The New Public Governance in Developing Countries

A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

The paper seeks to contribute to existing efforts aimed at rethinking the preoccupation of mainstream public management theory with structural reforms in the developing world. Drawing insights from theories of public organization and recent global experiences, the paper argues that the challenge for public sector reform in the developing world is to embrace a holistic view of development management that takes into consideration the nature of power as well as the fragility of the state in most developing countries, especially Africa. The focus of the discussion is on examining how public sector reform in post-conflict societies can be influenced by critical factors such as environmental complexity and institutional legitimacy in the delivery of public services and the management of development. The key implication of the discussion is that the framing public sector reform needs to move beyond the narrow preoccupation with the structural configuration of service delivery.

Introduction

The paper discusses the new public governance in the developing world through a conceptual framework that takes into consideration the ecology or operating environment of the public sector in post-conflict societies and the constraints of fragile states in the management of development. The analysis builds on on-going efforts to rethink the preoccupation of mainstream development management scholarship and practice over the past three decades with the search for administrative panaceas in the developing world. One of the central lessons that emerged from the experimentation of the recent past is that development management often requires an appropriate fit between the operating environment and the structures and processes of the machinery of government.

While the present discussion focuses on ecological or environmental variables of public sector reform, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the structural configuration of the public sector and the various designs of the machinery of governance. Indeed, the configuration of a government's machinery has immense impact on the effective pursuit of public policy objectives and the performance of required tasks. Organizations shape policy implementation or service delivery processes and outcomes. The organizational elements of public management consist of government departments, central agencies, crown corporations, and a range of semi-autonomous special operating agencies such as regulatory, revenue-collection and service delivery agencies.

Some of the critical elements of public sector reform in the developing world relate to the design of organizations for development management. This includes factors like determining the nature of layers in an organizational hierarchy, the number of departments or divisions, etc (Mintzberg, 1983). Other structural issues in public sector reform relate to the devolution of administrative authority (Boston, 2000). Within this framework, one finds discussions about the role and nature of special operating agencies (Thomas and Wilkins, 1997), the distinct

characterises of public enterprises and regulatory agencies, and the recent pendulum swing towards privatization and partnerships (Conteh and Ohemeng, 2009; Henderson, 1995).

Another dimension in the framework of devolution of administrative authority is partnership with the non-profit sector (Hall & Reed, 1998; Brock and Banting, 2001). In general, partnership models of public management are increasingly taking on a multi-actor and multi-sector character (Sproule-Jones, 2000; Boase, 2000). Underlying this trend is the complexity of engaging and navigating the labyrinth of competing interests and perspectives in the now extended and porous boundaries of the public sector (Howlett, 2000). This phenomenon illustrates the importance of framing public sector reform beyond the preoccupation with structural and technical configuration of service delivery.

The present discussion is thus premised on the fact that the machinery of government is not a conservative, stabilizing structure that functions to consolidate a given status quo. Rather it should be directed towards institutionalizing a culture committed to self-diagnosis and institutional learning in societies characterized by rapid change, social tensions and deep complexity. Viewed from this lens, public sector reform for effective service delivery is intrinsically political as well as technical. Moreover, it serves both symbolic and instrumental purposes.

The effectiveness of public management and service delivery in the context of fragile post-conflict states is fundamentally about restoring the legitimacy and capacity of the state to serve as the appropriate conduit for pursuing society's collective developmental aspirations. In light of the existing social tensions latent (and sometimes manifest) in post-conflict societies as well as the ambivalent attitude among citizens toward the public sector, institutional reform aimed at improving public management in such societies must be able to identify as well as engage the deeply ingrained assumptions and mental pictures that influence how citizens understand and engage the state's power and policy interventions.

This paper argues, therefore, that public sector reform in post-conflict societies should be directing at cultivating 'system thinking' in public management. 'Systems thinking' focuses on the ecological or environmental variables of public management. From the analytical lens, public management can be seen as a process of formulating and implementing shared visions of socioeconomic change. There are several advantages attached to this analytical lens: Firstly, shared visions of governance created through systems approach to public management serve as a basis for enhancing social cohesion and commitment to organizational purposes among public officials and target populations. This way it serves a tension management and nation-building function. Secondly, shared vision of governance can create a clearer sense of purpose and direction within the public sector in the attainment of public policy goals. Thirdly, it can serve as a means of coordinating and controlling the plethora of agencies involved in public service delivery, thereby providing the integrative "glue" of policy implementation within the machinery of government, and between the state and society.

It is significant to recall that public management, both as a concept and practice, is nested within the institutions of the state, and serves as the main vehicle for accomplishing public policy goals. Therefore, the capacity and effectiveness of public management is inextricably intertwined with the legitimacy of the state as the embodiment of a given society's aspirations and values.

Thus, in order to appreciate the imperatives of cultivating 'systems thinking' in public sector reform in post-conflict societies, one should first of all understand the constraints and challenges of the state in much of the developing world, especially in Africa. This is particularly significant for post-conflict societies.

Conceptualizing the Modern State in Africa

The modern state in general consists of a set of institutions made up of rules, structures, norms and processes geared toward the collective pursuit of a society's developmental goals and aspirations. The main characteristics of any modern state, therefore, are largely defined by its relations with the society which it reflects, represents and seeks to manage (Leftwich, 2008). In the developing world, the articulation of specific societal goals and objectives of socioeconomic and political progress, along with the preferred instruments for achieving them, constitute what Ferrell Heady (2006) refers to as the "narrative of development". The narrative of development has been the preoccupation of politics and governance in Africa over the past six decades (since independence) and has made the state the main conduit of collective action.

The narrative of development provided the rationale behind the general inclination of the state during the post-colonial years towards strong executives (relative to the legislative and judicial arms of government) and a high degree of public sector centralization, often in the administrative capital of a given country. It even provided a justification for political authoritarianism and bureaucratic paternalism in the developing world (Leftwich, 1995). The general assumption was that without strong executives, centralized public sector and a monopoly over public policy formulation and implementation by often invisible bureaucrats and technocrats, the task of rapid economic and social transformation to catch up with the rest of the world, or at least replicate the experience of industrialized countries, would be impossible or extremely difficult.

The narrative of development was not just the obsession of African governments but also constituted the central thread in the fabric of the international discourse of development. Since the end of World War II, the belief in the possibility of replicating the experience of industrialized countries among newly "minted" independent states in the developing world (Chang, 2002; Kirkpatrick, Clarke and Polidano, 2002). For instance, perspectives such as modernization theory, espousing the possibility of expediting the rapid socioeconomic transformation of developing countries through predetermined and universal stages of development, became pervasive and rather ruthless ideologies or articles of faith (Rustow, 1970). An elaborate infrastructure of multilateral and bilateral development assistance with a plethora of sometimes suffocating aid conditionalities gradually emerged and became increasingly sophisticated over the years. Equipped with ever changing fads and panaceas of development, billions of dollars in all shapes and sizes of development assistance – financial, technical, human and material – were injected into the developing world, especially Africa, over the past six decades.

Underlying this trend, a significant characteristic of the international narrative and ideology of development has been that the visible paraphernalia of statehood in the

administrative capitals of African countries were assumed to be the legitimate conduits of development. However, a closer look at the state in much of Africa reveals an unsettling reality. Often, for much of the rural peasantry and urban poor, the institutions of the state and its preoccupations with development management activities in the administrative capital is a distant phenomenon – an exogenous construct still bearing the relics of a detached and post-colonial entity (Young, 1994). Thus the mandates, structures, and policy ambitions of the modern state in Africa exist in tension with the "ghosts" and "fossils" of its pre-colonial society. Much of the sophisticated "rituals" of public policy governance in most of these countries are noticed by, and relevant to, only a minute segment of the population – often that privileged thirty percent of population who are literate and/or urban. The peasant majority seems disengaged from the preoccupations of the governing elite with the ideology of development, seemingly content to being left undisturbed in their traditional ways. Moreover, the political elite tend to be socially and culturally separated from the citizenry (on whose behalf millions of international aid dollars are handled), except during election times when the votes of the peasantry make them objects of attention.

Hence, underneath the thin veneer of the often passionate narratives of national development are the fissures of a dual reality – one for the vast army of the rural poor and urban peasantry, and another for the tiny fraction of the privileged few in society. There tends to be a yawning gap between the structural and formal edifice of the modern state in Africa and the everyday realities of survival. This yawning gap can be interpreted in number of ways, ranging from sheer apathy and indifference to deep distrust of state power and its use (Migdal, Kohli & Shue, 1994). In short, after decades of independence there is still a persistent gulf between the "state" and "nation" in much of Africa. Within this context, the public sector (including the machinery of development management) in Africa tends to be overly insulated from society or the target groups they are supposed to serve.

Another characteristic of the modern state in Africa is that although governments in the region perceive themselves as responsible for addressing the problems of their countries' fragile societies and economies, the machinery of development management is typically lacking in the requisite competences such as the financial, human and organizational resources and know-how to pursue developmental goals. Some of the deficiencies of the public sector in Africa include low human resource pool with financial and organizational management skills, and administrative orientations that privilege status quo maintenance over reform and change (Heady, 1996).

Another pathology of the public sector in much of Africa is the discrepancy between form and content (Leftwich, 2008). In particular, one finds elaborate set of laws establishing procedures of public policy implementation, service delivery and accountability, but these laws are often not followed or enforced. For instance, governments adopt personnel regulations for the public sector, but they are often ignored. Reporting or performance measurement procedures are often established but they tend to be grossly inadequate to actually measure the success or failure of programs goals. This disparity between form and content is a reflection of the deeper fragility of the state – a detached artificial paraphernalia of centralized power rather than an organic reflection and projection of the values and aspirations of nationhood and nation-building.

In spite of the deficiencies of the public sector and the yawning distance between the formal institutions of the state and the daily reality of the vast peasantry, the narratives of development provides the rationale and justification for collective action, with the modern state as the main conduit. Fortunately, in recent years, the characteristics of the public sector as a conduit of development management have been gradually coming under closer scrutiny (Burnell, 2008; Gould, 2005; Harrison, 2005). The accumulated experience of international development cooperation over a period of five decades have led to many questions about the capacity and legitimacy of the paraphernalia of statehood and development management in Africa and the developing world. Some of the questions have focused on diagnosing and addressing existing technical and managerial deficiencies in the public sector. Others have focused on redesigning the structures of the machinery of government aimed at decentralization and de-concentratation of public service delivery.

Over the past decade, international donors, led by the World Bank's new framework of poverty reduction strategy (PRS), have shifted their attention toward strengthening the central institutions of development policy and program coordination in aid recipient countries, usually within or under the office of the president. The rationale is that a strong centralized policy coordination unit can address endemic institutional fragmentation and enhance the framework of accountability for implementation processes and outcome. It should be noted, however, that the often unmentioned motivation for the promotion of such central units is that they provide an institutional forum where international donors can coordinate their aid own programs, and also influence (for better or worse) the formulation, implementation and evaluation of development policies and programs. One should not rush into quick judgment and dismiss such efforts as illegitimate, or as undermining sovereignty per se. It is worth remembering that the long catalogue of institutional fragmentation, corruption and low technical competence in aid recipient-countries, among other things, have frustrated the ambitions and hopes of many well-intentioned international donors.

The problem, however, is that there seems to be rather conflicting objectives of institutional reforms – often promoting decentralization and centralization at the same time, for instance. More importantly, while there has been a laudable recognition of the weaknesses in the paraphernalia of statehood in Africa, the discussion of public sector reform has had the tendency to be narrowly focused on the structural and technical dimensions of public management. This often comes at the expense of a deeper and broader discussion about the very legitimacy of the state itself and how the public sector – as an instrument of the state – can advance the goal of a society's collective pursuit of their developmental aspirations. This paper argues that the discourse of public sector reform in Africa needs to broaden its lens of analysis to include the wider strategic environment (or the ecology) within which administrative action is nested.

Before engaging in this discussion, however, it is important to provide a historical overview of the efforts undertaken over the past few decades to reform the public sector in developing countries, especially in Africa. Following that, the discussion examines public sector reform in the developing world through a conceptual framework that takes into consideration the ecology of the public sector in post-conflict societies. The main argument emanating from this analysis is that public sector reform aimed at enhancing the state capacity for development

management requires an appropriate fit between the task environment and the structures and processes of the machinery of government.

A Historical Review of Public Sector Reform in Africa

Public administration as a discipline and practice in developing countries has seen major "paradigms" or 'fads' (Ayee, 2006; Balogun and Mutahaba 1991). Among these have been trends such as pragmatic institutionalism of the 1960s and on to the 1970s; the new public management (NPM) of the 1980s and 1990s; and more recently, governance (referring to the trend towards self-sustaining networks by which the state engages in sharing power and administrative responsibility with non-state actors) (Mutahaba, 1989; Adamolekun, 1991; Kaul, 1996; Macgregor et al, 1998; Olowu, 1999).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was on developing administrative states equipped with all the institutional paraphernalia of a fully developed bureaucracy able to undertake large scale transformation of society (Waldo, 1984). Africa's post-colonial history of centralization and bureaucratization reflected the growing responsibilities of newly independent governments and the maturation of young nation-states seeking to expedite the process of social and economic change. The legacy of centralization, bureaucratization and control inherited from their colonial masters was taken to a new height with ideological vengeance. The downside of the expansionist enterprise can be found in the institutional rigidities of development management. Power shifted to public servants and the impersonality of the bureaucracy choked compassion and suffocated economy and common sense. All these pathologies were worsened by endemic patronage as successive governments crowded the bureaucracy with inept and incompetent political cronies and kinsmen.

As Africa's external debt mounted and the promised socioeconomic change failed to materialize, governments were soon forced to start looking for alternatives. The emergent new public management in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s was thus a direct assault on centralization and bureaucracy, even though its prescriptions were fraught with contradictions (Conteh, 2009). Two sets of (contradictory) ideas inform NPM: public choice theory and managerialism. African government were counselled to reign in their public sector by giving greater authority and capacity for policy oversight through increased centralization, coordination and control measures. Meanwhile, managerial prescriptions were counselling radical decentralization, deregulation, contracting-out and privatization so as to allow for greater agency discretion and exploration of alternative service delivery mechanisms like public-private partnerships.

Moreover, under the NPM paradigm, structural adjustment programs targeted Africa's bureaucracies as being too large, complex and slow (Conteh, 2007; World Bank, 1995). The NPM reforms had two separate but related phases: First, there were the reforms from the 1980s to the early 1990s, focusing mainly on macroeconomic stability and debt reduction. Another variant of reforms under NPM emerged in the mid-1990s and lasted until about 2000, focusing on performance management.

Generally speaking, the administrative orthodoxy under NPM recommends that governments contract out service delivery to competing private firms or NGOs; or provide funds to NGOs, community groups and private firms administering social services or public works projects (Burnell and Randall). Other measure include setting up performance based agencies with managerial autonomy but accountable for outputs and outcomes. Performance indicators provide yard sticks for measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of such agencies. The decentralization of political authority to territorial units of government was also prescribed with the promise that it will contribute to the state's capacity for locally-relevant program development and implementation. Public policies can be made more responsive to local needs when politicians and bureaucrats are accountable to local communities.

The NPM-inspired reforms were the most aggressive set of institutional reforms in Africa's post-colonial history. Countries in Africa were advised to make their bureaucracy into more lean, effective and efficient central government machineries. In this regard, the central bureaucratic machinery in the administrative capital would focus on policy development, regulation and formulating mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating programs. Furthermore, the governments would explore alternative service delivery mechanisms such as outright privatization, outsourcing or, at least, public-private partnership arrangements.

Unfortunately, the empirical evidence suggests that the results of the NPM-inspired structural adjustment policies of the Bretton Woods institutions (notably the World Bank) compounded the continent's predicament of institutional weakness by drastically shrinking the state (J.C. Roos, 1996). Development Plans were abruptly terminated, resource allocations for social development were drastically cut, and the already ill-equipped administrative machineries were further stripped of human and material resources, inflicting a lost decade in the continent. The outcome of these reforms was the decapitation of already weak and hollow states plagued by a crisis of administrative capacity and political legitimacy.

More recently (since the turn of the millennium), the governance paradigm has softened the rhetoric of privatization and market-based mechanisms of service delivery. This wave of reforms picked up pace after 2000, emphasizing improvements in service delivery through mechanisms of citizen participation and collaborative implementation. While the post-millennium reforms still have elements of the NPM paradigm they draw more heavily on the governance perspectives, tending to focus on the improvement of responsiveness to, and participation of, citizens in the process of public service delivery (Ayee, 2004). In particular, governance emphasizes decentralization, devolution and state-society partnerships, with horizontal structures of decision making and accountability in which ordinary citizens will gain greater ownership over the process of development management (World Bank, 2009).

The focus of public sector reform in Africa has been on a narrow range of structural tinkering covering a plethora of prescriptions that include decentralization, privatization, deregulation, co-production; and public-private partnerships (Hyden, 1983; Lewis, 1998, Ayee, 2001). One of the reasons why these reforms failed was because they were seen in technical and managerial terms rather than in political and institutional terms. Indeed, public administrations are embedded in complex and interdependent systems (Levy, 2004: 11).

For instance, decentralization (apparently the most popular and ubiquitous reform) seeks to increase the operational autonomy of line managers and agencies, leaving only broad policy

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guidelines to be worked out at the centre (Smith, 1985; Rondinelli, 1989). While given lip-service by the political leadership, decentralization, however, is viewed with deep suspicion for several reasons, not least of which include objections at higher political levels for fear of dislocating the nation by accentuating precarious social and political imbalances within the nation-state. Moreover, there are worries among the political leadership that inexperienced local leaders can misuse scare resources.

Furthermore, local leaders are not necessarily supportive of democratic principles and may thus exploit devolved authorities to deepen power imbalances at the local level (Ayee). Even within the bureaucracy, decentralization is sometimes viewed with a jaundiced eye by senior public servants in the administrative capitals. For example, the inclusion of clients in policy-making is relatively rare and runs up against professional hostility in public bureaucracies. Moreover, decentralization is frequently undermined by a range of other practical concerns such as central government controls (in part owing the logical contradiction of NPM ideas), fiscal dependence of local jurisdictions on central governments, poorly qualified staff, administrative incapacity, and global forces that restrict the ability of local governments to respond to local needs (Ayee).

Given the plethora of public sector reforms over the past four decades (including the recent focus on governance), a few questions about administrative capacity in the developing world are worth exploring. In the wake of all these reforms, how should we approach capacity building for development management in Africa? Ministries, departments and agencies are not self-contained entities but, rather, are part of a larger institutional framework. These organizations are thus expected to develop governance arrangements for their engagement with the strategic environment within which they operate (Ayee, 2006).

Given that the structural features of public organizations affect the nature of development policy planning and implementation, how can public administration in developing countries position the state for a more strategic and holistic development management that could bring about socioeconomic transformation of their societies? Moreover, since the current model of development management in much of Africa operates within the framework of democratic accountability and participation, how can development management be endowed with the institutional infrastructure for an effective engagement between the public sector and its operating environment − society? These questions about administrative capacity for development management are explored in the next section.

Public Sector Reform as Capacity-Building for Adaptation and Learning

According to the UNDP (2003), administrative capacity involves the ability of public sector to perform functions, find solutions to problems and achieve society's articulated goals. Hope (2006) defines capacity as the competency of individuals, public sector institutions, private sector entities, civil society organizations, and local communities to collectively engage in activities in a sustainable manner that permits the achievement of beneficial goals such as the effective service delivery and economic development. The Canadian International Development Agency (2000) provides a similar definition of capacity that refers to the abilities, skills, understandings, attitudes, values, relationships, behaviors, motivations, resources and conditions

that enable individuals, organizations and networks to collectively achieve the tasks they have set out to accomplish. Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff define administrative capacity as the "evolving combination of attributes, capabilities, and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt, and perform." A "system" in this regard is operationalized as a network of organizations and individuals.

The above definitions share an emphasis on the collective – the assemblage of individuals and organizations working jointly (often in contestation and cooperation) towards a shared goal. In particular, the notion of "system" raises significant considerations for the present discussion about public sector reform in post-conflict societies. First, it refers to the complexity and inter-connectedness of the organizational elements associated with administrative capacity (which eliminates reductionist public sector reform efforts as simplistic). Second, capacity can be understood as a latent qualities (consisting of attitudes, values, relationships, behaviors, motivations etc), which are often only visible when actors exercise them to achieve some result. Third, administrative capacity and its associated elements are best seen as a function of the agency of a country's actors, not merely the actions of international donors or any other well-intentioned partners.

Four core capabilities have been identified that a system should develop and integrate to achieve collective policy purpose in development management (Brinkerhoff, 2010): first, the capability to commit and engage; second, the capability to carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks; third, the capability to attract and maintain domestic and international support; and fourth, the capability to adapt and self-renew. From a system perspective, therefore, administrative capacity can be identified at three levels of analysis – the individual, organizational (structural) and institutional (politics and policies as enabling environment). A central thread running through all three levels of the system perspective of public management is an implicit recognition of the need to integrate politics and administration – more especially, to situate public sector reform within a broader context of political culture (Farazmand, 2006; Klingner, 2006). This recognition provides a useful guard against wholesale transfer of packaged institutions as panaceas or "best practice" (Snyder, Berry and Mavina, 1996).

This paper builds on the above insight by advancing what it refers to as 'systems thinking'. Actually, systems thinking can be traced back early schools of thought in public management. It emerged as a reaction to frameworks of public management that facilitated administrative control and organizational stability through machine-like pursuit of rational goals that focused on the smooth internal workings of agencies. Two predominant schools of thought promoting such perspectives were the scientific management and administrative management schools (Taylor, 1967; Gulick, 1990; Weber, 1946). The fundamental premise of each school is the assumption of rationality about organizational behaviour, agencies' engagement with their external environments. According to both schools, the best way to control environmental uncertainty was for agencies to establish clear lines of authority from top to bottom, delineate a distinctive division of labour among departments within an agency, and delegate power and authority to administrators commensurate with their responsibilities. Both schools viewed organizational effectiveness and performance as enhanced by systematizing work processes and standardizing work tasks.

Systems thinking was originally championed by two schools of thought: the human relations school and the natural systems perspective (Follet, 1920; Bernard, 1938; Mayo, 1933). These schools of thought were a direct reaction to what was perceived as the excesses of

scientific management and administrative management. Both schools ushered in what became administrative notions that value personal and collective adjustment to environmental contingencies, cooperative behaviour and social cohesion. Although the focus of both schools was on internal processes within the agency, their contribution shaped ideas in public management that viewed public agencies as cooperative systems intrinsically embodying non-rational adjustment processes.

Another perspective – the structural functional perspective followed on the heels of the human relations school and the natural systems perspective in the 1940s and 1950s (Merton, 1949; Selznick, 1953; Gouldner, 1954; Blau, 1963). The work of scholars in this research tradition directed the most enduring assault on the bureaucratic tendencies of administrative management and scientific management that are now seen as pathologies. In particular, structural functionalism critiques the dysfunctional tendencies of organizations that are inward-focused. While this school developed no explicit theory of intra-organizational effectiveness per se, nevertheless, it marked the beginnings of a focus on how organizations interact with their external environment.

By the onset of the 1960s, formal modeling of environmental variables in organization theory led to the emergence of what is now referred to as the open systems perspectives (Thompson, 1967). Open systems perspective focus on keeping public agencies viable by balancing the imperatives of internal coherence and external adjustment. Such was the influence of the structural functional perspective and open systems analysis that subsequent schools of thought factored environmental variables in their analysis of organizational behaviour. For instance, human resources theories of public management were mindful of the complexity of human agency since personnel were functions of their cultures whose attitudes, values, motivations and performance were inextricably intertwines with their formal and informal ties to the environment (Maslow, 1954; Argyris, 1957; McGregor, 1964). Other perspectives such as total quality management theory (Demmings and Juran) and organizational culture and leadership theory operate from the same premise of the inextricable link between organizations and their operating environment.

A detailed analysis of these schools of thought is beyond the scope and purpose of the present work (and has already been done elsewhere (see Tompkins, 2007 and Denhardt and Denhardt, 2004, for instance). What is worth noting, however, is that public management as a discipline and practice should be understood as inextricably bound to, and influenced by, the institutional conditions of a given operating environment. Therefore, the legitimacy and capacity of the public sector as a whole, and the strategic of individual public agencies are based on environmental characteristics (Young-Hyman, 2008). The practice of public management is characterized by processes of mutual adjustment among individuals, agencies, interest groups bound by shared rules and norms that constrain behaviour as well as provide incentives for joint action (Fox and Miller, 2007). The environmental conditions of public management are rooted in societal culture, and the actions of agencies are constrained by path-dependent social processes.

A key characteristic of systems thinking in public management is that it focuses on the forms of network governance and administrative mechanisms that enable governments to be more constructively involved in their economies and societies. Through the government's involvement in and connectedness to society and the economy, non-governmental actors, including the private sector, as organized interests, can be structurally integrated into

collaborative policy implementation processes in ways that enhance a capacity for constant adaptation and learning.

For fragile, post-conflict societies, public management is fundamentally about enhancing the capacity and legitimacy of public institutions or the machinery of the state to provide basic security, physical infrastructure (like roads, water and electricity) along with social services like health and education for its citizens. But these are only the foundational social, institutional and physical infrastructure of development. In a broader and more dynamic sense, public management is also about leveraging the creative ingenuity of a people and empowering them to serve as agents of change.

Development is best defined as continuous improvement in material and social conditions of a society through new or better ways of doing things that create or add value. In this context, the challenge for public management is to leverage the latent capacities of individuals and regions to use their talents and resources, exploit opportunities and adapt to the imperatives of exogenous and endogenous forces of change. Public management in developing countries should position the state a facilitator of economic and social processes. It involves the building and nurturing of the institutional fabric of economic and social entrepreneurship.

The macro-institutional environment of development consists of the technical, legal, financial, commercial infrastructure that serves as the "backbone" of a functioning system. So also are the educational, health and physical infrastructure. But even more important for dynamic societies geared towards change are the social linkages and the informal interactions between macro-institutions and problem-solving networks of innovation, entrepreneurship and adaptation. These networks often manifest themselves in dynamic interactions among key actors within particular regions and sectors. It is this set of civic actors (in the economic and social sectors) that provide the collaborative and organically integrated ecosystem conducive to creativity, exchange and learning.

Two significant properties of systems thinking for strategic development management are as follows: first, public agencies' ability to maintain organizational coherence in engaging and coordinating economic and social actors; and second, the relative policy autonomy of implementing agencies from rigid and stifling top-down over-centralized processes, on the one hand, and bottom-up special interest penetration and parochial political pressures on the other. Public sector reform should therefore be aimed at building a governance architecture that fosters organization coherence within the public sector, and the embedded autonomy of the latter within society. Such a vision of institutional change transcends and integrates the various levels of government (central and local) as well as fosters a framework of network governance.

Institutional reform for capacity building positions to state to be organically embedded within the clusters of market actors (entrepreneurs), knowledge producers and civic interests which can be leveraged into formal mechanisms of engagement and collaborative forms of governance. Public management in this context relate more to cultivating capacities for institutional "co-production" between the public, private and civic sector as well as across levels of government. Public sector reform in this sense is increasingly about collaborative or multi-organizational arrangements for solving socioeconomic problems.

Implications for Public Sector Reform

The long heritage and accumulated experience of development management research and practice can be classified into two major perspectives – closed and open systems approaches to

public management. The closed systems perspective embraces a Weberian vision of public management that projects strictly technical and rational views of public organizations. The complexity of environmental forces, the interests and strategies of competing actors, the maze of multi-layered systems and the imperatives of politics seem to not bother the scholars and practioners holding this view. For them, development management is simply an exercise in planned and technocratic control in a relatively serene environment. One is reminded of ship captain on the high seas who preoccupies himself with intricacies of navigational tools when the most potent challenge confronting the crew was a leaking vessel.

The open systems perspective of development management, broadly defined, explicitly or implicitly incorporates environmental analysis. Whether focusing on the whole agency, or individuals within the agency, their fundamental premise is that organizations are living organisms operating dynamic and often fragile environments. This does not necessarily amount to a complete rejection of the role of rational planning, but rather, scholars are more willing to view the pursuit of policy goals as often characterized by spontaneous, adaptive responses to environmental threats and opportunities. From this perspective, public management in the developing world is a process of constantly finding an appropriate fit between the task environment and mandate, strategy and structure of public agencies, thereby assuring continued organizational adaptation to maintain effectiveness and legitimacy. The complexity of managing in post-conflict societies puts the above-mentioned imperatives in sharper focus.

The discourse and practice of public sector reform in the developing world has often focused on the structural dimension of public management with a rather static orientation toward organizational performance. Much of the debates over centralization and/or decentralization, for instance, have created a false dichotomy given that it is often difficult to lay out universal laws or panaceas about the best form of structural designs. The laws of the situation usually determine which structural approach is most appropriate. Moreover, complex organizations can manifest degrees of centralization (often in articulating policy goal and facilitating wider institutional coordination) and decentralization (in setting policy objectives and ensuring legitimate and effective program delivery at the frontlines).

It is also the argument of this paper, therefore, that the discourse of public sector reform in the developing world has become too dominated by 'managerial' concepts such as performance (in the narrow sense of efficiency) and structural dimensions of organizational performance (mostly biased towards decentralization, downsizing and PPP). Important as these considerations are, challenge of public sector reform in post-conflict societies is to develop visions of governance capacity building that emphasize process reforms and a search for dynamic conceptualizations of performance that reflect the complexities of the strategic environment of development management.

Thus, a seriously overlooked but critical dimension of public management is the capacity of agencies for adaptation, learning and change. In fluid and dynamic societies recovering from the ravages of war and still seeking to establish the legitimacy of the state for collective action the public sector needs to cultivate a culture committed to continuous self-diagnosis, learning and change. Public agencies in their natural state are conservative, stabilizing forces that function to resist rather than facilitate change.   This tendency has led to the caricature of bureaucratic organizations being viewed as moribund and static.

For instance, in post-conflict Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, characterized by rapid change and deepening complexity, public sector reform should be about instituting organizational culture committed to self-diagnosis and institutional learning. Instead of merely relying upon rules, operating procedures, reporting systems, and other structural devices, which has been the predominant approach to public sector reform, the dynamic approach to public management relies on standardization of values to guide the behaviour of public servants, motivate their performance and coordinate their work activities. Consequently, organizations are held together as much by a normative glue as by rules and procedures (Peters and Waterman). In fact, the rules and procedures become institutional reflections of deeply inculcated norms of public sector leadership. Developing coherent and dynamic mental frames is especially relevant for public agencies operating in fragile state systems where the biggest challenge facing policy governance is the crisis of legitimacy of the state in society.

An institutionally coherent and socially embedded machinery of government is alert to changes taking place in the public sector's external environment (the adaptive function), thereby creating a continuous process of adjustment. This continuous process of adjustment is, in turn, driven by endogenous forces and indigenous interests. Public management is thus characterised by an ongoing articulation of a common vision in the public sector, interpretation of diverse preferences and aspirations of societal interests in terms of common themes, and the provision of a common language by which the various actors – constellations of social interests, departments, and donor agencies can assess their individual actions and communicate with each other.

Finally, the structural models of public sector reform provide only a foundational point of departure in the discussions about the capacity and legitimacy of the public sector in fragile systems. The configuration of organizational elements of public management such as government departments, central agencies, crown corporations, and a range of semi-autonomous special operating agencies deserve some attention. Fortunately, there is a rich body of literature addressing the nature of layers in an organizational hierarchy, the number of departments or divisions, and the like.

"Systems thinking" frameworks of public management, on the other hand, direct our attention to those variables that position the public sector for adaptation, learning and change in often fluid and dynamic societies where administrative panaceas have often proven inadequate. The future of public sector reform will thus need to emphasize the strategic imperatives of environmental forces, promote network approaches to public service production and delivery that eases the rigid boundaries of the public sector. It should also pay attention to enablement, relational and leadership skills for public managers.

To recapitulate, 'systems thinking' focuses on developing a shared vision of governance among public agencies and between the public sector and its operating environment. Shared vision can also create a moral ethos, and a sense of purpose and direction within the public sector in the attainment of public policy goals. It also serves as a basis for enhancing social cohesion and commitment to organizational purposes among public officials and target populations. In this regard, it serves a tension management and nation-building function in of post-conflict reconstruction. Furthermore, it can serve as a means of coordinating and controlling the plethora of agencies and interests involved in development management, thereby providing the integrative "glue" of development program formulation and implementation between the state and society.

Conclusion

The discussion has provided a critique of public sector reform in the developing. But more than that, it also advances an alternative vision of reform through a conceptual framework that takes into consideration the ecology or operating environment of the public sector in post-conflict societies and the constraints of fragile states in the management of development. The analysis is an effort to build on on-going efforts to revisit the preoccupation of mainstream public management in the developing world over the past three decades with the search for administrative panaceas.

The central argument of the paper has been that development management often requires an appropriate fit between the operating environment of public agencies and the structures and processes of the machinery of government. The premise of this argument is that the effectiveness of public management and service delivery in the context of fragile post-conflict states is fundamentally about restoring the legitimacy of the state as the appropriate conduit for pursuing society's collective developmental aspirations. Given the social tensions latent in post-conflict societies as well as the ambivalent attitude among citizens toward the public sector, the paper argued that public sector reform in such context should be directed at cultivating 'system thinking' in public management.

'Systems thinking' focuses on developing a shared vision of governance between public agencies. Systems approach to public management serves a tension management and nation-building function in of post-conflict reconstruction. Public management, both as a concept and practice, is nested within the institutions of the state, and serves as the main vehicle for accomplishing public policy goals.

Therefore, the capacity and effectiveness of public management is inextricably intertwined with the legitimacy of the state as the embodiment of a given society's aspirations and values. This argument does not the need to address the severe limitations in requisite technical competences such as the financial, human and organizational resources and know-how to pursue developmental goals. However, underneath the thin veneer of the often passionate narratives of national development are the fissures of a dual reality – a gulf between the "state" and "nation" in much of Africa. Within this context, the public sector (including the machinery of development management) in Africa tends to be overly insulated from society or the target groups they are supposed to serve. This yawning gap is often manifested in the discrepancy between form and content, creating the rather depressing comedy of finding elaborate set of laws establishing procedures of public policy implementation, service delivery and accountability that are often not followed or enforced. This disparity between form and content, the paper argued, is a reflection of the deeper fragility of the state – a detached paraphernalia of centralized power rather than an organic reflection and projection of the values of nationhood and nation-building.

Although the recent years have witnessed the accumulation of questions and concerns about the capacity and legitimacy of the paraphernalia of statehood and development management in Africa and the developing world, the problem, however, is that there seems to be rather conflicting objectives of institutional reforms. More importantly, while there has been a

laudable recognition of the weaknesses in the paraphernalia of statehood in Africa, the discussion of public sector reform has had the tendency to be narrowly focused on the structural and technical dimensions of public management.

This paper argued that the discourse of public sector reform in Africa needs to broaden its lens of analysis to include the wider strategic environment (or the ecology) within which administrative action is nested. The discussion particularly borrowed insights from the literature on administrative capacity that emphasise the collective – the assemblage of individuals and organizations working jointly (often in contestation and cooperation) towards a shared goal. The discussion built on this insight by advancing what it refers to as 'systems thinking'. The roots of systems thinking can be traced back earlier schools of thought in public management. It emerged as a reaction to the limitations and excesses of administrative frameworks advancing machine-like pursuit of rational public policy goals. What emerged from the review of this literature is that public management as a discipline and practice should be understood as inextricably bound to, and influenced by, the institutional conditions of a given operating environment.

Given that the legitimacy and capacity of the public sector as a whole, and the strategic of individual public agencies are based on environmental characteristics, the practice of public management is characterized by processes of mutual adjustment among individuals, agencies, interest groups bound by shared rules and norms that constrain behaviour as well as provide incentives for joint action. Against this backdrop, one can argue that the discourse and practice of public sector reform in the developing world has often focused too much on the structural dimension of public management with a rather static and narrow orientation toward organizational performance. The structural models of public sector reform provide only a foundational point of departure in the discussions about the capacity and legitimacy of the public sector in fragile systems.

A key characteristic of systems thinking in public management is that it focuses on the forms of network governance and administrative mechanisms that enable governments to be more constructively involved in their economies and societies. Through the government's involvement in and connectedness to society and the economy, non-governmental actors, including the private sector, as organized interests, can be structurally integrated into collaborative policy implementation processes in ways that enhance a capacity for constant adaptation and learning. The most critical dimension of public management in post-conflict societies, the paper argued, is the capacity of public agencies for adaptation, learning and change. In fluid and dynamic societies recovering from the ravages of war and still seeking to establish the legitimacy of the state for collective action the public sector needs to cultivate a culture committed to continuous self-diagnosis, learning and change.

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