Strengthening Professionalism, Ethics, Integrity and Accountability in the Public Service for Sustainable Development in Africa

Paper to be presented during the 36th AAPAM Roundtable Conference,
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Public Service as Services Delivered to the Public

Understood in its broadest meaning to include all employees remunerated from government funds, the Public Service can be taken as an instrument of state action. Every Government counts mainly on the Public Service to implement its policies and programs. The Public Service, above anything else, is about the delivery of Public Services. They cover a wide range of peoples’ lives including: security, safety, law and order, justice, education, health, agricultural extension services (especially in Africa), veterinary service, forestry services, information and communication, water, energy, shelter, etc. The quality of the public service is not only in its structure, or in its behavior, or even in its institutional set up and qualifications of the public servants and their leadership. All these in themselves do not amount to a good public service. The services delivered define whether the public service is good for the people or not. Most Public Service Reform programs that do not result in much improvement in the public service fail precisely because they remain structuralist and do not extend to the increase and improvements in the services delivered. The quality of the public service is verified in the quality, equity, quantity, accessibility and affordability of the service that it delivers.

The Public Service as Public Servants

When everything is said and done, managing the Public service is essentially about two critical things: the services delivered, and the people who deliver the services. It can never be over emphasized that global, regional and national policies, strategies and commitments to sustainable development and poverty reduction need human capacities in the Public Sector to transform them into tangible and visible results. The knowledge, know-how and skills, networks and attitudes of personnel in the Public Sector are at the heart of the performance of countries because it is through them and by them that services are planned and delivered, critical innovations conceived and realized and needed reforms carried out. While effectiveness of the Public Service can be largely seen through the nature, quality, quantity, responsiveness and equity of the services delivered, the women and men who deliver them (i.e the Public Servants) must be developed, capacitated, motivated and committed all the time to sustain satisfactory levels of service delivery. This brings to the forefront the issue of professionalism, ethics, integrity, and accountability in the Public service. This presentation is premised on the author’s suspicion that professionalism, ethics, and integrity in the Public Service in most Africa countries has been taken a little bit too lightly and the consequences are reflected in the many weaknesses in the public service including low morale among public servants, ghost public servants, embezzlement of public funds (sometimes in a rather obvious way), and generally poor service delivery.

Institutional framework for conduct of public Servants: Professionalism and ethics

One of the goals of public sector institutional capacity development is to establish and/or strengthen the policies, laws, rules, regulations, processes, procedures, systems, human resources, and organizational structures, which eventually have a strong bearing on the practice,
behaviour, and outputs of public servants in their work. The performance of public sector institutions is appreciated by citizens not only in terms of the quality, quantity and timeliness of the goods and services they provide but also in the manner in which public servants conduct themselves in their interaction with the public and in handling the resources that are entrusted to them. While the behaviour of public servants is human it can greatly be influenced by the institutional arrangements, laws, rules, regulations and codes of conduct under which the public servants work.

**Codes of Conduct and other Legal Frameworks:**

Public Sector institutions stand better chances of being effective when they are operated by public servants working with professionalism, ethics, integrity, openness, transparency and accountability to prevent all forms of corruption in public administration and effectively deliver public goods and services. Many countries have for long had laws, rules and regulations, to guide their public servants. Within these are found sections on codes of conduct or codes of ethics. In implementing Public Service reform programs, many countries realized that public servants rarely refer to these voluminous laws, rules and regulations to guide their work. Therefore many countries, as part of public service reforms, have put in place shorter and more easily referenced codes of conduct in the hope that public servants will find them easier to consult and follow as reference to guide their conduct. However, all the other legal frameworks such as laws, standing orders and other forms of regulations also remain in place and in force.

**A Public Servant must have the whole PIE to be effectively accountable**

| **Integrity:** | means maintaining ones good reputation, having values and consistently keeping them as the boundaries of their conduct and speech, not bending to pressures and influence and standing upright in terms of how one lives and believes. |
| **Ethics:** | is a standard of accountability which the public or the public service itself uses to scrutinize the work of the public servants. |
| **Professionalism:** | The ability and practice of performing a function in a systematic manner with commitment, selflessness, and concern for the general interest adhering to agreed fundamental principles and values, laws, rules, and regulations, to provide the best possible efficient, effective and innovative public service to the community all the time. In the Public service, professionalism can be located at the point where expertise in terms of knowledge and skills meet with integrity and ethics to form a competent whole of a highly capable, committed and responsible and responsive public service |

A public servant cannot be professional without integrity or without ethics. Nor can one be successfully accountable without integrity, ethics, and professionalism. These four are central in the African Charter on Values and Principles of Public Service and Administration. An analysis of codes of conduct and other
legal frameworks of the public service in more than 30 African countries indicated that the four (integrity, ethics, professionalism and accountability) figure prominently in the public service accountability infrastructure.

**Principles expressed in the African Charter on values and principles of public service and administration**

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**Codes of Conduct and other legal frameworks in the Public Service of African Countries**

Information on Codes of Conduct and other legal frameworks guiding the behaviour of Public Servants in Africa was obtained from 36 African countries that have some kind of law related to codes of conduct/ethics in the public service, such as Code of Conduct/Ethics, Civil Service Law, “Statut-General”, etc. Of these, 20 of them have adopted codes of conduct/ethics in the public service, 13 of them have articles in the “Statut-General” that deals with ethical behaviour in the public service and 3 of them use other types of legislation such as Civil Service Law, Civil Service Act and Civil Service Code to enforce ethics in the public sector. The Chart bellow gives this summary.
The review of the codes of conduct and other documents has been carried out against 33 various values and principles of ethical conduct in the public service. The Chart below summarizes the top ten values reflected in the codes of conduct/ethics and civil service laws of the 36 African countries: In order of Prominence they are: Professionalism, integrity/honesty, responsibility, conflict of interest, impartiality/fairness, accountability, ethical conduct, transparency/openness/clarity, efficiency/effectiveness, excellence/effectiveness, and loyalty.

The above analysis shows that in most African countries there is congruency between the African charter of values and principles and the legal frameworks of public services at country level. Therefore, one would not expect difficulties or hesitation on the part of African countries to ratify the continental public service charter. The other thing the above illustrates is that if all that is required for African public service to be professional, ethical and accountable is an institutional legal framework, African governments would have very professional public services. But this seems not to be the case. While these institutional legal frameworks are necessary as operational and behavioral boundaries in the public service, there seem to be other determinants of professionalism, integrity, ethics and accountability. These need to be explored in the effort to promote professionalism, integrity, ethics, and accountability in the public service.

**What else will it take to instill integrity, ethics, professionalism and accountability in Africa’s Public service?**

**Leadership**

A good reputation of its leadership is one of the most important (I should say the most critical) possession of any public Service organisation. For the Public Service this is not only critical but also delicate because leadership in the public service is diffuse ranging from the top political executive (e.g the President of the country), Ministers, to the Senior managers (e.g Permanent Secretaries). A slight lapse in integrity, ethic, professionalism and accountability on the part of such top leadership or leadership at any level and any agency is likely to be followed by a lapse across the board if it is not quickly checked and corrected. As the saying goes fish rotes starting from the head. “It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation and only one bad one to lose it.” (Benjamin Franklin)
It is difficult to enforce ethics professionalism and accountability if the leadership of the organization has a question mark on their integrity. A number of African countries have passed through turbulent political times where integrity, ethics, professionalism and accountability especially on the part of leadership have not been of great concern. In some countries the survival for the fittest such political turbulence has engendered has made people including public servants learn and internalize survival instincts and behavior or coping mechanisms which over time look normal behavior but never the less unethical and unprofessional when judged using standards of accountability in the public service. Without a determined leadership in the Public service that is resolved to over a long term enforce strictly the standards, such survival instincts and coping mechanisms are likely to be passed on and on to future generations making it more and more difficult to ensure integrity, ethical behavior, professionalism and accountability in the public service. Clearly instilling these values and principles in the conduct of public servants in Africa is one of the prime duties and responsibilities of the top political and managerial leadership in the Public Service at both central and local government levels as well as in all Public agencies. It is my well-considered opinion that if the top political and managerial leadership do not want unethical and unprofessional behavior in the Public Service, they can successfully discourage it, the difficulties involved in the task notwithstanding. However, leadership itself must be up to the task both in the willingness to do it and in other various capabilities including knowledge, skills, attitudes, networks, mind-set, and overall governance environment. This brings our discussion to the second element of what it will take to instill integrity, ethics, professionalism and accountability in the public service in Africa, which is training.

Training

Many legal frameworks, many codes of conduct, many laws and regulations, cannot in themselves result in improvements in ethical conduct, professionalism and accountability. It needs that the public and public officials have specific dispositions, attitudes, mindsets, knowledge, and skills that guide the work of Public Service. Public Servants must know to the minutest detail what to deliver to the public and how to deliver as well as how to handle situations of failure or shortfalls in order to avoid the public losing trust. For this training in ethics is essential. The laws and codes that guide performance must be presented and explained to public officials. The consequences of lapses in following them must be made clear and the need to be decisive in applying the laws code and regulations must be inculcated in the mind of all. There is a tendency to believe that ethics and professionalism cannot be taught. This is wrong. I would propose that right from kindergarten, through primary schooling, secondary education and University training to induction courses after recruitment as well as in-service continuous training, ethics, professionalism, and accountability should be made compulsory irrespective of what course one takes. Ethical behavior, professionalism, and accountability know boundaries when it comes to domains and disciplines of study. They are necessary for medical students because these are the ones who will eventually deliver health services. They are necessary for engineering students because these are the ones who will eventually design and build bridges and skyscrapers which may or may not collapse on people because the construction standards are not followed. They are necessary for education students because these will become the teachers of tomorrow shaping the moral behavior of the entire society. For this training in ethics, professionalism and accountability should be mandatory in all training. The public also should be sensitized on what to expect from the public service, and how to demand accountability from the public servants.

Enforcement of laws, rules, regulations, codes etc

Rigorous enforcement of laws, rules, regulations, and codes of conduct should be top priority especially from political leaders and managers. To break down long learnt habits there has to be zero tolerance for lapses in ethics, professionalism
and accountability. The consequences of such lapses need to be certain, predictable, and immediate to serve as instruments of dissuasion against unethical, unprofessional behavior and lack of accountability. In many instances, in a number of countries, experience has shown that there are discriminatory applications of laws rules and regulations where by it is not easy to predict what will happen to who in cases of unethical behavior since laws, rules and regulations are applied in a discriminatory manner. Enforcement has to be see to be applied to all in a similar manner.

Societal values

When everything is said and done, unethical, unprofessional behavior as well as lapses in accountability become rampant partly because society in a way tolerates. There needs to be an empowered citizen that has values and norms which are in line with the requirements for ethical behavior in the public service, professionalism and accountability; an informed citizenry that is aware of its rights and obligations and ready to demand accountability for the public service.