
Good governance, service delivery and records: the African tragedy

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Abstract

A paper tasked to establish the relationship between records, good governance and service delivery, especially in Africa, runs into immediate definitional ambiguities. This is because good governance and service delivery mean different things to different African leaders. Moreover, even the most criminal and tyrannical regimes in Africa claim to be motivated by good governance and service delivery. This situation begs for a different definition of good governance based on shared universal values. The United Nations says that good governance is accountable, is run by consensus, is transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. Using this international benchmark this author draws a relationship between records and good governance based on these United Nations characteristics.

Keywords: Good governance, service delivery, United Nations, accountability, transparent, records, Africa.

1 Introduction

A paper designed to address “Records and Archives in Support of Good Governance and Service Delivery,” is long overdue in Africa for three major reasons. The first reason is the poor state of records management in Africa, the second reason is the poor state of governance and the third reason is the poor state of service delivery in Africa (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2005).

Research especially coming from the World Bank and the United Nations support the view that indeed developing countries are devilled by a poor culture of records management, governance and service delivery (Bannon 1999). The World Bank is of the view that records and archives support good governance and service delivery (Bannon 2000). How do records support good governance and service delivery? To answer this question one needs a definitional clarity of “good governance and service delivery.” While many African governments will readily admit that they have a record keeping problem, few will take responsibility for bad governance and poor service delivery. This is because most African leaders see governance and service delivery as political and records management as merely an administrative and not necessarily a political problem. On the other hand issues of governance and service delivery are seen as political and therefore, at the very heart of their pro-longed stay in positions of power.

The sensitive issue of governance and service delivery and their relationship to state power, state resources and widespread looting has led to a definitional deadlock on governance and service delivery. While poverty remains a big problem in Africa the political leadership of the continent would like its people to believe that their record on governance and service delivery is an excellent one. So, is there a definition of good governance and service delivery that is not so controversial and one that can help us to answer the primary question of how records support good governance and service delivery. An acceptable definition of good governance and service delivery is provided by the United Nations (UN).

2 The United Nations and good governance

According to the United Nations, governance means the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). From this one can infer that good governance refers to the expeditious implementation of decisions taken (UNESCAP 2006). Furthermore, the UN says that good governance has eight attributes, namely, participatory, consensus oriented, equitable and inclusive, responsive, effective and efficient, follows the rule of law, and is transparent and accountable. Participation is related to consensus orientation and both refer to the active involvement of citizens through established structures. An equitable and inclusive government treats everybody equally and invites everybody to the party. Responsive, effective and efficient are also related and refer to a government that executes its mandate seriously and expeditiously. A government that follows the rule of law gives no special treatment to anybody and subjects everybody to equal judicial treatment. A transparent and accountable government conducts its business openly and allows its citizens to audit its decisions freely.

There is a direct relationship between these attributes and records. The active participation of citizens in the affairs of their country is not something that should be said by word of mouth only but should be seen to be happening and the only way to evaluate that is if every activity is documented. Responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency are aspects of quality control and can only be measured from the records of a politically elected government. The proper rule of law should produce law enforcement records which should be able to qualify the absence or presence of anarchy or the rule of law. An elected government can only claim to be run by consensus if its records are periodically opened to the public for scrutiny.

3 Service delivery

Service delivery is an aspect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and a key indicator of poverty (Njunwa 2011). A government can only lay claim to have met its target of service delivery and reduced national poverty levels if it allows researchers and the citizens to interrogate its national service delivery records in an honest and transparent manner. In its third meeting of the Committee on Human Development and Civil Society held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (2005) pronounced that the effective delivery of public services is central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Thus, to ensure sustainable development and guarantee a progressive stride towards achieving many of the goals, widespread access to water, sanitation and other basic public services are proving to be fundamental preconditions (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2005). However, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (*ibid*:1) regrets that

African governments, like most countries in the developing world, face a daunting task in their attempts to provide effective and equitable public services. When looking at the various surveys available, it becomes quite apparent that basic infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) lags well behind the rest of the world. Poor quality and lack of widespread availability of services like electricity, water and sanitation, and roads are quite common in some SSA countries, and the average for the region is well below others. According to the UNDP's *Human Development Report*, in 2000, the population's access to safe water in SSA was only 44%, while the average for countries in East Asia and the Pacific (EAP)

stood at 67% and in Latin America and the Caribbean was reported to be 65%. Furthermore, it is amply clear that the challenge of providing basic water and sanitation persists as not much improvement has been made since the early 1990s. Even where water supply systems and sanitation facilities have been installed, they are still often inadequate, unsafe and in disrepair.

The provision of water and other basic services needs to be documented not just for the ruling party to boast about its service delivery record but also to allow international bodies like the United Nations to measure its progress towards the achievement of the MDGs.

4 Defining accountability

Accountability is the most compelling aspects of good governance because accountability encompasses all other UN attributes of good governance. Actually, it is proper to suggest that good governance equals accountability or that good governments are accountable. So, what is accountability, and can records support accountability. Or put another way; is there a relationship between records and accountability? This will be explained later, but it would seem that records are the raw materials of accountability and good governance.

Accountability has become the defining word of modern times. The existing literature defines accountability as a concept in ethics with several meanings. Yet, despite being a “buzz-word,” accountability is controversial. Ratner and Abrams (2001) have asserted that accountability has varying forms and means different things to different people. Kearns (1996:29), states that “the accountability environment is a constellation of forces, legal, political, socio-cultural, and economic that place pressure on all organizations and the people who work in them to engage in certain activities and refrain from engaging in others.”

In *The politics of accountability in the modern state*, Flinders (2001) further says progress in the definition of accountability has been undermined by a lack of definitional clarity. In *Rethinking democratic accountability*, Behn (2001) goes on to suggest that accountability has become a cliché and, like all clichés, is a substitute for thinking. Behn further states that at any given time there are always many forms of accountability competing with one another. Flinders (*ibid*) agrees that accountability is a multi-layered concept which can be formal or informal, can operate in a range of directions and can be conveyed through a number of codes of accountability. The definition of accountability is therefore, as varied, as wide, and as value-laden as the organisations that propound it. Organisations like Transparency International and the World Bank have now made accountability their chief mandate.

Political accountability attempts to limit elected officials propensity to the abuse of power by advancing national mechanisms that curb corruption (Kpunder 2000). These mechanisms try to instil ethical conduct in private and public institutions. Ethics or codes of conduct for members of any organisation are also one of the great pillars of accountability. A breach of ethics amounts to a breach of accountability and to an erosion of the public trust. Financial accountability focuses on the proper use of public and private funds, or on what is sometimes referred to as fiscal discipline. It does this through codified rules, procedures, and standards (Sheldon 1996). In the public sector, the Auditor-General holds all public institutions accountable for their use of public funds.

Administrative accountability recognises that in a government bureaucracy all members of public and private bodies need strong and explicit ethics to prevent bribery, conflict of interest, and other associated evils (Kpunder 2000). The carrying out of one’s task

can only happen in a regulatory environment that is characterised by adherence to the highest level of personal and professional conduct. This is necessary if the integrity of the administrative body to its constituents is to be sustained.

In its broadest usage, accountability related to governance therefore, would seem to refer to a wide spectrum of public expectations dealing with organisational performance, responsiveness, and even morality of government. In its other usages “accountability involves answering to a higher authority in the bureaucratic or inter-organizational chain of command.” Kearns has stated that the range of people to whom an account must be rendered includes not just superiors in the chain of command but also the general public, the news media, peer agencies, donors, and many other stakeholders

In *The politics of accountability in the modern state* (2001) Flinders, Rombek, and Dubnick (*ibid*) inform us that accountability is a process where a person or groups of people are required to present an account of their activities and the way in which they have or have not discharged their duties. Flinders (*ibid*) further presses this point home by saying that, accountability is the condition of having to answer to an individual or body for one’s actions. Rombek and Dubnick go on to tell us that, accountability is a relationship in which an individual or agency is held to answer for performance that involves some delegation of authority to act. This definition is similar to the one offered by the International Organization for Standardization on records and information. ISO 15489 (2001), defines accountability as, the principle that individuals, organisations, and the community are responsible for their actions and may be required to explain them to others.

5 Records and Accountability

The relationship between records and accountability is an old one (Thomassen 2001). However, the theory of archives reflects a deep awareness of accountability. In the first issue of the journal, *Archival Science*, Thomassen (2001) reminds us that records serve as agents of accountability and evidence. Thomassen further says,

trustworthy records contain reliable evidence of decisions taken, rights acquired and commitments made. Without records, no assessment can be made of whether individuals, private organizations and public organizations have actually carried out the actions and transactions that they had to execute, or whether they made these actions and transactions meet the criteria of efficiency, legitimacy or the principles of good governance, and whether they have done things which they were supposed to do. Reliable records make people and organizations accountable, within their own organizations, to each other, to suppliers and customers and to society (*ibid*:376).

In “Records and information: the neglected resource” Mnjama (2004) argues that records are a critical means by which organisations maintain accountability to the public. There have been countless cases in the world where records have been critical to the rendering of an account. The critical role of records in the prosecution of human rights violators during the Nuremberg trials is a case in point. In this special instance, records generated by the Nazis were used as evidence to prove that the persecution of Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals was not accidental but followed a state-sanctioned policy of racial cleansing and genocide (Lecomte 2001).

The importance of using records to hold rogue leaders to account is now gaining significant attention in archival discourse. Previously, archivists had preoccupied themselves with perfecting mechanisms of reliable and authentic records rather than directly addressing

issues of accountability. In “Should creating agencies keep records indefinitely,” (1996), Eastwood has remarked that the first “reason for establishing the first modern National Archives, the Archives de France, and the reason for thereafter establishing all the agencies given responsibility for the preservation of public records, at least in democratic states, has been to ensure citizens would have access to records of their rights. In time preservation of records in archival repositories has become one of the chief means by which citizens can learn how they are governed (*ibid*:259-60). In “An accountability framework for archival appraisal (2004) Sunderman states that “central to any concept of archival accountability is our understanding of the records we seek to preserve.

Over the past decade records have become critical sources of accountability in both small-scale and large-scale events and, in the process, have reshaped the world. On a smaller scale, records appear daily in the global press supporting lawsuits and investigations into fraud, theft, and corruption (Makgapha 2011). The anti-corruption campaigns, championed especially by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (Bannon 1999), and Transparency International all concur that proper management of records is key to accountability. Bannon (1999) supports this claim by informing us that,

institutional capacity weakens if civil service pay and conditions are inadequate and the processes that ensure transparency and good record keeping are eroded. Reducing fraud and corruption requires a willingness to install or re-establish sound systems and the capacity to operate them as intended. The basic principles of sound procurement are well known, as all donors adopt these principles to protect the projects they finance from corrupt practices. The challenge, however, is to extend these systems and best practices to cover all government procurement, irrespective of the source of funding. Corruption is fungible, so protecting individual projects may simply shift corrupt practices to other, less protected areas of government procurement.

Mnjama again says the lack of records management is directly linked to the persistence of corruption and fraud. Financial management controls recognise and acknowledge the fact that well managed records systems are vital to the success of most anti-corruption strategies. Records provide verifiable evidence to fraud that can lead investigators to the root of corruption. On a large scale, especially in Eastern Europe, records have been central to the understanding of repression and human rights violations in the former satellite states of Soviet Union. Priscilla Hayner (2006) has stated that a Spanish judge used archives from the Chilean truth commission to build a case against Pinochet. In Peru, truth commission records are now used for criminal prosecution by judicial authorities and also by lawyers representing both victims and perpetrators.

Mnjama (2004) has opined that “government records have a unique character that imposes special responsibilities on the agencies that preserve and manage them”. The Bundesarchiv or the Federal Archives of Germany and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) of the United States offer useful instructions. Both the Bundesarchiv and NARA have played critical roles in exposing former Nazi operations and members in the reparation of victims of Nazi Germany, and in national reconstruction and reconciliation. Using very elaborate indexing and finding aids, NARA records embarrassed many nations, especially those that claimed innocence in the Holocaust, including the United States itself, by proving that even though Nazi Germany carried the principal responsibility for the genocide, other nations that publicly condemned it were accomplices too. For example,

Bradsher (2002) tells us that NARA records reveal that the United States was aware that the Holocaust was taking place in Europe and could have done more to minimise the death of Jews, that the allies powerlessly attempted to prevent the theft, that the Vatican was involved in the Holocaust era assets as well and, finally, that Swiss banks profited unfairly from many dormant accounts of Jews, and only under international pressure did they concede to compensation.

6 Conclusion

An examination of how records and archives support good governance and service delivery is an important one. Good governance, service delivery and the alleviation of poverty can never take place unless proper records management systems are put in place in Africa's government structures. A poor record keeping culture is one of the many factors that accounts for poor governance, poor service delivery, under development and the general lack of accountability in Africa.

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