

PREREQUISITES FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

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Introduction

It is generally accepted in contemporary societies that a “state” is a *fait accompli* and as such has particular responsibilities concerning the well being of its citizens. The major questions facing the governments of states concern the extent and the diversity of the services to be provided to satisfy the needs of society expected to be satisfied by the state. The gist of this contribution is aimed at the prerequisites for effective and efficient delivery of public services within a democratic country. It does not concern the kind of services to be provided or the identification of who, within a society, should have access to such services.

Public management

In contemporary states the dividing line between the so-called public sector and the so-called private sector is slowly being eroded. This is partly due to the complexity of society and the diversity of services required by citizens in developing, as well as developed states. The contemporary state, especially in Africa, simply does not have access to the financial and human resources to provide the services demanded to improve the living conditions of the poor and the indigent. Therefore, governments are compelled to co-operate with business or the private sector to assist in the provision of services. This is often done through public–private partnerships or by contracting the private sector to achieve its objectives.

The duality of using the private sector to assist in service delivery complicates the management of the public sector considerably. This is *inter alia* due to the fact that public management is not concerned with managing for profit, but operates within the confines of the political structures and the requirement that accountability in public for all decisions and actions are non negotiable. The private sector, however, participates in activities only if there is a reasonable expectation the expenditure incurred in a venture will be less than the possible revenue collected.

As a result of the complex nature of the services required and the equally complex nature of the management require to provide services, the prerequisites for effective and efficient service delivery should be reconsidered. The traditional approaches are outdated. In most cases the time frame within which public institutions operate are no longer valid for the pace at which some services are required, e.g. in the case of a natural disaster like drought or a tsunami, a dire need exists for the rapid deployment of resources to deal with the effects of such disasters.

The normal principles applicable to public management cannot be ignored. Account must still be rendered for actions or inactions. Community values

must still be honoured and the authorisation of the political structures must still be obtained, but the time frame has to be adjusted and donors and public-private partnerships will have to be employed to render the services. These will require of public servants as well as the political structures to adjust their operational time frames to satisfy the most basic needs. Thus public management is required to reconsider its frames of reference.

Service rendering

If it is accepted that particular services have to be rendered by the “public service” urgent attention should be devoted to the extent of the services required within the specific state, bearing in mind its level of socio- economic and political stability. Furthermore, the availability of financial resources and the availability of suitably qualified human resources will have to be weighed against the extent of the services required. Simultaneously the question has to be addressed whether the state should assume a minimalist approach or a maximalist approach concerning its involvement in societal issues.

Should a government decide which approach it wants to follow within its mandate from society, a number of critical matters have to be addressed. These issues are briefly alluded to in an effort to register the need to reconsider the traditional approaches to public management in contemporary society. In the discussion the four matters referred to in the *Report of the Commission for Africa*, entitled: *Our Common Interest*, under the heading: “*Getting things right: Governance and Capacity-building*” will be alluded. These issues include:

- Capacity to deliver
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Corruption

Prioritising needs

One of the most complex matters any government has to address is certainly determining the most crucial needs that have to be satisfied. The reason for this decision as a starting point for a government’s policies is due to the fact that needs always exceed the available human, financial and most other resources available to government. Therefore, it is imperative for government to prioritise the needs to be dealt with and attend to the needs in the order required to promote economic, social, physical development. These developments have to be promoted in such a way that political stability could be obtained and maintained.

In various African countries the developing democracies were faced with extreme challenges as a result of high expectations of society for the immediate solution of their urgent needs for economic improvement, social equalisation and also for democratic participation in government. Unfortunately many countries experienced severe faction or ethnic crises, demanding immediate attention thus detracting from government’s ideals of promoting normal governmental and administrative developments. Similarly,

the focus shifted from prioritising needs to stabilising the state to quell the internecine struggles for supremacy by certain factions or ethnic groups.

South Africa was fortunate in regard to stability after the first democratic election in 1994. There was a smooth transfer of powers from the previous regime to the new government. The interim *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1993 (Act 200 of 1993) and the current *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) contain clear guidelines within which government has to determine its policies and how the administration of the public sector has to be conducted. Chapter 10 of the Constitution, 1996 e.g. require public administration to be governed by democratic values and principles as contained in the Constitution including *inter alia*:

- promoting and maintaining professional ethics
- promoting the efficient and effective utilisation of resources
- development-oriented public administration
- providing services impartially, fairly and equitably
- responding to people's needs by encouraging participation in policy-making
- obtaining accountable public administration
- promoting transparency by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.

The implications of the principles concerning public administration in South Africa are obvious. It implies that administrative actions have to comply with the Constitution, 1996, which is, as determined in section 2 of the Act “ the supreme law of the Republic; law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled”. It could, therefore, be argued that government is obligated in terms of the Constitution, 1996, to determine and acknowledge the needs of society and ensure that those needs are satisfied. Thus prioritising needs as a primary requirement for effective service delivery. However, it is equally important to establish whether government has the political support and the will to enforce the policies formulated.

The issue of political commitment to enforce policies is of crucial importance. This is a sensitive area in countries where government does not enjoy a clear mandate of the citizens and where ethnicity, religion or cultural groups prevent government from acting impartially or at least from delivering services actually identified as priorities to be delivered. Instead, services have to be delivered to pacify opposition groups, derailing the governing processes.

Sound management system/practices

Most African countries are endowed with abundant natural resources. Although desertification and water scarcity inhibits development, there is usually no shortage of natural resources. The down side of this statement is, however, the fact that African countries are up to 78% dependent on the natural resources in exports and 21,2 % of the GDP whereas for developed

countries the percentages are 15,8 % and 2,6 % respectively (*Report on the Commission for Africa, 2005:139*). This is a clear indication that the limitations on possible developments could be due to other reasons than natural resources.

In many cases development is inhibited by a lack of sound managerial systems and properly trained and experienced public servants to operate within those systems. The Commission for Africa's report states unequivocally that qualified professional staff are essential to all forms of development. "The delivery of health, education and other services depends on them. They are crucial for collecting and managing data, and debating and developing policies, based on the evidence of what works and what does not" (2005: 130).

The Public Service Commission in South Africa published a particularly significant report on the state of the public service in 2005. The Report identifies nine principles that are considered as prerequisites for development. Principle eight requires that good human resource management and career development practices as well as the maximisation of human potential should be cultivated (*State of the public service report, 2005: 37*). The Report, furthermore, identifies the need for more egalitarian, flatter structures as well as the adoption of more modern, team based work methods for producing better results (2005: 38). This is an indication of the recognition of sound, or rather, more efficient and effective managerial systems and practices to achieve governmental goals such as improved service delivery.

Inherent in effective managerial systems is the need to obtain and enforce public accountability. Accountability is not only a precondition for the maintenance of democracy, but is also a requirement for sound public administration. The argument made in this discussion on the prerequisites for improved service delivery is that officials in managerial positions should be able to operate within a sound administrative system, supported by equally sound managerial practices. Furthermore, managers should be capacitated to perform their managerial functions efficiently, i.e. they should be enabled to take decisions, to exercise discipline and to demand accountability from all their staff.

Accountability is not a function of only the public managers and is not enforced by only managers. Accountable government is also a duty of the courts of law, the news media and other constitutional structures established to promote democracy e.g. in South Africa, the Public Protector (ombudsman); the Human Rights Commission; The Commission for the Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities; the Commission for Gender Equality; and the Auditor-General. Irrespective of the designations of the institutions created, the crucial requirement is that those institutions should be politically and structurally sufficiently independent to act without fear of retribution to enforce accountability within their respective spheres of competence.

Transparency

As alluded to earlier, democracy depends on particular cornerstones. If these cornerstones are eliminated or ignored, democratic government is threatened. One of the primary requirements of democracy is the ability of society to establish how the elected government is performing. That implies that society should be able to demand information from governmental institutions and be able to determine the success or failure of policies and related actions of government.

Transparency is crucial for the maintenance of democratic government. If society is able to gain access to the results achieved through governmental action, government would be sensitive to the success achieved as lack of success could have serious consequences at the next election. Transparency will most likely also prevent the inequitable allocation of resources. Furthermore, the availability of valid information increases the ability of members of society to participate in policy making and in monitoring the performance of public institutions.

The Commission for Africa identifies budget transparency as one of the most crucial requirements for effective government (Commission for Africa, 2005: 138). The Commission argues that citizens have the right to information about how the budgeted money is spent. Budget transparency is particularly important in the case of capital project or work creating programmes e.g. in the case of South Africa, the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* that was instituted immediately after the newly elected government assumed office in 1994.

Most African countries are endowed with abundant natural resources (Commission for Africa, 2005: 138). However, the utilisation of these resources is sometimes not to the greatest benefit of society. The Commission for Africa reports that in some of the oil rich countries the revenue from oil is often used only to the benefit of the ruling elite (2005: 138). The vast majority of society does not benefit and do not have access to any information relating to the financial and economic benefits of the natural resource.

The south African Public Service Commission, in its *State of the public service report* (2005: 23) states as a principle for effective service delivery that services must be provided impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias. Thus it subscribes indirectly to the basic principle of just actions which should be open to public scrutiny. This can be ensured only if society has access to the information relating to the quality and the quantity of the services provided. In the *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Batho Pele)* Government Gazette 18340, 1 October 1997) the South African government committed itself to honouring eight principles in service delivery including the following:

- consultation: citizens should be consulted on the level and quality of services they receive

- service standards: citizens should be told what level and quality of public services they will receive so that they are aware what they can expect
- information: citizens should be given full information about the public services they are entitled to
- openness and transparency: citizens should be told how national and provincial departments are run.

Transparency is also promoted in South Africa through the following two acts of Parliament:

- The *Promotion of Administrative Act, 2000* (Act 3 of 2000) which *inter alia* requires that reasons must be given for any administrative action thus promoting transparency in public administrative decisions and related actions. However, the Commission found that (Public Service Commission, 2005: 24) that the awareness of the public servants and the citizens was rather low regarding the requirements of the Act and that the reasons that have to be provided are often not adhered to.
- The *Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000* (Act 2 of 2000) which requires of governmental institutions to provide information to its clients within particular guidelines, but it is an important addition to the measures to promote transparency. As in the case of the Act mentioned above the Commission found that (Public Service Commission, 2005: 25) that there are serious problems as a result of non-compliance to the Act.

It seems as though governments profess to promote transparency and take active steps to promote this principle. However, lack of commitment by public servants to adhere to the prescribed guidelines is a serious challenge that should be addressed to give practical effect to the principle.

Ethical conduct

One of the traditional principles of public office bearers and officials are required to adhere exhibit ethical conduct. In most codes of conduct it is required that the basic values governing public administration should be honoured. In the case of South Africa the public service's *Code of Conduct* requires *inter alia* that:

- An employee should be faithful to the Republic; put the public interest first; loyally execute the policies of government; and abide by all statutory and other instructions applicable to his/her conduct and duties.
- An employee should promote the well-being of society; will serve the public in an unbiased manner; is polite, helpful and reasonably accessible; and does not discriminate unfairly against any member of the public.
- An employee strives to achieve the objectives of his/her institution cost effectively; is punctual in the execution of his/her duties; executes his/her duties in a professional manner; and does not engage in activities that is in conflict with the execution of his/her duties.

- An employee does not use his/her official position to obtain private benefits ; and does not disclose official information for personal gain.

The above-mentioned guidelines are extensive and should promote ethical conduct. However, many public servants are unaware of the guidelines or openly flaunt these great ideals of the public service In doing so it fosters an environment conducive to corruption.

Corruption is a potential danger to developing countries. Especially in cases where there is a lack of transparency and of public accountability. The *Report of the Commission for Africa* identifies corruption as one of the four impediments for good governance and capacity building (2005: 143). The presence of corruption is most obvious in the functions of procurement of public goods, export credit agencies and in the most robust case simply stealing state assets. The new democracy in South Africa has not been spared from this malady. Corruption has been uncovered in various sectors of the public service such as the misuse of child support grant;; the unlawful allocation of pension benefits; the misuse of benefits intended for the indigent to alleviate their inability to afford basic municipal services; claiming remuneration by “ghost” workers; tendering by officials under the guise of relatives ; and various other examples too numerous to mention. Therefore, the government of South Africa has introduced legislation to augment the code of conduct in an effort to promote the sense of responsibility of all employees to curb this malady.

The Parliament of South Africa passed the *Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act, 2004* (Act12 of 2004) to:

provide for the strengthening of measures to prevent and combat corruption and corrupt activities; to provide for the offence of corruption and offences relating to corrupt activities; to provide for the establishment and endorsement of a Register in order to place certain restrictions on persons and enterprises convicted of corrupt activities relating to tenders and contracts; to place a duty certain persons holding a position of authority to report certain corrupt transactions; to provide for extraterritorial jurisdiction in respect of the offence corruption and offences relating to corrupt activities; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

The Act is not dealt with in any detail as it is considered sufficient to prove the South African government’s awareness of the phenomenon of corruption and its negative effects on service delivery. It also illustrates the commitment to curb corruption by *inter alia* providing for so-called whistle blowing and the protection of such informants.

It should be noted that corruption is a serious negative effect on democratic government. It not only hampers effective and efficient service delivery, but also prevents proper accountability as the real reasons for lack of

performance is difficult to establish. Corruption in its various forms could probably be identified as one of the challenges facing African governments in their efforts to improve the living conditions of their respective societies. This malady is often so widespread and appears in so many forms that its eradication becomes extremely difficult. The curbing of corruption is largely dependent on the ethical conduct of political office bearers, senior public servants, watchdog institutions such as the Auditor-General and ordinary members of the public whose concern is the promotion of good governance.

Concluding remarks

The main purpose of the state, through its various institutions is the protection of its inhabitants, maintenance of law and order and economic stability. The provision of services that cannot be accessed by its citizens for various reasons such as poverty and economies of scale is also one of the important duties of the contemporary state. That is one of the primary reasons why there is an emphasis on effective public administration and management. The brief overview provides a summarised version of some of the primary requirements for effective and efficient service delivery. It does not profess to be an extensive exposition, but is an effort to stimulate debate on the challenges facing the contemporary state and in particular the contemporary African democratic state.

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