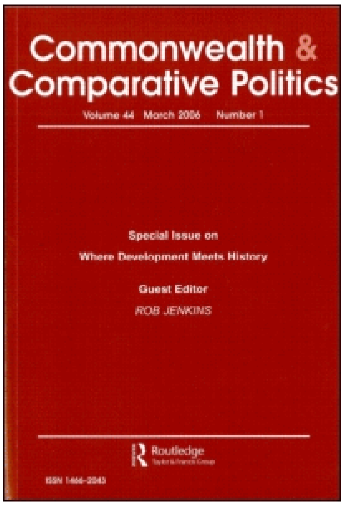

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Rethinking civil service reform in Africa: 'islands of effectiveness' and organisational commitment†

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After many decades of reform efforts and capacity-building, the delivery of public services in most sub-Saharan African states remains in crisis. Yet explanations of this failure which focus on failure of implementation, continued overstaffing, lack of political will or the inherent problems of 'neo-patrimonialism' are unconvincing. In fact the key problems of African public services remain those of understaffing and lack of organisational commitment. It is argued that the best way forward is to identify and work with the competent managers to be found in 'islands of effectiveness', encouraging and spreading more effective kinds of incentives and developing more positive organisational cultures. Pressure from the public for better performance is only likely to work if the need to respond is incorporated into organisational incentive structures.

Keywords: civil service; Africa; service delivery; effectiveness; organisational culture

The continuing incapacity of most (but not all) states in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to provide adequate public services and to manage economic policy can justifiably be called an institutional crisis. It is a crisis which not only concerns the international aid donors (see Commission for Africa, 2005), but also directly affects the suffering of ordinary African men and women in their everyday lives – non-existent health services, poor education, dangerous and unhealthy cities, vulnerability to crime and exploitation. Worse, this crisis in the state capacity follows on from 30 years or more of hugely expensive and comprehensive public service reform programmes, most of which are generally acknowledged to have failed.[1]

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In this article, I intend to address the following questions. Why have public service reform programmes in SSA failed? Are the explanations of why they have failed convincing? And are there new approaches to reforming the public services which might work better? My argument will be based on two main propositions:

(1) that African public services are not overstaffed or lavishly over-resourced but, on the contrary, lack the staff and resources to do a good job, particularly at front-line or local and even regional levels; and
(2) that the best way to improve performance is to identify and work with existing competent and committed middle managers and front-line officers within particular departments and agencies, whether it be in particular rural districts or quarters of big cities. These pockets or 'islands of effectiveness'[2] should be nurtured with incentives and resources, thereby developing localised centres of positive and effective organisational cultures.

The analysis falls into three main sections:

(1) The failure of public sector reform programmes since 1980: the scale of the crisis.
(2) Explanations of failure: Faulty design? Faulty diagnosis? Or is it all down to the politics of 'neo-patrimonialism'?
(3) A new approach to public sector reform.

The failure of public sector reform programmes

Three generations of reform

Efforts to reform the public services have conventionally been divided into the first and second generation (1980s, 1990s), but we may now add a 'third generation' associated with attempts to improve the quality and delivery of public services, as summarised in the World Bank's *World Development Report* on public services (World Bank, 2004a).

First generation

Large scale, donor-funded civil service or public sector reform programmes really began in Africa with the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s. Between independence and the late 1970s, the main focus had been on Africanisation of the small, inherited colonial civil services combined with rapid expansion (particularly of education services) – a process aided by the former colonial powers mainly through training and technical assistance.

The SAP loans of the 1980s were primarily aimed at stabilising macro-economic crises of balance of payments and fiscal deficits, runaway inflation and currency overvaluations. For this reason, the civil service reform packages which frequently accompanied SAP loans were mainly concerned to reduce the cost of public sector employment, which was regarded as self-evidently excessive or bloated, because unaffordable. The main problems of the African civil services which had emerged during the economic crises leading up to the SAP, were identified as:

- excessive expansion in the numbers of low level and poorly qualified employees, particularly in unproductive state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and 'parastatal' agencies,
- erosion of real wage levels caused by massive inflation and the effects of import controls, and
- compression of wage differentials.

It is reckoned that in Anglophone Africa, public sector wages declined 80 per cent in real terms between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s (paralleling the general decline in GDP *per capita*) (Van de Walle, 2001: 134; cf. Stevens & Teggemann, 2004: 45). In Francophone countries, the squeeze was reflected in the deliberate failure to pay wages, sometimes for over a year, resulting in indebtedness and demoralisation (Van de Walle, 2005: 77). Compression of wage differentials was such that in Ghana in 1984, for instance, a top Permanent Secretary earned only 2.5 times the salary of a basic clerk (although of course there were substantial non-pay benefits) (Nunberg, 1994: 146).

It was during this period, therefore, that the familiar problems of moonlighting and absenteeism, low morale, corruption and politicisation of recruitment emerged; there was little doubt that in many countries the capacity of ministries, including Finance Ministries, to fulfil even basic tasks had virtually collapsed.

The solutions offered by the 1980s civil service reform programmes were relatively crude; in line with neo-liberal economic policies aimed at drastically reducing the role of the state in the economy, they focused on:

- downsizing – retrenchments, mergers and recruitment freezes, eliminating ghost workers, and
- decompressing wage scales, trying to use savings on recruitment to pay higher salaries to higher level managers with scarce skills.

Large amounts of aid money were allocated for this purpose; between 1981 and 1991, the World Bank included civil service reform programmes in 91 SAP or TA loan/credit facilities world- wide, 55 of which, totalling \$2131 million, were to African countries (calculated from Table 7.1, Nunberg, 1994: 122).

Second generation

The second generation reforms of the 1990s to some extent emerged from a limited recognition that downsizing and pay restructuring alone were not producing the desired results. Net reductions in numbers were not great, except perhaps in the former SOE sector, overall salary expenditures were actually rising and yet as one authoritative World Bank study found, the idea that retrenchments and decompressions would produce savings which could fund real improvements in salary rates for skilled staff had not worked (de Merode & Thomas, 1994: 180). The 1990s reforms retained the assumption that the civil service needed to be reduced in size, but accompanied this with much more ambitious attempts at total restructuring of civil services, focusing on management systems, performance management and budget/financial management, and marketisation of service delivery. As Richard Batley has shown in impressive detail in his series of books on the changing role of government, this period of reform was nothing less than an attempt to transfer to African and other less-developed countries all the techniques of public sector reform which in the developed, particularly English-speaking, countries have come to be known as New Public Management (NPM) (Batley & Larbi, 2004). These techniques generally include:

- performance related pay and managerial autonomy (often misleadingly called 'decentralisation') based on 'internal markets';
- emphasis on outputs not 'process' (i.e. de-emphasising traditional civil service concerns with ensuring legality and due process in policy formulation and implementation);
- the use of the private sector to provide services through privatisation, public–private partnerships (PPPs) and contracting-out;
- 'agencification' – creating corporate public service providers based on performance contracts, on the model of the UK's *Next Steps* programme, begun by the Thatcher government in 1982. In Tanzania, 47 new executive agencies were planned in the 1991–99 programme! (Therkildsen, 2000); and
- decentralisation to new local government systems.

The typical mechanisms for designing and implementing these reforms were the creation of high-level reform agencies, usually located in presidential or prime ministerial offices. The purpose of such special agencies, backed up by teams of foreign consultants and technical assistance personnel, was to by-pass the mainstream ministries. At the same time, foreign aid flows to SSA continued to increase massively, by 5 per cent per annum in real terms between 1970 and 1995, only declining somewhat by the end of the 1990s (Van de Walle, 2005: 71).

This served to increase the direct role of donors and their agents in government programmes especially public sector reform (Therkildsen, 2006: 56).

Third generation

What might be called a third generation of reforms has only emerged since the end of the 1990s, following on the World Bank's recognition in its 1997 World Development Report that having an effective, responsive and legitimate state was crucial for sustaining an effective market economy. New generation programmes since the millennium, although still very much within the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, have tended to focus on how to improve service delivery to citizens, making it more responsive and effective. They are normally specifically linked with poverty reduction strategy papers which have become a new conditionality for loans to highly indebted poor countries, the majority of which are located in SSA.[3] Thus for public servants, this has meant programmes which attempt to involve officers in taking on board the opinions and demands of their clients –the public or users – and designing their own performance improvement plans or PIPs which involve service delivery standards monitored by both responsible managers and citizen user groups. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank funded such programmes in Tanzania (PSRP 2001–05), Uganda and Ghana among others (Crook, 2001; Therkildsen, 2006; Therkildsen & Tideman, 2007). The Ghana CiSPIP programme, which was started in 1996, involved staff in targeted agencies engaging in 'self appraisal' exercises in which they were supposed to confront and discuss what their public clients felt about the quality of their service, and then come up with PIPs which could form the basis of a performance agreement with their Chief Director and the government. PIPS have to include measurable performance indicators (PIs) (Republic of Ghana, 1995; DFID, 1999; Crook, 2001; Stevens & Teggemann, 2004: 70).

The results of public service reform programmes

After nearly 30 years, what results have these successive generations of public service reform achieved? Unfortunately, the general consensus to be found in both consultants' reports and in the academic literature is that their achievements have been extremely limited, even negative in some instances. The World Bank review of 1999 concluded that, in aggregate, public sector reform programmes had been 'largely ineffective in achieving sustainable results' (World Bank, 1999).

Reductions in overall size

There is considerable disagreement over the record here – primarily because reliable figures even within individual countries are hard to come by, let alone comparable figures for creating aggregate results for the region or sub-regions. Some analysts (Goldsmith, 1999; Lienert, 1998; Schiavo-Campo, 1998; Olowu, 2003) argue that in selected important countries civil service numbers really fell, by up to 10 per cent, and that by the mid-1990s SSA had the lowest ratio of civil servants to population of any group in the world – 1 per cent compared with 3 per cent for other less-developed countries (Olowu, 2003: 113; cf. McCourt, 2006: 169). In Uganda for instance, the total fell from 239,000 to 159,000 in 1986–96, and in Tanzania, from 335,000 to 270,000, 1992–2000 (Therkildsen, 2000).

Others argue that falls in the civil service to population ratio reflect only a decline relative to population growth, and that by the end of the 1990s, rehirings ('revolving door syndrome') and redistribution cancelled out many of these reductions (McCourt, 1998; Sandbrook, 2000). As van de Walle calculates, government expenditure on wages and salaries in SSA increased as a percentage of total expenditure, whilst expenditure on goods and services, transfers and capital expenditure went down – even while overseas aid increased from 5 per cent to over 10 per cent of GDP. The figures suggest that governments have attempted to maintain their core establishments and waged employees whilst cutting back on equipment, services and development expenditure – a 'retreat of the state apparatus from what were once considered central development functions' (Van de Walle, 2001: 96, 2005: 78). Therkildsen, in a study of eight Eastern and Southern African countries, also found that after real declines in real government *per capita* consumption up to the mid-1990s, government spending increased and government employment began to creep up again (skewed quite importantly by large increases in military personnel in Uganda and Mozambique). And like Van de Walle, he points to a shift in the composition of government expenditures towards wage costs (Therkildsen, 2006: 61). It also seems likely that a lot of skilled middle and senior officers left during the retrenchment phases (Olowu, 2003, 122).

Restructuring of pay scales

The record on increasing pay incentives tells an even more depressing story. Real wage levels in most countries continued to fall on average by 2 per cent per annum between 1990 and 1996 (Lienert cited by Olowu, 2003: 114), and continued to fall in the new century except for a few countries such as Tanzania and Uganda (Kiragu *et al.*, 2004: 111; Therkildsen & Tideman, 2007). Here, real increases were achieved from the mid-1990s onwards (Tanzania, 75 per cent between 1992 and 2000; Uganda, nine times from a relatively meaningless base!). But Tanzanian wages were still only 80 per cent of their 1970 level in 2000 (Stevens & Teggemann, 2004: 45). Only in Botswana, Africa's economic success story, have public sector wages kept pace with inflation – while at the same time, total public sector employees

INCREASED in absolute numbers by nearly four times (from 24,000 in the late 1970s to 82,000 in the mid-1990s). Botswana's public wage bill remains proportionately the largest in Africa at 10 per cent of GDP (Goldsmith, 1999: 532; Kiragu *et al.*, 2004: 117). This is hardly surprising when we consider that Botswana is one of the few African countries to show a significant increase in *per capita* GNP between 1970 and 1998 (six times higher, compared with an average fall of 9 per cent across SSA as a whole).

Although a lot of progress was made on decompression or increasing differentials (see Nunberg, 1994: 145), by 2001 the general picture in SSA remains one of relatively low decompression ratios, with Uganda and Botswana again the major exceptions. Botswana has decompression ratios of 30:1, high even by general international standards (Kiragu *et al.*, 2004: 117). The most significant issue now is that of relativities. Public sector salaries for skilled personnel became increasingly uncompetitive with the local private sector and with the burgeoning NGO and donor agency sectors, which by the end of the 1990s were a far more attractive prospect for bright young African graduates.

For African professionals or managers with internationally marketable skills, of course, the lure of emigration also became stronger, and the brain drain became a torrent. Around 60,000–100,000 trained personnel probably emigrated from SSA in 1986–90, (Van de Walle, 2005: 78). The health sector remains especially vulnerable – in Ghana, it is estimated that one-third of all trained health workers left the country between 1993 and 2003, and more than two thirds of the output of trained doctors from medical school left between 1995 and 2002 (ISSER, 2001). The number of Ghanaians emigrating to the USA increased sixfold in the period 1986–96, nearly all people with tertiary education or technical skills. The increased presence of expatriate technical assistance personnel on international salaries is a daily reminder to those who remain of these enormous differentials.

For those on the lower pay scales, a continuing problem in many countries was the practice of non-payment for many months, as governments sought to balance budgets.

Performance and service delivery

Worst of all, most analysts seem to agree that the two key objectives of public service reform – which are to improve management of government budgets and programmes, and to improve the capacity to offer better services – have not been achieved.

Budget and financial management

Even in the 'star pupil' countries of Ghana and Uganda, which have received the largest shares of aid over the past 20 years, budget tracking studies have shown that only 27 per cent of budgeted grants for education actually reached schools in Uganda, and 51 per cent in Ghana; in the health sector in Ghana, only 32 per cent of central funds reached front-line services (Van de Walle, 2001: 136; Killick, 2004). Revenue collection efforts have improved in some countries, e.g. Ghana's Internal Revenue Service (Joshi & Ayee, 2009), but overall the major story is one of increasing reliance on donor aid and loans to support government budgets and the major part of development budgets.[4]

Public services

Numerous studies of education and health have shown continuous declines in quality; in Tanzania for instance, primary school enrolments went down (from 93 per cent in 1980 to 66 per cent in 1996) even as the number of teachers employed went up, and in Mozambique, 50 per cent of teachers have only a primary education (Van de Walle, 2001: 94). In Ghana studies of educational standards have shown shockingly low rates of achievement of basic competence in literacy and numeracy in the state sector schools: one study showed that, by the end of primary school (P6) only 4 per cent of pupils could pass basic competence tests in maths, and only 9 per cent in English (ISSER, 2001).

In growing West African cities such as Accra, Lagos, Ibadan and Kumasi, attempts to improve sanitary and waste collection services through contracting out and PPPs have failed to deal with the rising tide of informal settlements and the reliance of poor people on pit latrines (Ayee & Crook, 2003).

Rural health provision in many African countries is increasingly provided only by mission organisations, donors and NGOs, with one leading observer of Africa suggesting that the continent's increasing dependence on aid has deepened its 'institutional devastation' and the declining developmental capacity of the public services (Van de Walle, 2001: 100, 2005: 79).

Explanations of failure

Most of the conventional explanations for the failure of public service reform currently circulating are unsatisfactory because they do not address the core reality of the situation, or offer only a partial analysis. So the prescriptions which they continue to promote are also faulty. I discuss here a selection of the commonest explanations, culled from official reports, consultancy reports, and academic analyses.

Official and consultants' reports

The routine explanations of failure to be found throughout official reports for the donor agencies and the World Bank can be grouped into the following types.

- Failure of implementation: it is very common to assert that the plan or design of the reform was fine, it was just not implemented properly. A typical example is the World Bank's Public Sector Management Reform Programme for Ghana, launched in 1999, which aimed at nothing less than a 'total redefinition of the roles and functions of the state and its agencies' across 'all sectors'. This inherently unrealistic objective was described as satisfactory and 'in line with best practice'. The failure to properly implement was ascribed to the lack of capacity, the poor quality of consultants (*sic*) and agency rivalry (World Bank, 2004b).
- Supply-side factors: typical answers to the question 'why was the plan not implemented properly?' are derived from supply-side issues such as lack of staff capacity (meaning too many underpaid, poor quality staff) and inadequate technology, meaning that more 'training' and IT-based technical fixes are needed.
- Organisational problems: another implementation-focused explanation suggests that the plan was fine, but there was resistance and conflict from within the public services, caused by agency rivalry (a common consequence of locating the reform programme in a dedicated agency), or lack of clear lines of command (Republic of Ghana, 2003).
- Lack of 'ownership': this explanation focuses on resistance to change, seen as coming from conservative or fearful staff. It is usually brought into play four or five years after the launch of the reform programme, when it is 'discovered' that members of the public services have, in practice, little real commitment to reform or to changing their ways. The culprits are managers who fail to explain the reform properly, and donors who fail to ensure that there is local ownership of the plan during its development.
- Lack of political commitment: this is now the favourite catch-all explanation, in that it appears as the most plausible underlying reason for all the failures of implementation, lack of ownership and commitment, and failures to resolve conflicting lines of command. It is suggested that all these other problems could have been cut through if the highest political authorities had really been committed to the reforms and prepared to put their authority on the line to implement them. What is required is that the president or prime minister be fully convinced that public service reform is necessary, and committed to driving it through (Agere, 2000; Republic of Ghana, 2004; Stevens & Teggemann, 2004). Hence the popularity of special agencies located in the president's or prime minister's office. Unfortunately, what is less commonly addressed is why there should be a lack of political commitment, other than the usual references to the (exaggerated) fear of the political consequences of downsizing and rationalising. It is at this point that broader political science analyses are invoked.

Academic analyses: neo-patrimonialism

Academic, particularly political science, analyses have the merit of going beyond the truism that any reform of the public agencies of the state is a highly political matter and therefore must, by definition, require the consent and support of the political elite. They suggest that simply 'requiring' such support as a prior condition for the funding of any reform programme is no more realistic than blaming implementation failures. First, one has to ask: WHY is there a lack of real political support, even when political leaders formally and repeatedly assure donors of their commitment? What can one do to secure a real commitment?

The dominant view is unfortunately based on a characterisation of African states which suggests that real commitment to public service reform is so unlikely as to make the demand for it extremely naïve. The political context in Africa, it is argued, is especially difficult because states work to a logic of neo-patrimonialism. The prevalence of patronage-based political systems, and of neo-patrimonial elites living off the economic 'rent' extracted from import/export taxes on minerals and primary commodities, means that there is little or no political constituency for reforming the public services so as to make them a more effective and efficient Weberian bureaucracy.[5]

The most extreme views, put forward by writers such as Chabal and Daloz (1999), French scholars (Bayart *et al.*, 1999), and Reno (1998, 2002) suggest that there is no escape from a patrimonial logic which means that African political elites have an interest in perpetuating the existence of a parallel, informal, or 'shadow' state. This state has its own systematic rules of personal loyalty and redistribution, based on the use of public resources for private and clientelistic ends. The parallel state operates within the context of a formally legal-bureaucratic system, and feeds off of it.[6] The symbiotic relation between the bureaucratic system and a patrimonial system which constantly undermines it is such that there is no limit to the economically destructive logic of predation and rent-seeking. So while political elites may swear to donors that they want public service reform in order to get the loans, they do not in practice WANT a competent, law-abiding bureaucracy which could restrain their activities or insist that formal rules and laws be obeyed. Ultimately they will 'kill the goose that lays the golden eggs', as Mobutu did in Zaire, and produce state collapse. Such an explanation of why all public service reforms to date have failed seems at first sight to be more hard-headedly realistic, with its claim that this is the way that 'Africa works'.

Other proponents of the neo-patrimonial analysis do allow that the situation may not be completely hopeless and that there are variations in the performance of neo-patrimonial regimes which suggest that there may be ways forward. Van de Walle, for instance, argues that once rent-seeking politicians become more like 'real businessmen' they might develop an interest in having a more effective and modern capitalist state (Van de Walle, 2001: 273), while Sandbrook, following Jackson and Rosberg, points to the critical role which clever and powerful presidential rulers can play (Sandbrook, 1985). These are only glimmers of rather contingent hope. Englebert (2000) goes further in developing a typology of the variations in the effectiveness of neo-patrimonial African states, based on the degree to which they have inherited pre-colonial authority structures (and are hence 'legitimate'). But, as Kelsall and Booth have noted, this model fails to offer a plausible escape route from the malevolent effects of neo-patrimonialism insofar as it sees the cultural determinants of state legitimacy as an historic given (Kelsall & Booth, 2010).

Beyond the neo-patrimonial model

Patronage-type elements are undoubtedly present in most African regimes (as indeed they are in Europe or America). But comparative logic suggests that the currently dominant neo-patrimonial model of African governance is not a convincing explanation either for lack of political commitment to public service improvement or for general developmental failure.

In the first place, the neo-patrimonial model fails to distinguish between benign and destructive patrimonialism. If all African states are 'neo-patrimonial' and therefore subject to the same systematically destructive logic, then how can one explain why some African states have done better than others? Some, such as Botswana or Cote d'Ivoire during the 30 or more years of the Houphouet-Boigny regime, have been relatively well managed and economically successful; others such as Senegal, Tanzania or Ghana have avoided civil war and remained peaceful and stable for long periods of time. Scholars who have focused on particularly successful cases have confirmed that they are, or were, just as much infused with patronage-based political relations as other African states. What distinguishes the 'developmental patrimonialism' of Cote d'Ivoire for most of the Houphouet-Boigny regime, or Botswana even today is a regime which supports effective public bureaucracies in sectors which it regards as crucial for its developmental project or main policies, and orders its relations with key elements in society in inclusive ways (Crook, 1989, 1990; Pitcher *et al.*, 2009). It is not sufficient, however, simply to acknowledge that neo-patrimonialism has varied outcomes; there has to be a systematically comparative explanation of how it differs and whether those differences are causally related to the different results. Médard suggested such a framework nearly a decade ago in his model of the degree to which 'neo-patrimonialisms' differ in their kinds of regulation, from most redistributive to most predatory (Médard, 2000). And the African Power and

Politics research consortium is now developing a model based on variations along two dimensions: the degree to which rents are centrally controlled and the degree to which rents are invested for long- as opposed to short-term gains (Kelsall & Booth, 2010). Patronage can be exercised in constructive as well as destructive ways, which suggests that genuine political commitment to public service reform is possible, given the particular historical and political motivations of the ruling elite.

Secondly, it is clear that not everything in African politics and administration can be explained by the logic of neo-patrimonialism. Political elites may operate according to other principles – nationalism, the search for political popularity and electoral victory, even developmental goals (Therkildsen, 2005: 49) and professionalism, a sense of public or organisational duty and efficiency can in fact be found in African administrations. The problems of African governance can just as well be explained in structural terms, as products of colonial institutional legacies, the logic of their political economies and the impact of continuing economic and fiscal crises caused by their mode of insertion into the global economy. And foreign aid, as already noted, has also played a critical role in sustaining weak states (Leonard & Strauss, 2003; Therkildsen, 2005). For Therkildsen, it is time to take the 'articulation of bureaucratic and patrimonial power seriously' (Therkildsen, 2005: 50).

Third, countervailing political and social forces which cut across vertical patronage structures or which provide different constituencies for reform, do exist in African societies and polities and should not be forgotten or dismissed. There is a historic legacy of mobilisation by social classes (agrarian interests, urban workers) and other popular groups which periodically re-emerges, sometimes quite violently, and which challenges corruption and patrimonial logic. New forms of citizen activism have emerged during recent democratisation processes; both communal and residential user groups organise to demand better services (see Joshi, 2007). This is a more realistic (albeit slow and piecemeal) approach than relying on a 'change of heart' by political leaders which is all too easily derived from the imperatives of adaptation to donor agendas.

A new approach to public sector reform: building organisational commitment in islands of effectiveness

Neither current official and consultancy reports, nor the academically dominant 'neo-patrimonial' model of the African state, provide convincing explanations as to why public service reform programmes have failed over the past 30 years. They cannot therefore, provide a plausible basis for a more successful strategy to be developed for the immediate future. The new obsession with 'political commitment' simply begs the question of how to find or cultivate such commitment. I suggest a new approach based on the following propositions about the nature of African public services and their potential for reform.

- The core problem of the civil service and public service provision in Africa is UNDERstaffing and lack of resources at levels where it matters most – front-line services, and key middle-management operations at both central and local levels.
- Getting public agencies to perform better, from the very low level they now find themselves in, requires not just resources but an organisational commitment on the part of staff to do their jobs; this requires a changed organisational culture within which not just wages but the whole package – of personal rewards and incentives and management style – encourages and DEMANDS better performance by public agencies.
- Changing organisational cultures requires a focus on particular agencies or departments and the successful or committed managers or workers who DO currently exist in many African countries. National level, top-down comprehensive PSRs focusing on institutional reorganisations and using special agencies staffed by external consultants, must be abandoned. 'Islands of effectiveness' must be given the resources and encouragement they need, (including competitive salaries).
- External pressures for good performance – from citizens, clients, users – can provide another set of demands for organisational change, which have the potential to counteract neo-patrimonial logics and reward public servants; but only if they are built into the internal organisational incentive structure; and not vitiated by privatisations which undermine accountability and the power to regulate effectively.

Understaffing not overstaffing

The notion that the main problem of African bureaucracies is that they are full of underemployed, useless staff has been repeated and recycled so widely that it has achieved the status of an incontrovertible fact. Yet this 'fact' is daily contradicted by the reality which people experience on the ground.

Any visit to the offices of agencies providing front-line services in a rural district office, or in the office of a city government in Ghana, for instance, normally reveals a desperate shortage of the staff necessary to do the job. This applies particularly to office support staff and technical and professional staff, without whom middle managers at this level find themselves helpless. The same is true even in central ministries where middle managers find themselves overwhelmed with impossibly complex tasks and few subordinates to whom they can delegate. And basic equipment and resources are usually lacking as well.[7] Let me give some examples.

Throughout Africa, new local government schemes have been set up in the name of decentralisation over the past 10–20 years. Virtually all (with the possible exception of Uganda between 1999 and 2007)[8] suffer from the problem of 'unfunded mandates' – big responsibilities without the staff or the resources to fulfil their legal duties.

In Accra for instance, a capital city with a population of around 3 million people, the Waste Management service had virtually collapsed by the mid-1990s following further decentralisation from the Greater Accra Metropolitan Assembly to the sub-metro districts (SMDs), who then sub-contracted to private contractors.

An interview in 2003 with the Head of the Waste Management Department Monitoring Unit in Accra, who was responsible for managing all the private contractors doing the waste collection, revealed that the total staff of the Unit was himself plus three other assistants. These four officers were supposed to inspect and monitor the performance of waste and cleansing contractors, covering all six SMDs with over 500 container sites, as well as all the human waste removal contractors for a sprawling modern city. Each of the SMDs had a local officer (DCO) who had no transport, so had to take *tro-tros* or rely on a lift from the central office.[9] In each of the SMDS, there were around 20 or 25 environmental health officers who did the street level public health and sanitation work in Accra; they similarly had no transport and were reliant on *tro-tros*. In the Ashiedu Keteku SMD, the EHOs office did not even have a telephone. Effective regulation was impossible, even without reckoning on the political protection enjoyed by the contractors (Crook & Ayee, 2006).

In most of the rural district assemblies of Ghana, which are supposed create composite budgets for all the decentralised departments, financial estimates were prepared by young National Service personnel; composite budgets were still an aspiration, 15 years after the introduction of the reform. Revenue collection was hampered by lack of basic data such as ratepayer rolls and property data bases.

In the area of land revenue, collection of revenue in Ghana from lands under the customary jurisdiction of chiefs – the so-called Stool Lands – is now under the control of a state agency, the Office of the Administrator of Stool Lands. It covers valuable timber concessions and cocoa farms at the heart of the economy, as well as urban/peri-urban lands undergoing a massive boom in prices. It is therefore a crucial and politically sensitive function. The Regional Administrator of this service in Kumasi in 2002 was responsible for the whole region of Ashanti, population around 6 million, with its capital of around 1.5 million, and five or six large secondary towns. She had three clerical assistants, and a couple of typists employing a force of around 54 revenue collectors, and a further 90 private 'commission collectors'. The chief officer, on her own initiative, had created a computerised data base of all the chiefly authorities, showing the properties and the revenues due. But as she acknowledged, very large areas of the land and revenue yielding properties remained outside the system, such is the difficulty of establishing even the basic data base, in a country where most lands are not surveyed or registered (Toulmin *et al.*, 2004).

Agricultural services are another key developmental responsibility of the government, although throughout Africa they have been decimated by SAPs and World Bank-inspired cuts. The key official has always the District Agricultural Officer. An interview with a District Officer in a remote rural district of northern Ghana yielded a sad story. He was middle aged, technically well qualified – he had a degree in agronomy from the University of Reading and had taken a course on cooperatives in Yugoslavia (before its collapse), as well as various donor-funded short courses in Britain. He had been in the District for several years; he really knew the area and when you talked to him he clearly knew the farmers in each area very well and all the problems of their crops, their land tenure, their disputes; he was interested in them; he was well known, and liked. He had a farm himself which helped him to live in spite of his poor salary. Luckily the office still had one old motor bike he could get around on, although the telephone in his office did not work. But what could he do? He had a very small staff – a couple of assistants and a clerk, who clearly respected him. But there were no extension agents because they all went during the World Bank enforced closures of the state extension system. He could not provide any inputs of seeds or fertilizer either for the same reason, and there were no funded programmes in an area of deep agricultural backwardness and poverty. Yet here was a man with a precious and unique store of local knowledge, with a real interest in helping the farmers, a commitment that could be harnessed if only he had the staff and the resources to do something. As it is, he was unable to achieve much, frustrated and underemployed.

In Senegal, van de Walle writes similarly of the rural development office of large rural district near Dakar. There are seven officers including the district agricultural officer; but they have no development budget, and provide no inputs; their office budget is the equivalent of $100 p.a., and there is no transport. They rely on the good will of the Prefect to give them lifts or use rural buses.

These stories of well qualified, dedicated district officers, city engineers, environmental sanitation officers, health officers and nurses, and school headmasters, frustrated by lack of personnel and resources, could be multiplied many times over. They serve to emphasise the everyday reality of African administration. It is not all bad news; there are good elements and good potential side by side with huge difficulties.

Although these scenes are typical and familiar to anybody who knows Africa, it may be objected that they are only anecdotes. But hard evidence is difficult to find, as many scholars have discovered. Both Dele Olowu and Arthur Goldsmith, however, have produced figures which show that by the mid- to late 1990s African public sector employment was actually quite low compared with other developing countries, taking the ratio of public employees to total population (Table 1). Thus a sample of 20 SSA countries in 1996 had ratios of between 1.5 and 2.0 per cent, compared with 3 per cent for Latin American, 2.6 per cent for Asia, and 3.9 per cent Middle East and North Africa (Olowu, 2003: 106).[10]

Admittedly this is a very crude kind of a measure, especially as it is known that government spending and the size of government increases with the wealth of a country. Citing Heller and Tait's work, which measured public employment against a norm of numbers predicted by population, *per capita* income and type of economic system, they again found that that African countries were 8 per cent below the expected level. Goldsmith also notes how the most successful African economy – Botswana – actually increased its numbers of public employees nearly fourfold: 24,000–82,000 from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s! (Goldsmith, 1999: 532) So by the late 1990s, it had a ratio of 5.8 per cent.[11]

Perhaps more critical is the evidence relating to the distribution or allocation of public employees. Most studies including Goldsmith's repeat the contention that African public services have an overconcentration of lower level employees and too few high level managers and professionals. Only Olowu makes the point that staff are perhaps too concentrated in central ministries whilst decentralised structures remain starved of personnel (Olowu, 2003: 120). van de Walle also asserts that the main focus for government employment has retreated to the key elite 'sovereignty functions' – defence, security, cabinet and presidential offices (Van de Walle, 2001: 101).

With these exceptions, my contention is that most analyses are too ready to confound data on the distribution of employees among pay grades with the assertion that there is a surplus of basic and low level staff. Many front-line and even regional services cannot function through lack of support staff (clerical and basic technical, as well as labouring and building staff) which means that hard-pressed front-line managers can achieve very little. And it is also clear that the middle-management level is also very weak, which is why

Table 1. Public sector employment as % of population (1995).

SSA (including South Africa)	1.5
Asia	2.6
Latin America	3.0
Middle East/North Africa	3.9
OECD	7.7
Botswana	5.8

Source: Goldsmith (1999), Olowu (2003).

the cadres of highly qualified and sophisticated civil servants in the central ministries, who spend most of their time dealing with the donor agencies, are stretched so thinly.

Changing organisational culture

How can public agencies in Africa actually be helped to improve their performance? It is not difficult to understand why many public officials in African countries suffer from lack of motivation, cynicism and demoralisation, and lack minimal commitment to doing even a basic good job. We have to ask, what would make them care what the public think of them, what would persuade them to provide a better service? Low pay, lack of basic equipment and resources, perverse incentives and the informal power of patronage relationships would seem to provide a powerful enough explanation of why they do not.

Nevertheless, as the 'islands of effectiveness' literature shows, we know that some organisations or departments in these countries do in fact perform quite well even in these most unpromising circumstances. And we know that there are many individual officers who are trying to do a good job. Can this be built upon?

Organisational theory suggests that in an organisational context, particularly a public or not for profit organisation, workers do their job because of the collective pressure to conform to minimal official norms and expectations – so called organisational goals. These pressures come not just from a combination of incentives and sanctions enforced by the official authority structure, but also from informal pressures:

- from people's relationships with their colleagues or their work group, their professional peers, from a staff association or trade union; and
- from the atmosphere and expectations set up by their immediate bosses or line managers – in short, from the organisational culture.

If that culture supports the fulfilment of organisational goals, getting the job done, then we call it a positive organisational culture. It is also well known and recognised that in any organisation there are informal pressure and values at work which can undermine the commitment to doing the job. These are present anywhere in Britain or the USA as much as Ghana or Tanzania. What is going wrong in many African bureaucracies is that the balance of incentives and motivations between organisational commitment and other motivations is too strongly on the latter side – from well known factors deriving from, e.g. politicisation of recruitment and promotion, corruption hierarchies which require pay back, nepotism based on various connections.

It is not impossible, however, to find examples where this balance has been altered. Grindle studied a group of 29 agencies in Africa and Asia (central financial services, agricultural extension, and maternal /child health services) and identified the factors associated with the 15 more successful ones. And Tendler's study of the famous state health ministry primary health care campaign in north eastern Brazil identified organisational features associated with their relative success. Both sets of studies (Grindle, 1997; Tendler, 1997) identified the following kinds of factors.

- A sense of commitment to a mission on the part of employees, associated with the belief that they were doing a valued and useful job – hence pride in their job.
- The sense of being part of a team, an enjoyment of the solidarity among work mates.
- Managers who demanded, recognised and rewarded good work performance, with an open style.
- A sense among employees that they were special and had been selected for their competence.
- Relative organisational autonomy in operational matters.

In other words, whilst material rewards such as pay and conditions and resources to do the job are important, they are not sufficient on their own. The 'social group' and job satisfaction rewards are equally powerful, and have to be reinforced by managerial standard setting and leadership. Otherwise, better pay might still not lead to better performance as performance-related appraisal systems, promotions etc. will not be respected or trusted, can be subverted, or will not carry the 'right' messages.

A positive organisational culture involves altering the whole balance of incentives and sanctions so that employees can get more reward from behaving in accordance with organisational norms than in undermining them. Therkildsen's detailed study of civil servants' motivations in Tanzania and Uganda established quite clearly that the best performing agencies were the ones in which managers used an array of non-pay rewards to motivate staff, used a responsive managerial style, and were seen to apply merit principles. He also found that in these bureaucracies, loyalty to colleagues (an internally oriented organisational culture) was more important than a public performance culture (Therkildsen & Tideman, 2007).

The critical importance of encouraging professional commitment and integrity by managers has also been emphasised by Leonard in his studies of successful public managers in Kenya and elsewhere (Leonard, 1991). His latest suggestion is that for the most senior officials, who have to work closely with political elites, the only solution is an internationalisation of professional peer support and payment of near-international salary rates to retain good staff. This could be paid for by transferring the TA money used to employ so many expatriate personnel to rewarding high performing top African civil servants (Leonard & Strauss, 2003). Of course this is a special solution appropriate only for the highest levels rather than the front-line services being discussed here. Nevertheless, the reinforcement of such a group at the top of particular agencies could have a powerful ripple effect.

In short, managers and workers together have to exercise a DEMAND for work performance which fulfils organisational goals. In a public agency, this means stressing a public service ethos, and service to the public – in contrast to many current NPM reform programmes which denigrate public service and use PIs only to create fear and mistrust, especially where the necessary trust in impartial appraisal techniques does not exist. It also means moving away from supply-side techniques, such as training and capacity building, insofar as these are not reinforced by the daily organisational context of real rewards and sanctions coming from fellow workers and line managers.

The most difficult issue remains, of course, how to build such a positive organisational culture, against the contrary pull of the other principles at work in so many African public agencies.

Focusing on success

The individual officers and their departments or offices discussed above represent an incredibly valuable resource which is in most cases going to waste. And they are mainly at the front-line and district level. They have excellent local knowledge, commitment and the respect of their immediate staff (see Leonard's analysis of Kenyan managers, who were respected because they were fair and non-discriminatory with staff). Yet most of the time they experience nothing but frustration and a sense of blockage in what they are trying to achieve.

Nevertheless, these 'islands of effectiveness' can be easily identified by those with local knowledge. Such institutions should be targeted and supported.

The first step in the development of an 'island of effectiveness' is to provide some of the minimum resources which will make the job both feasible and eventually more rewarding. This means MORE staff and competitive salaries where necessary. There is nothing more demoralising than the perception that no matter how hard you work or what you do, the task is basically impossible or unrealistic. But incentives can also be created by giving a possibility to raise their own revenue or income from the activity wherever this is possible or appropriate.

The effective individuals and managers identified should also be given full support to develop their style of management, especially where it is based on team work and reward for good performance. A study of the Environmental Health Officer workforce in Accra and Kumasi showed an unexpectedly high level of cooperative and positive work relations and job satisfaction, in spite of high levels of complaint about pay and conditions. This apparent contradiction could be attributed to a very positive, team-based way of working and style of management (Crook & Ayee, 2006).

The critical advantage to be gained from supporting such managers would be that they could reinforce the values of the work place (as in any other society) if they were allowed to alter the balance of incentives, such as the power of personal status, relations with one's work colleagues, as well as recruitment, promotion and pay, and equipment to do the job. Indeed I would argue that this is the only way to deal with the contradictory pressures coming from patrimonial principles, short of a change of regime at the very top which might lead to a more national demand for effective public services as in countries such as Botswana and Cote d'Ivoire in the 1970s and 1980s.

National level, top down comprehensive PSRs focusing on institutional reorganisations and using special agencies staffed by external consultants, should be abandoned.[12] The resources can instead be diverted to the targeted agencies and departments.

Internalisation of public demand for better services

It is important not to romanticise the idea of civil society organisations as the key to transforming public services through public demands (cf. Joshi, 2007). But there are now some good examples of reforms where a triangulation of demands coming from the public – citizens, users – and media campaigns has changed the behaviour of senior managers, and front-line workers have worked to improve the performance of public services. Recent work in Africa, for instance, has highlighted the importance of grass roots public officials doing effective work through collaboration with very local level and spontaneous forms of social action – newly invented 'Town Chiefs' in Malawi, and reforms to health care centres led by Mayors in Niger, for instance (Booth, 2010).

These show that the considerable advances experienced in countries such as India and Brazil, which are leaders in this field, could find fertile ground in Africa (Houtzager *et al.*, 2008). One notable example from India is the case of water supply in Hyderabad in India.

In Hyderabad city the public Metro Water company transformed the effectiveness and responsiveness of its operations with a combination of reforms. At the top management level, two young and enthusiastic Indian Administrative Service officers were appointed in the late 1990s. They set up new demands, new styles of leadership and new rewards and sanctions for the organisation;

these demands were put directly on front-line section managers. From the public side, a new Customer Complaints system was set up with enormous publicity to encourage the chasing of problems in the water supply. Front-line workers had to deal with complaints AND improve bill payment. Better performance on the one was directly linked to success in the other (Caseley, 2003).

Crucially as Jonathan Caseley concludes, the key feature in the reform was the creation of much stronger and more direct accountability relationships among public customers, senior managers and front-line workers.

It should also be noted that this was done without large injections of international donor support. But the World Bank did have a catalytic effect by insisting on legislation to create an autonomous agency before it granted a loan to deal with the extreme water supply crisis which the city was experiencing at the end of the 1980s. In the end, the main loan was withheld in 1998 because of the Indian government's nuclear tests; but the new management went ahead with the reforms anyway.

This model is one which many African societies and governments are capable of implementing – for instance Botswana, South Africa, Ghana, and now Rwanda to name but a few. The critical requirement is that any attempt to build a relationship between a public service provider and a citizen group has to be built into the incentive structures of the public organisation.

Conclusion

I have argued that the crisis of state institutions, particularly public service provision in most of Africa, is acute and urgent. Yet over 25 years of increasingly lavish, donor-funded public service reforms, efforts have failed to change the situation – if anything, it has got worse.

A complete rethink is required. Wholesale privatisations or contracting out do not seem to be plausible answers, if only because the evidence so far shows that the capacity to regulate the performance of private providers is not there (it is a more difficult job). Most frequently, the politically based awarding of contracts and protection of contractors providing services means that contract standards cannot be enforced (Ayee & Crook, 2003).

There has to be some renewal of public agencies, particularly with respect to rebuilding a sense of public service ethos and the ability to do a job that is felt to be worthwhile and valued. My proposal is that governments and donors abandon overambitious, best-practice-based general PSR programmes and focus instead on the talent and commitment which already exists in Africa among hard-pressed middle and front-line service managers. They need to be encouraged by being provided with the resources, the staff and the pay which they need.

Notes

1. I do not want to exaggerate or contribute to the media stereotype of Africa as a continent of failed or collapsed states; Liberia, or Democratic Republic of Congo or Sierra Leone during the civil war of the 1990s and 2000s are not in fact typical of the whole of Africa, certainly not Commonwealth Africa. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are African models of success too, in Botswana and South Africa. But the picture I am painting nevertheless applies even to reasonably well-established and stable states such as Ghana, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, or Uganda which do have the capacity and the resources to do better, or Nigeria which certainly has the resources to apply if it chooses.
2. Daland first used the phrase ‘pockets of productivity’ to describe the existence of reasonably effective public agencies or departments operating within the context of otherwise weak and poorly governed states (Daland, 1981). This insight has generally been ignored by all but a handful of scholars, most particularly David Leonard (Leonard, 1991) and Julia Strauss (Strauss, 1998), and others who have carried out empirical studies of examples of successful organisations in unpromising circumstances (Grosh, 1991; Schneider, 1991; Grindle, 1997, 2004; Tendler, 1997). Leonard has recently reviewed the whole issue of how such pockets can emerge in these contexts (Leonard, 2008). I use the term ‘islands of effectiveness’ because ‘productivity’, it can be argued, is rather an inappropriate concept to apply to public bureaucracies; it is more normally used by economists to express the production functions of agricultural or industrial enterprises, or output per capita. Evans uses the term ‘islands of efficiency’ (Evans, 1998: 79) but I prefer ‘effectiveness’ as it seems to encapsulate more broadly what is meant by the performance of a public agency.
3. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative was launched in 1996; 34 of the 42 participating countries are in SSA (UNDP, 2003: 152).
4. A 2004 review of 15 World Bank public sector reform projects in Africa, focusing on fairly limited projects in financial management and administrative reforms did rate 10 of the 15 as ‘satisfactory’, although that was hedged with caution about the ‘lack of observable performance results’ upon which to base a more robust assessment (Engberg-Pedersen & Levy, 2004).
5. The literature is very large, but the key references are: Médard (1982), Sandbrook (1985), Bratton and van de Walle (1997), Chabal and Daloz (1999), Van de Walle (2001), Chabal (2005), Erdmann and Engel (2007).
6. This is what makes it ‘neo’ patrimonialism as opposed to the classic model found in Weber’s historical sociology.
7. This comment in based on the experience of field research mainly in West Africa over a period of nearly 40 years.
8. During this period, the World Bank and other donors funded the Ugandan Local Council system generously through their Local Government Development Programmes I and II, combined with around a 50 per cent share of Ugandan general revenues, making the Ugandan local authorities 90 per cent dependent on central government transfers (World Bank, 2008; Wunsch & Ottemoeller, 2004).
9. *Tro-tros* are the local private minibuses which provide transport for the mass of the population in Ghana.
10. Therkidsen’s later study of Eastern and Southern Africa paints a similar picture for 2001 (Therkildsen, 2006).

11. The Management and Training Services Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat has also warned, in its analysis of how to improve the productivity of public services, against the destructive effects of understaffing and under-funding (Agere, 2000).
12. A leading DFID official has accepted that incremental approaches, identifying specific organisations are the most practical way forward – using the 'best fit' rather than the 'best practice' principles (Teskey, 2005).

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