens of the role of public administration whether as the engine of growth or facilitator of growth is basically the same. In African countries characterized by hunger, famine, social disorder, war and conflict, inadequate basic necessities (water, food, health, education, electricity, telephone, housing), the perception of the citizen of the role of public administration is bound to be negative and invariably their assessment of public services.

By reading and listening to news and news report coming from Africa, it is enough to convince one that nothings seems to be working well in the second largest continent of the world.

3. **Implementation of government policies**

Politicians come to power on the basis of their programmes and personalities to improve on the existing situation. They achieved their objectives through public administration. In the same vein, military come to power by their gun, presumably to improve on the existing situation through the public servant.

Thus, whatever form or character of government is established, public servants have important role to play in translating the ideas, wishes and policies of politicians either in civilian or military uniform, into reality.

a) as steerer of societal development and in this, bureaucracy is a legitimate player.

b) as arbiter between competing interests, but has its own interest to advance. Bureaucracy under this circumstance is seen to play the part of aggregator or consensus builder; it is expected to be pervasive in its role, size, organizations etc.

c) as having limited capacity to do everything it can and do things that it has capacity to do and leave the rest to the private sector. Bureaucrats, under this circumstance must thus become managers.

d) As rule maker and enforcer. It should "govern and rule" only and not as production machine. To ensure law and order - minimalist state. Minimalist intervention in societal activities.

4. Assessment of public services

Service providers

In order to cater for its citizens, governments provide varieties of services directly or indirectly through its agencies. In recent times, autonomous agencies or executing agencies have been created to provide direct services to citizens. Such services include provision of water, health, education, electricity, telephone, postal, public transport, agriculture, public housing, immigration and security services.

Service recipients

Citizens who are the recipients of public services assume varying roles in their relation with public administration. Citizens as taxpayer, voter, customer/client and as supplier. When individuals act in their role as citizens, we assume they have certain rights or entitlements that are confirmed by the state by virtue of the individual attachment to the longer community. By contrast, as client or customer of the government, individuals do not share any common purpose with the country, but are acting on individual basis seeking personal advantage. (p 9) Alternative Service Delivery: Transcending Boundaries Robin Ford & David Zussman (p 2 - 14 - in Alternative service Delivery: Sharing Governance in Canada, 1997 - IPAC).

There are rural and urban citizens; there are rich and poor citizens; there are elite and common people. Each may have different or varying perception or need. What the rural people may need is rain, or irrigation scheme and agricultural implements to be able to produce food to eat and cash crops to sell to earn a living; availability of road, schools for education of their children, health services and potable water. The urban citizens concern, on the other hand, is not with agriculture per se, but education of their children, health service, water, electricity, telephone, transport and housing. Governments are already beginning to commercialise or privatise some of the public utilities.

It is generally recognised today that as taxpayers, recipients of public programmes indirectly pay for various services and therefore deserve the same attention accorded to paying customers in the private sector.7 (Ford & Zussman p; 11).

In the West, citizen is increasing been regarded as the client or customer, sharing a willingness on the part of politicians and public bureaucracies to be more responsive to their constituents' needs and demands.8 (Ford & Zussman p; 11).

**Findings**

Accountability of governments depends on the existence of highly articulate citizens with enormous capacity in exercising their civic duty within a strong democratic political culture. These two variable, existence of vibrant civil society and strong democratic political culture are what M. Shamsul Haque sees as the foundation for ensuring governmental accountability.9 ( xiii 1997) RDD,vol.18,N°2222, Autumn 1997. " Local Governance in Developing Nations: Re-examining the question of Accountability".

**Service Delivery**

It is generally believed that public administration in Africa is unsatisfactory, services, instead of improving, are deteriorating, constant administrative reforms not withstanding. While reforms are taking place, government services are expanding, unfortunately without corresponding expansion of their resources. Thus, unsatisfactory services are inevitable. These may not be the only problems. Others have contended that inadequate supervision of public agencies and lack of initiative by citizens to demand better services from such agencies have compounded the problem by limiting the agencies responsiveness to the public and their motivation to improve services even within the limit of available resources.10 (Samuel Paul and Sita Sekhar p 119).

The problem may not be as simple as Paul and Sekhar assume. Inadequate supervision in itself may be due to many factors, including increasing expansion of public activities, which cannot be adequately supervised. Similarly, lack of initiative by the citizens may be due to the absence of strong democratic political culture and their weak position in the power equation of the society.

Other factors which seem to be ignored and which affect service delivery are the conditionalities imposed on African countries that have seriously reduced the ability of the domestic political and

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10 Samuel Paul and Sita Sekhar p 119).

In almost all discussions about public administration in Africa, one noted characterisation of civil servants as inefficient, ineffective, corrupt, unaccountable, irresponsible, unproductive etc. This characterisation has been going on since late 60s culminating into the pervading administrative reforms of 1970s and the World Bank promoted structural adjustment programmes of 1980s, and to the UN, UNDP sponsored programme of good governance of the 1990s.

There is no attempt so far to recognise the tremendous efforts of the civil servants and the role they have been playing in moving the African countries forward in spite of political and governmental instability, characterised by military coups and counter coups, civil war, emergence of dictators, and in the face of socio-economic problems of the society as a result of changes in the internal and global environment.

African bureaucracy cannot be compared with their western counter part on efficiency, not because African bureaucrats are inefficient, but because the work environment is not the same, the motivation is not the same and the office automation is not the same and the overall socio-economic environment is not the same. All these are crucial variables for enhancing performance.

This notwithstanding, the competence of African public servants should not be underestimated. The first set of African public servants was trained during the colonial period in the various metropolitan countries of Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain and Portugal. They had learned the best skills and values of efficient public service and had done their best to inculcate such values and ideals. The subsequent high civil servants have been trained at home and abroad in a continuous basis for improvement of their skills and know how - thus, they have the skills, the energy and determination to deliver efficient and effective services in line with people's aspirations. However, purposeful leadership is very much required to release such skills, and energy for the betterment of the society.

5. Assessment

In their studies of accountability and service quality in some selected cities in India, Paul & Sekhar conclude that the level of public satisfaction with the performance of public agencies is unfortunately low and that corruption was rampant in all government agencies which made the cost of public services very high - speed-money, and delays in service delivery. (xix)

Improving service delivery in terms of timeliness, courtesy, responsiveness, availability, variety and convenience (Emil P. Bolongaita p157,- 1997) - this can be achieved by considering citizen as customer and success is measured in terms of citizens' satisfaction.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} (Emil P. Bolongaita, in RDD, vol.18.N°2222, Autumn 1997, p157
The reluctance of the public sector to treat citizens as customers is largely due to the following: Public Agencies are funded through legislature, or treasury, rather than directly from the people, and they tend to please top bosses rather than citizens government agencies face neither competition due to their monopolistic nature, nor receive pressure be efficient and responsive; and the people do no money seem to complain about poor government performance for they become accustomed to the situation (Bolongaita).  

Bolongaita has captured the problem when he says "few governments in the world, whether national or local view their people as citizens, even less as customers. Except during elections, when people are courted for their votes, may national and local governments deliver basic services late, poorly and arrogantly as if government funds come from their own pockets, rather than from taxes paid by the people" p. 55.

If services are poor, it should be shown whether it is due to the behaviour or attitudes of the service providers or due to inadequacy of the facilities. Where, for instance, communication services are inadequate, coupled with grossly under staffed organization, perception of citizens and their assessment of such organizations are bound to be negative. However, the point is where will the blame be attributed to? The public servants who provide such services in the face of inadequacies, or the organizations or government for failure to provide the basic requirement of the services.

In Africa, it should be acknowledge that governments do almost everything - providing goods and services, and the infrastructure necessary for socio-economic development. All these are done in the face of inadequacies - limited facilities with demotivated staff.

Ford & Zussman argue that public programmes and services cannot be examined exclusively through the restrictive free-market lens of the private sector. "The Public Sector must balance competing demands of the public that go beyond the impersonal market - driven relationships controlled by the forces of demand and supply."  

6. Performance

It is reasonable to know the objectives of an organization, its budgetary scope, infrastructure and size of its staff to be able to know whether its performance is satisfactory or not. Mere saying organization A or B does not provide satisfactory services is not helpful to our understanding of the problem.
Other factors which affect performance of public servants as Wali has argued are governmental instability, overheads, socio-economic problems of the public servants and infrastructural inadequacies within the public service and outside it (see Wali 1990).

7. **Service Delivery in UK**

In recognition of the importance of service delivery to the citizen, a citizen's charter was launched in Britain on 1 July 1991 by John Major. Highlighting the objective of the charter, Mr. Major says: "to make public services answer better to the wishes of their users, and to raise their quality overall." (p. 18).

But it has not worked through making machinery of government changes; instead it has aimed at changing attitudes within a very clear framework of service delivery. The emphasis has been upon improving public servants' efforts to fulfil their duties rather than upon creating new rights for citizens. In the original Citizen's Charter white paper, the following principles of public service were laid down:

- standards-set, monitored and published so that users can know what they can reasonably expect;
- openness-full, accurate information in plain language and clear indication of who is in charge, how services are run and how much they cost;
- choice - wherever possible, and offering consultation with those who use services, whose views should be taken into account in final decisions on standards;
- courtesy and helpfulness - services available equally to all and run for their customers and implying the wearing of name badges for officials that deal directly with the public;
- putting things right - apologies for mistakes and clear complaints procedures;
- value for money - efficient delivery of services within affordable resources and independent validation of performance against standards.

The Citizen's Charter has had less impact upon the machinery of government than many other reforms but it has changed the mentality and the language of government service-delivery. The British Civil Service today can be identified, as Duggett contends, by the following six principles:

1. **Political Neutrality**

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2. Appointment and promotion on Merit
3. Permanence (in the sense that elections do not determine the holders of senior posts)
4. Administrative experience and management technique applied to the practical skill of policy advice
5. Awareness of value for money and propriety in its use
6. A sense of public service alongside the constitutional imperative of being servants of the Crown

Each wave of reform has contributed to this evolved approach. Any further reforms can build upon a readiness to evolve further.

8. Measuring the services

Methodology

The type of questions asked is important in getting the right answers. Even the questions we answered are dependent on where we are standing and the lenses through which we see. The following questions may be useful:

1. How satisfactory are the public services;
2. What does it cost the customers to obtain the services;
3. behaviour of public agency staff;
4. quality of information or services provided;
5. speed with which problems are attended to or solved.

The sampling of the citizens must be representative of Africa to ensure a balance perception. A situation where only 4 Francophone countries are involved in the sample is grossly inadequate and not representative. Besides, all the four countries are based in West Africa. The level of development is Africa is varied, and hence, all regions of Africa should have been incorporated in the sample.

However, it should be recognized that African countries generally have common experiences of public administration and interaction of the people with public agencies -- Hence generalization of the findings for the research may be true to most African countries.

Still, the respondents profile is important in determining whose perceptions is the research about. In the sampling, it is important to know who are included in the sample, their status, for in societies where 80 percent of the people is engaged in private agriculture, and only 20 percent is
employed by governments and other sectors of the economy, much has to be done to have adequate representation of the sample.

Furthermore, the extent of interaction and its frequency is important to be able to come to reasonable judgement about citizens' perception of public administration. It should be pointed out that some citizens do not even have interaction with public agencies, as Paul and Sekhar have found out in their studies. Their reluctance is traceable to a number of factors, notably, "lack of information on what needs to be done, the cost of time to pursue matters, lack of self-confidence, and fear of possible adverse repercussions if they complained" (124)

The studies if it shows variations in the countries of sample, than generalization for Africa will be hard. If on the other hand it shows remarkable similarities, generalization may be acceptable.

9. Survey or Focus Group

Opinion survey, the methodology adopted in this research is grossly inadequate to gauge perceptions and attitudes of citizens. Instead, focus groups approach, enables citizens to talk through issues and questions thoroughly. Such approach does not claim to show what everybody thinks, but it provides good indicator of perceptions and attitudes that are hard to gauge with other techniques. (David Mathews - Politics for People: Facing a Responsible Public Voice - Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1994: p3.)

Arguing further, Mathews contends that, focus groups allow researchers to learn not only what people think about politics, but also why they hold those views and how they thin about them; whereas such information is impossible to gather through opinion surveys. (David Mathews - Politics for People: Facing a Responsible Public Voice - Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1994: p3.) "In surveys, questions need to be predefined for respondents to answer; people are unable to discuss issues and then reconsider their own views; and new information cannot be entered into a discussion for respondents to consider" (p4).

Issues to examine in the research report will include: analysis/ interpretation/ explanation, synthesis, and comparison.

The whole exercise is to show that public services are grossly inefficient and ineffective and very costly. Solutions to that lie with the private sector. This may be so, but at a cost - citizens will have to pay more for such services, because of the profit -motive of the private sector and

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because they pay their staff more to motivate them to work more with limited number of staff at the expense of more staff.

Citizens’ perception of the role of public administration and their assessment of public services provided are based on their role as customers/client, voters, tax payers, suppliers and as those with rights and obligations to the state. Thus, the way they perceive public administration and their assessment of public services is dependant on which lens they were. Citizens as tax payers, as citizens (deserve to be treated equally, regardless of rank or status) and as customers (deserve to be served well).

Should change or administrative reforms focus on structures, process methods or type and competencies of personnel? Anyway, creativity, imagination and engagement are very important factors to consider.

10. Citizens and Participation

Citizens required matured political culture to ensure their participation in the Political Process, and invariably to be in position to make or articulate their demand. Without active participation in the political process, citizens may not have the courage to make demand.

Where they do not participate, they may feel not belonging to the political process, and hence have no "right" to make demands:

(perception - feeling - assessment - reaction).

1. Level of citizens' satisfaction with the service-providing agencies.
2. Frequency of speed-money paid by citizens - to obtained services.
3. Willingness of citizens to pay extra money to receive better services.

11. Role of State

a. Provide opportunity for people to participate in decision-making;
   b. Guarantee freedom of expression and association, and for self development.

These can be achieved by first ending all wars and conflicts and establishing peace though out Africa.  

However, whose perception is changing?
And what are the lessons for any new Government wishing to further reshape that service?

P.B. Johnnie concludes that the performance of public enterprises in developing countries is relatively good as the objectives of such organizations were not to make economic profits, but

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25 See African Charter for Popular Participation in Development, ECA, Arusha : 1990), p21
social profits (120) (105 - 120° corporate performance of public enterprises in developing countries. The human factor as a neglected areas in AAS, 1988 N° 31.

Citizens may demand attention, access or power in their various roles.

12. **Service Delivery**

In assessing public services, it is necessary to identify which organizations or public agencies, and which kind of services while some agencies are centered with delivery regulation, control, contract, training, others are concerned with taxation and pure services.