

BEYOND BEAN COUNTING: DIAGNOSTICS OF PUBLIC AGENCY GOVERNANCE

By *M J Balogun*

The author is a former senior adviser to the United Nations and a management consultant specialising in governance and public service reform



Good governance includes giving the electorate the services they need.

How can a government be sure that the goods and services produced by the public service are the same as those promised to the electorate?

The honest answer is: it can't. Were all the beans to be duly counted, the government would still not be able to say confidently that the delivery matched the expectations. Statutory mandates can be "rewritten" by way of the prevailing rules regime and sundry implementation glitches, unanticipated bureaucratic behaviour, external political interference and civil society apathy.

Tracking the interactions between wishes and horses – or between "marching orders" and compliance – is the remit of agency governance.

Although political and corporate forms of governance have been widely studied, not much has been done to delineate the boundaries and examine the dynamics of governance in public jurisdictions. In the broadest sense, governance has to do with the traditions, institutions and processes by which power in a country

is exercised for the common good. As the operational side of politics, it is concerned with the question of who gets what, when, and how. It warrants tracking the choices made by individuals and groups to assert and reconcile conflicting interests, seeks mandates to enact specific policies and programmes, and takes decisions that are at once legitimate, authoritative, binding and expressive of the people's collective will. Closely bound with governance are issues of sovereignty, individual liberty, constitutionalism, the rule of law, enfranchisement, elections and electioneering, and relations between state and society.

Democratic governance starts from the premise that the individual is born free. However, the state requires the individual to surrender a fraction of his/her sovereignty to a central authority, in order to stave off the mayhem that would likely result from unbridled enjoyment of rights. In federal, confederal or unitary systems, the central authority acts on everyone's behalf to dispose of matters beyond the capacity or legitimate sovereignty of the individual. The state exercises collective sovereignty to ensure that no right overrides or extinguishes another without just cause. In other words, the state acknowledges individuals' right to decide matters that concern none but themselves, but deems it expedient to intervene before the strong devour the weak. So it is that one is not at liberty to take another person's life, but the state can be authorised to execute a person found guilty of homicide. Only the state is authorised to raise an army; to take up arms against the state is treason. Only the currency issued by the state is legal tender; anything else is counterfeit and met with the severest penalty.

The essence of "good governance" is thus the exercise of the state's sovereign (specifically, legislative, executive and judicial) powers to attain those ends that are beyond the individual's capacity or legitimate claim, while simultaneously safeguarding the rights and liberties of

every individual. Good governance makes happen those things that the people want to see happen – such as peace, security, material prosperity, preservation of basic rights and freedoms, and efficient public services. What regular and reasonable humans don't want are civil strife, brigandage, rights violations, bribery and corruption, power or water shortages, sub-standard housing, environmental pollution, decaying infrastructure, gridlocks, declining education and healthcare, poverty and destitution.

Sharp as these distinctions between the desirable and the undesirable appear, human beings rarely, if ever, see eye to eye on how to usher in the former and keep the latter at bay. To impose a modicum of order, individuals associate together in political parties, or forge alliances around key issues. In the end, the party or the coalition that commands the support of the majority forms the government. This is where the real governance headache starts. The transition from electioneering to incumbency signals the dawn of a new awareness – that the politicians might have promised more than they or the bureaucracy could deliver. The essence of agency governance is, roughly, to interrogate the bureaucracy's capacity and motivation to fulfil their mandates in the face of formidable odds.

DIAGNOSTICS OF AGENCY GOVERNANCE

"Agency governance" is the tool by which the larger promise of good governance is fulfilled. It is distinguished by its location within a framework of rules, processes, values, and – for better or worse – bureaucratic politics. In contrast to the broad conceptualisation of governance as the traditions and institutions by which *power* is exercised, agency governance is the exercise of *authority*. In short, it deploys the professional competencies and applies the requisite management techniques to make those things happen that the government (as the people's representative) wants to see happen, and

foreclosing any contrary developments.

Of course, making good things happen is just one side of agency governance. The flip side is far more complex. Things rarely happen as planned or intended and the agency's mission risks being subverted by glitches, whether natural or man-made. Agency governance yields negative or undesirable dividends when the gear-linking processes – including practices, ethos and attitudes – move into neutral or reverse mode. The signs that an agency is idling in neutral include rigid interpretation and blind application of rules, failures to resolve internal contradictions within rules, and a preference for processes over results.



The transition from electioneering to incumbency signals the dawn of a new awareness – that the politicians might have promised more than they or the bureaucracy could deliver.

The reverse gear is engaged when

- performance standards are non-existent
- performance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are either weak or absent
- authority is over-centralised
- superiors refuse to delegate to subordinates, particularly to service-delivery agents
- communication breaks down frequently
- complex time-consuming processes are in vogue
- chaotic service perimeters are left unchanged

- rules are interpreted in a legalistic, opaque, or otherwise faulty manner
- employee morale and *esprit-de-cors* are on the decline.

An agency also risks wandering off-course when human frailties trigger frequent circumventions of due process and widespread violations of the service ethos. Sadly, it is the citizen who most frequently bears the brunt when organisations fail to operate as intended. A derailed agency is capable of anything except providing the quality of service the citizen requires. A police force that serves partisan political interests to the neglect of its statutory crime-fighting mandate has serious agency-governance issues. So does a traffic control agency whose staff is adept at extorting money from motorists but incapable of enforcing road discipline or clearing gridlocks. Racketeering (at the ports, in customs long rooms, or at vehicle licensing offices) is an unmistakable symptom of an agency-governance crisis.

Even when things are running smoothly, it is necessary to keep agency-governance practices under close and constant observation. As noted elsewhere¹, the dynamics of agency governance warrant frequent and systematic *diagnoses* of:

- organisational structure, mandate/mission, policies, medium- to long-range plans, strategies and tactics (as well as the actors' cognitive and perceptive interpretation of same)
- the interface between political power and bureaucratic authority (that is, between political functionaries and career managers, between partisanship and professionalism, and between political calculations and rational, fact-supported, evidence-based decisions)
- decision-making processes (with particular reference to the grades of officials authorised to take discretionary middle-management decisions on wide-ranging subjects, especially contract awards, budget allocation, staff deployment and ➤

discipline, eligibility for and access to service, and delegation of authority to headquarters and field staff)

- the clarity and consistency of rules, as well as the frequency of compliance and deviation (including the public service code of ethics on professionalism, non-partisanship, impartiality, accountability, transparency, integrity)
- links between formally enacted rules and day-to-day application within formal and informal networks (i.e. the tension between the public service rules and internal bureaucratic politics)
- the effectiveness of conflict resolution, grievance handling and diversity management mechanisms
- internal and external accountability processes (including the accountability of service-delivery agents to their supervisors, to political cadres, parliament, the judiciary, the auditor-general, the ombud, office colleagues, service beneficiaries, tax-payers and the general public)
- the service-delivery systems and ethos in place, as well as the standards and indicators of “quality service” established within each agency
- mechanisms for customer/beneficiary/citizen evaluation of goods and services produced by the agency.

A variety of *methodologies* are needed to conduct these agency-governance diagnostics, including:

- a literature review, including scholarly articles, ministerial organisation charts and mission statements, each ministry’s budget, annual reports, reports of the civil service commission, ombud reports; ministry staff lists, government circulars, civil service personnel and financial rules, monitoring and evaluation reports, and other secondary sources
- the design, testing and administration of at least two survey questionnaires: one to be completed by a representative sample of political functionaries and career officials, including superiors and



A derailed agency is capable of anything except providing the quality of service the citizen requires. A police force that serves partisan political interests to the neglect of its statutory crime-fighting mandate has serious agency-governance issues. So does a traffic control agency whose staff is adept at extorting money from motorists but incapable of enforcing road discipline or clearing gridlocks.

subordinates; the other by external clients, including opinion leaders, civic actors, umbrella organisations representing each ministry’s clients, trade unions, chambers of commerce, employers’ federations, etc.; plus follow-up personal interviews with selected respondents

- focus group interviews
- a record of successful and failed cases in agency governance
- direct observation at service perimeters (e.g., passport or vehicle licensing office) to capture wasteful

or time-consuming processes and the attitude of service delivery agents to their “customers”.

EXTENDING THE FRONTIERS

Agency governance was identified as a distinct field at a previous meeting of the Pan-African Conference of Public Service Ministers. However, it has only recently begun to receive the attention of African governments and public service leaders. Tanzania is one of the countries currently engaged in the review and improvement of agency governance practices.

The study of agency governance has been hindered by the lack of a universally acceptable definition. It may also have stalled due to the perception of agency governance review as an inquisitorial exercise. This came out anecdotally at a panel convened by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) in February 2015. One eminent panellist aptly observed that career officials tended to be wary of “external assessments” of their performance and advised that agency governance practices be approached from a less threatening angle. He particularly recommended replacing the word “assessment” with “diagnostics”. Agency-governance diagnostics should aim to collaborate with all stakeholders in the search for answers to pressing problems, rather than coming from outside to find fault with those inside the agency.

It is gratifying to note that the ACBF not only acknowledged the merits of agency-governance diagnostics as an area of priority but also decided to incorporate it in its new strategic plan for 2016–2020. Our knowledge of the subject will surely grow as empirical studies yield valuable data on agency governance processes, practices, and culture. [NA](#)

NOTE

1. Balogun, MJ. 2003. “Performance management and agency governance for African development: Search for common cause on excellence in the public service”, *DPMF Occasional Paper No. 9*. Addis Ababa: Development Policy Management Forum