Driving Public Sector Innovation in Africa

By
Dr Doreen Ninsiima Kasozi and Norah Madaya

Abstract

The different crises African countries have been facing overtime motivated Governments to explore lasting solutions, for example through policy reforms and research studies, on critical issues affecting public sector management within organizations. As such, systematic reviews of public service procedures given the changing times were essential, which allowed for effective repositioning through balancing efficiency and innovation to improve service delivery. Inclusively, Innovation gives Public Sector Organizations a great competitive edge. However, like any other socio-economic driver, it needs to be fostered and championed by the leadership. Against this backdrop, this paper examines Public Sector Innovation in Africa in view of the current barriers faced, the notional outlook, and how leadership factors into the innovation equation. An Innovations Requirements Matrix is then designed to map out key requirements, criteria and enabling factors essential in strengthening and institutionalizing Public Sector Innovation in Africa.

Key words: Public Sector Innovation, Efficiency, Innovation Requirements Matrix, Strategic Leadership, Operational Management, Knowledge Management, Value Systems

1. Introduction

In Africa and other developing countries, however, the need to reform public sector institutions has been prompted largely by world-wide decline in public finances and the need "to get more for less" (Caiden, 1988: 332). The unjust international economic system and persistent public pressures for increased government intervention to reverse the situation have forced governments in Africa and other developing countries to adopt temporary measures which have resulted in large-scale borrowing, unprecedented public indebtedness, high rates of inflation, frequent currency devaluations, and harsh policies imposed under the pressure of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Hicks and Kubisch, 1984). Governments have had to cut back to reduce expenditures, staff, investments and services and to demand higher productivity and better performance from their sluggish public sectors. The renewed sense of urgency about creating an effective public sector in Africa can be observed both at the continental and national levels in many African countries. For instance, the fourth PanAfrican Conference of Ministers of Public Service, held within the framework of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) in March 2003 in South Africa, agreed to a Pan-African Government and Public Administration capacity-development programme to strengthen public institutions and systems of African states. Public sector reform has also become a high priority for governments in Africa. In order to improve their countries' positions in the emerging world economy, governments in Africa and other developing countries have been forced to redefine their roles and strategies. In doing so, almost all have blamed the "dead hand" of bureaucracy: the poor performance of public bureaucracies, the daily annoyances of irksome restrictions, cumbrous red tape, unpleasant officials, poor service and corrupt practices . The "dead hand" of bureaucracy had to be replaced by a new invigorating concept of public management and clear proof that public organizations were value for money (World Bank, 1997).

Even though the role of the state in development in Africa has been downplayed for decades, a paradigmatic shift and a rediscovery of the importance of the state in the development process and the need for a more capable sector occurred in the 1990s. The relevance of the state or the public sector2 to socio-economic development in Africa cannot be underestimated. This has been re-echoed in the 1997 World Development Report which argued that "an effective state is vital for the provision of the goods and services – and the rules and institutions – that allow markets to flourish and the people to lead healthier, happier lives. Without it, sustainable development, both economic and social, is impossible" (World Bank, 1997). The basic function of the public sector in Africa therefore is to provide goods and services to citizens based on "realization and representation of public interests and its possession of unique public qualities compared to business management" (Haque, 2001: 65). Reform of the public sector in both developed and developing countries, which began in the early 1980s, was meant to improve ways in which government is managed and services delivered, with emphasis on effectiveness, efficiency, economy and value for money. This is because of the recognition that an effective state depends on an effective public sector capable of spearheading socioeconomic development and reducing poverty particularly in developing countries. One area of the public sector which

underwent reform in Africa is the civil service, regarded as the nerve centre of the machinery of government. Since the late 1980s many African countries reformed their civil service as part of the process of state redesign, which was largely influenced by the adoption of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), democratization and the new public management (NPM) (Economic Commission for Africa, 2010).

2. Notional Innovation outlook

The term 'innovation' is a heterogeneous concept. Examples of innovation in public sector organizations include; Product or service innovation, process innovations, administrative innovation, conceptual innovations and institutional innovations (Bekkers et al., 2006). Drivers for innovation in public sector organizations arise from several sources, they include: pressure on government budgets; rising public expectations for more accessible and flexible services, greater participation in service and policy development and review; and complex social, environmental and economic challenges. The more proximate drivers arise from: the priorities of politicians; the specific problems that arise in areas of policy, administration, and services; and, the identification of options for improvement (Scott-Kemmis, 2009). There is a very large body of knowledge regarding innovation in public sector organizations, but nevertheless there is much continuing uncertainty about how best to measure, promote and manage it. In an effort to support a higher level of innovative thinking and problem solving among its employees, public organizations need to develop capacities for all types of innovation. These capabilities cannot be imported, nor achieved simply by hiring people or by implementing a blueprint. They must be learned. Such learning involves an evolutionary process of investment by the organizations, action and evaluation. Innovativeness and innovation capability is accumulated over time and is embodied in the capabilities of individuals (involving both cognitive frameworks and specific skills) and also it is embodied in the specific policies, structures, human resource management processes, communication patterns, culture, 'ways of doing things' of an organization(Borins,2001). In addition, public sector organizations need to recognize technical and economic clues, sensing, and opportunity discovery to enable them build superior patterns of innovative thinking among their employees (Borins,2008).

Public Sector Organizations also need to acquire new knowledge from outside public organizations through collaboration management, alliance management, licensing and networking for example informal networks linking individuals to sources of capability and to communities of practice; formal networks linking the organizations to others related vertically or horizontally or outside the public sector (Albury, 2005). Public Sector Organizations can also explore higher innovative thinking and generation of new knowledge in-house through research and by embedding effective routines in structures, processes and behaviors through regular training, auditing, Idea management, Incentive systems, Continuous improvement, Human resource management and Knowledge management.

As change become more frequent, and the knowledge intensity of change increases, there is need for public organizations to give more focus to fostering innovation, particularly to improve productivity. Public organizations also need to strengthen their ability to learn from each other and from outside. There should also be clear mechanisms to seek ideas from employees as well as the customers of public sector organizations (Auditor General, 2009).

2.1 Barriers to Public Sector Innovation

Innovation in the public sector is not very different from other sectors. It often occurs as a pressing need arises for a solution that would deliver improved services with tighter budgets, to citizens with increasingly higher expectations. It is sometimes, but not always, part of a reform agenda or a measure introduced to improve the functioning of the state machinery within the prevailing conditions. The public sector is always under heavy political pressure and faces challenges of social change (e.g. ageing). This makes innovation vital to ensure better quality services. Furthermore, the public sector is an important market for innovative products (goods and services) from across economy, thus impacting on public procurement (Lepage, 2017). Lepage shades more light on a few barriers to Public Sector Innovation.

i. Firstly, the sheer size and complexity of public sector institutions: silo mentality' is usually rife, there are skills shortages and gaps, lack of clear agreement with respect to perceived problems, approaches and solutions as well as overlap in responsibilities and communication difficulties.
ii. The systemic impact of innovation and change is often viewed as an unwelcome perturbation to the overall functioning of the organization. There is much of the "not invented here" attitude which results in an unwillingness to accept any novel ideas.
iii. Added to that are many other issues including internal and external politics, bureaucratic and overregulated work environment, poor leadership, budgetary issues and poor learning environment.
iv. Public service managers and politicians are generally very wary of enacting changes that may result in negative outcomes, particularly if there is the risk that these will attract media focus. This risk aversion, added to an inherent blame culture, with its associated high levels of accountability, contributes to a work environment that is quite hostile to innovation.
v. Making public sector innovation work requires the introduction and facilitation of learning and networking. This will help pull the organization together and enable easier access to relevant in-house competencies needed to find, understand and make use of outside competences and technology.

Part of the improvement of the public sector work force is to encourage entrepreneurs or champions with sufficient vision and determination to push the innovation process through. These people should be given funding, responsibility and leeway to pursue the innovation agenda. Staff mobility should be encouraged between institutions and involvement and commitment developed by encouraging civil servants to take initiative while providing them with a safe space to innovate. At policy level, it is important to reach for a good balance between "competent bureaucrats" and "creative policy entrepreneurs". Shaking the system is often a necessary evil as reorganization measures against organizational lock-in and stagnant waters. Everyone, including people employed in the public sector, private and non-profit sectors, possesses the capacity to learn and innovate. Innovation should be seen within the context of human evolution. It is essentially about humans escaping and breaking free from the confines of the old world (Lepage, 2017).

Innovation requires strategic leadership and operational management that is willing to take the initiative to make incremental and even radical improvements to the existing systems, technologies, product portfolios, where necessary; to replace current products and processes with new ones, and or develop new-to the world technologies and products or the benefits of existing or new customers, stakeholders, and society (Rainey, 2010; 2014).

2.2 Balancing efficiency and innovation

For innovation to succeed within the public sector organization there is need for the leadership to balance efficiency and innovation. Producing direction for an innovation culture that yields efficiency and expected outcomes of innovation should be opportunity although it may generate emerging challenges. Employees that desire to innovate must know that creativity and prototyping should be as efficient as possible regarding time and resources. Kuhn (2012), scientific revolution followed a structure that began with normal science having "a paradigm and dedication to solving puzzles; followed by serious anomalies, which lead to a crisis; and finally, resolution of the crisis by a new paradigm" (p. xi). This is the structure of innovation, moving from paradigm to paradigm. However, it may not be as smooth a transition as indicated. Oster (2011) explained that people believe paradigm shifts to be "perfectly linear, discrete, and identifiable" but "that is not the true nature of innovation" (p. 210). Innovation does not necessarily happen in an organized fashion. However, innovative organizations require a balance between efficiency and innovation. Oster (2011) stated that "efficiency and innovation must be of equal and complementary importance if an organization ultimately is to survive and thrive" (p. 149). Hence the need for ambidextrous organizations. Ambidextrous organizations create a framework to be innovative while keeping standards in place. According to Davila, Epstein, and Shelton (2013), ambidextrous organizations "promote innovation and operations within its architecture through multiple groups handling different types of innovation and operations projects, thus promoting different cultures and processes for innovation needs" (p. 112). Davila et al. commented that this structure encourages the innovators to "break the rules" but also

"protects it from organizational antibodies" (p. 113). For maximum effectiveness, ambidextrous leaders must allow freedom in innovation while holding to specific standards of the organization.

Leaders with democratic leadership qualities encourage employees to express their opinions and provide timely and constructive feedback, recognize good work, and reinforce skill development. Jaskyte, Byerly, Bryant, and Koksarova (2010) noted that delivering feedback to subordinates is a good leadership quality. Notably, effective leaders explore potential causes and remedies, implement strategies and policies that promote efficiency in innovation including; recognition, rewards, and publicizing individual and teams. Innovation processes without clear targets, incentives for the innovators from the leadership frustrates effort. Indeed, leadership failure to provide expert advice and opinion to their employees, poor communication, limited investment in innovation through resource provision and clear systems affects creativity. Quite often, the result is avoidance, withdrawal, the birth of organizational antibodies, and failing the innovation project. Conversely, organizations with leadership that continuously push their employees to concentrate on non-valuable propositions and prototypes result in innovation fatigue.

Innovation must be customer oriented. Any astute leader will not prioritize efficiency but will seek to understand the changing segments of customers and modify the product to fit the purpose. Indeed borrowing from the notion of 'elegant solution,' leaders can influence the production of new ideas and products at the least cost possible (Oster, 2011). The innovation team in the organization could, therefore, undertake a market research. For example, if the primary product was children's clothing (0-6 months; 7-12 months; up to 4-5 years), after five years of operation, the products could grow to cater for the next age group (6-10; 11-15 years). Customer needs must influence the innovation direction to guarantee market as well as the quality, trust, and loyalty. Agility and flexibility enable organizations to avail the right environment for innovation. Best results are achieved by organizations that renew their teams with people from diverse backgrounds (Davila et al., 2013). Organizational innovation across borders are affected by the local culture, and every leader needs to appreciate that. However, regarding leadership role, all the above characteristics apply regarding technology leadership (Asian companies), product performance and time to market by European nations.

Innovation is universal across generations and borders but not homogeneous because of cultural differences, level of development and capacities (Davila et al., 2013). However, the principles of managing the innovation are quite related. Countries all over the world look up to the innovation and productivity to overcome the various social, economic, and environmental challenges. Innovation has registered as an integral part of economic development in the developed economies of Western Europe and the US, and competitive pressures are experienced world-wide mainly from Asian countries, Brazil, India, and Russia. Both the US and the UK went through the industrial restructuring in the 1980s, IT revolution in the 1990s, and the biotech craze in the 2000s (Smith, Bagchi-Sen & Edmunds, 2016). Thus, top leadership should support internal capacity development processes targeting their employees. Emphasis on preparing them

to work across borders and initiating business models must be part of its overall implementation plan.

3. Innovations Requirements Matrix

Albury (2005) and Australian business foundation (2008) significantly contribute to the Innovations Requirements Matrix presented in table 1 below. The matrix is designed to map out key requirements, criteria and enabling factors essential in strengthening and institutionalizing Pubic Sector Innovation in Africa.

Table 1: Innovations Requirements Matrix

Key Requirements	**Criteria**	**Enabling Factors**
Leadership & People Involvement	Champions who set goals and provide organisational support and protect the ideas from premature judgement *(Make innovation first an individual or collective responsibility then progressively extend it to be part of everyone's job in the organization)*	*Internal and External Support and Collaboration* with all stakeholders involved in resourcing, managing and marketing innovation beyond the organization
Resources	Commitment of resources by the leadership through each stage of the innovation process. Short term budget & planning horizons can limit sustained commitment.	
Networks	Informal networks linking individuals to sources of capability and to communities of practice; formal networks linking organisations to others related vertically or horizontally or outside the public sector.	
Culture	Cultures that support the identification and exploration of ideas from any source, experimentation and risk taking, that supports learning; good internal communications; lack on internal politicking	Sound Value Systems and Organizational Governing structures that are pro-innovation
Competencies	Accessible competencies inside or outside the organisation.	Innovation training and development programmes that nurture competencies, creative ideas and revolutionary skills-based learning
Ideas	Ideas, the starting point for innovation, may come from any source. Analysis of the external environment	
Learning	Individuals, teams and organisations learn from training activities, case studies, experience, reviews	
Organisational strategy	Strategies that recognise the role of renovating systems and capabilities for innovation, and that develop performance evaluation approaches to assess the effectiveness of the organisation's innovation systems; future orientation	Long Term Plans and Development Frameworks with Goal-Specific targets on innovation

4. Integrating and leveraging an organizational innovation Strategy

Most organizations especially in the public sector have included but not integrated the term 'innovation' in their mission statements. Approximately, 5% define actionable points of its operationalization. However, Davila et al., (2013) argued that the quantity and type of innovation must match the organizational strategy. The CEOs in this case 'Accounting Officers', should reposition themselves and direct the innovation culture by encouraging the design of an inclusive innovation policy, strategy, implementation plan and annual work plan with clear indicators of change. The strategy must delineate roles of the Management and other employees in the organizational structure, sub-contractors if any and the consumers. Dodge, Dwyer, Witzeman, Neylon & Taylor (2017) underlined that elements of innovation should be pursued in the innovation strategy namely; organizational encouragement, evidence of challenging and meaningful tasks, and creation of networked groups.

Finally, celebrating remarkable innovation for individual employees or teams should be one of the core strategies based on the selected challenging tasks for the given period determined by top management. The outcome of such engagements should create spillover effects that prompt others to take steps of faith and join the 'dream teams,' 'risk takers,' 'critical thinkers,' or more specifically - the innovators.' Consequently, in addition to integration and operationalization of the innovation strategy, the CEO should at an opportune moment ensure the entire organization participates in the event celebrating innovative achievers. There should be a clear framework and transparent mechanism for identifying performers. The objective is to create a critical mass of innovators among the employees, who can work across borders to join the team of "dreamers'' and aspire to be consistently creative and innovative by enhancing their research and development competencies.

5. Conclusion

In reality, regardless of the country, history, or context in Africa, Public Sector Innovation will thrive if supported by leaders who ably challenge the status quo, confront assumptions, engineer new thinking and have established trust and loyalty with employees and sub-contractors. They also competently manage innovation antibodies to enhance idealization and create equilibrium for the survival of current and potentials innovators. Such leaders must be strategic, analytical, business-oriented, risk-averse, highly imaginative, futuristic in thinking, practical, and tolerant to mistakes. It is factual that value systems and processes that encourage and support innovation are essential in high-performing organizations. Taking an expansive outlook of what institutes innovation, a collective approach that involves everyone's participation and contribution will increase the innovative outputs of the Public Sector Organization.

References

Albury, D. (2005). Fostering innovation in public services. *Public Money and Management*, *25*(1), 51-56

Auditor General. (2009). Innovation Across Central Government. National Audit Office, HC 12 Session 2008-9. UK

Australian business foundation. 2008. Inside the Innovation Matrix: Finding the hidden human dimensions. Retrieved from http://www.businesschamber.com.au/NSWBC/media/Misc/Ask%20Us%20How/Inside-the-Innovation-Matrix.pdf

Bekkers, V.J.J.M., Van Duivenboden, Hein, Thaens, Marcel. (2006). Information And Communication Technology And Public Innovation: Assessing the ICT-driven Modernization of Public Administration. *IOS Press*, Amsterdam

Borins, S. (2001). Public Management Innovation in Economically Advanced and Developing Countries. *International Review of Administrative Sciences, 67*(4), 715-731

Borins, S. (2008). Innovations in government: Research, Recognition and Replication, Washington DC, Brookings Institution

Caiden, G.E. (1988). The Vitality of Administrative Reform. *International Review of Administrative Sciences, 54*(3), 331-357.

Davila, T., Epstein, M., & Shelton, R. (2013). Making Innovation Work. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.

Dodge, R, Dwyer, J., Witzeman, S., Neylon, S., & Taylor, S. (2017). The Role of Leadership in Innovation. Research-Technology Management.

Economic Commission for Africa, (2010). Innovations and Best Practices in Public Sector Reforms: The Case of Civil Service in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Retrieved from http://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/21041/Bib-19453.pdf?sequence=1

Haque, S. (2001). The Diminishing Publicness of Public Service under the Current Mode of Governance. Public Administration Review, 6 (1), 65-82

Hicks, N., & Kubisch, A. (1984). Cutting Government Expenditures in LDCs. Finance and Development, 37-44

Jaskyte, K., Byerly, C., Bryant, A., & Koksarova, J. (2010). Transforming a Nonprofit Work Environment For Creativity. Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 21(1), 77-92.

Kuhn, T. (2012). The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition. University Of Chicago Press.

Lepage, M. (2017). Innovation for development in Africa: Focus on the public sector. Retrieved from http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2017/5/23/Innovation-for-development-in-Africa-Focus-on-the-public-sector.html

Oster, G. (2011). The Light Prize: Perspectives on Christian Innovation. Virginia Beach, VA: Positive Signs Media

Rainey, H. G. (2014). Understanding and managing public organizations (5th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Brand. ISBN: 978-1-118-58371-5

Rainey, D. L. (2010). Sustainable Business Development: Inventing the Future through Strategy, Innovation, and Leadership. Cambridge University Press.

Scott-Kemmis, D. (2009). Assessing Policies, Programs and Other Initiatives to promote Innovation in the Public Sector, International Case Studies :The Challenge of Sustaining Innovation in the Public Sector. OECD

Smith, H. L., Bagchi-Sen. S., & Edmunds, L. (2016). Innovation capacity in the healthcare sector and historical anchors: examples from the UK, Switzerland and the US. J Technol Transf, 41:1420–1439.

World Bank (1997). The State in a Changing World. World Development Report, Washington DC