

PROFESSIONALISM AND AFRICAN ADMINISTRATION

David K. Leonard

INTRODUCTION

That there are serious problems of civil service performance in most of Africa is commonplace knowledge.¹ What is less clear is how to correct them. In my own research I have sought answers to this question by looking at some of the many African public servants who **have** been effective and done work of high quality.² By understanding what has made them exceptional we can find clues as to what would make the general picture brighter.

In this article I wish to offer a limited but ultimately significant way of beginning to address the problem of public sector failure. My research in Kenya suggests that one of the several threads running through high civil service performance is professionalism. I want to suggest why this might be so and to indicate ways in which one could build upon and extend professionalism in Africa's public sector.

THE COLLECTIVE GOODS PROBLEM

The importance of professionalism to the public sector has its roots in Africa's collective goods problem. The economics literature has long made a distinction between what it calls public and private goods. A pure private good is one that is characterized by both excludability and rivalness. Excludability means that it is possible to prevent those who have not paid for the good from consuming it. Rivalness indicates that one individual's consumption of the good diminishes the ability of others to consume it. Goods which possess these attributes will be generated and allocated in an economically optimal manner in a free, competitive market. Pure public goods, such as a radio news broadcast, are characterized by neither excludability nor rivalness.³ Common-pool resources, such as an

unpolluted, scenic sea beach, possess rivalness but not excludability.⁴ These resources are particularly vulnerable to the 'tragedy of the commons.' If a common-owned field is not subject to sound collective management, it can be destroyed by overgrazing as each individual cattle owner tries to increase his share of the benefits by grazing more and more livestock on it. Pure public goods and common-pool resources together can be designated as collective goods, ones that lack excludability whether or not they possess rivalness. According to rational choice theory, the incentive to provide collective goods is always problematic, for they are subject to what is known as the free rider problem. Left to itself the market will not generate an optimal amount of such goods, which is a frequent justification for government action to provide them. But this presumes that the state has the capacity to manage its resources and services in the collective interest.

Not only can the state create and manage collective goods, it is one itself. It is a potential device for creating and sustaining social benefits, but the potential will be realized only if the state itself is managed in the collective interest. Just as with the collectively owned field, if those who control the state continuously use it only to maximize their own narrow, individual interests, they will soon run it down and it will produce less and less benefit for society as a whole. Unrestrained predation on the state and its resources, sapping its ability to produce and manage collective goods, is precisely what has happened to many (although certainly not all) African countries.⁵

This poor management of state-wide collective goods is deeply rooted in the nature of African politics. African peoples participate in politics primarily either as individuals or as members of ethnic/regional/kinship

¹ E.g., Philip Ndegwa, Chairman, *Report and Recommendations of the Working Party on Government Expenditures*, Government Printer, Nairobi, 1982: 42; Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983; John D. Montgomery, 'How African managers serve developmental goals,' *Comparative Politics*, April 1987: 347-60; and The World Bank, *Accelerated Development in sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action*, The World Bank, Washington DC, 1981.

² David K. Leonard, *African Successes: Four Public Managers of Kenyan Rural Development*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.

³ Paul Samuelson, 'The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure,' *Review of Economic and Statistics*, Vol 36 No 1 (1954): 387-89.

⁴ Elinor Ostrom, 'Issues of definition and theory: some conclusions and hypotheses,' in *Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resource Management*, prepared by the Panel on Common Property Resource Management, Board of Science and Technology for International Development, National Resource Council National, Academy Press, Washington DC, 1986: 604-7.

⁵ David Gould, *Bureaucratic Corruption in the Third World: The Administration of Underdevelopment in Zaire*, Pergamon-Maxwell, New York, 1980. Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985, esp. p.45. Richard A. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, esp. pp.57, 87.

groups. This form of participation evolves naturally and powerfully into patron-client politics. The overwhelming focus of African governmental activity, as Robert Bates has shown, is on the production and distribution of private goods, at the expense of collective ones — unless the latter can be ethnically or geographically defined. Consequently these societies are seriously under-provided with collective goods, including the public policies that add to collective welfare. Thus we have the paradox that these states may actually spend a substantial amount on, for example, rural or agricultural services even while agriculture or the quality of rural life is declining. The expenditures are on relatively unproductive private goods, while the desperately needed collective goods are underfinanced or undermined.⁶

PROFESSIONALISM AND THE COLLECTIVE GOODS PROBLEM

The professionalism of the senior civil service is a partial solution to the African state's collective goods problem. It certainly is not the only force acting on African states to pursue broad, collective interests and indeed probably only rarely is fully effective when it is the only causative agent. My examination of African public servants in Kenya who had a great and positive effect on rural development points to the importance of professionalism but suggests that other factors include: nationalism, certain forms of class formation, and international donor intervention.⁷ Nonetheless, I want to concentrate here on professionalism.

Professionals are defined by three important attributes:

- 1 'The job . . . is **technical** — based on systematic knowledge or doctrine acquired only through long prescribed training.'
- 2 'The professional man (or woman) adheres to a set of **professional norms**.'⁸ These involve 'a collectivity or service orientation'⁹ and are what R. K. Merton calls 'institutionalized altruism.'¹⁰

3 Professionals are oriented to their professional peers for at least part of their approval and advancement.¹¹ This last attribute implies some degree of autonomy for the profession, enabling it at least to pass judgement on the technical quality of the professional's work.¹²

From these defining characteristics we can begin to see the special kind of contribution professions have to make to public sector performance in Africa (and elsewhere). The normative structure of a profession strongly tends toward the production of collective goods, for at least it is dedicated to preventing a narrow commitment to the private good of the practitioner or even the client. The operative word in this sentence is 'tends.' I am not making the claim that all professionals adhere to professional norms. Freidson and others have made it clear that this is not the case. Rather I am suggesting only that the social system of the profession operates in such a way (a) as to encourage these values and (b) that those who show higher technical and ethical standards are accorded the relative label of being 'more professional' by their peers.¹³

Some professions, such as economics and public health, are inherently oriented to collective goods. And veterinary medicine, as practiced in Africa, is primarily directed to those ends. Others, such as curative medicine and law, are focused on the private good of individual patients. But at least the practitioner feels some responsibility to the collective good aspects of health or law (as a way of preventing the spread of sickness or lawlessness) and is constrained against acting purely out of selfish motives. Still other professions have a commitment to standards that, although perhaps not directed explicitly at protecting client interests, do result in collective benefit. Engineering standards of quality and efficiency tend to work to the collective good when employed in public works.

⁶ Robert Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981.

⁷ Leonard, Ch. 12 and 13.

⁸ Harold L. Wilensky, 'The Professionalization of Everyone?' *The American Journal of Sociology*, 70 (1964): 138.

⁹ William J. Goode, 'Encroachment, charlatanism and the emerging profession: psychology, sociology, and medicine,' *American Sociological Review*, Vol 25 No 6 (1960): 903. Goode, in contrast to some others, sees these first two attributes alone as the basic defining ones for a profession.

¹⁰ Robert K. Merton with Thomas F. Gieryn, 'Institutionalized altruism: the case of the professions,' in *Social Research and the Practicing Professions*, by R. K. Merton, ed. by Aaron Rosenblatt and Thomas F. Gieryn, Massachusetts, Cambridge: Abt Books, 1982: 109-34.

¹¹ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, Basic Books, 1989: 30.

¹² Wilensky, pp.151, 154. Freidson differs with Goode in holding that autonomy is the true defining characteristic of a profession and that knowledge and ethics are used only to support the claim to this status with the public. Eliot Freidson, *Profession of Medicine: A Study of the Sociology of Applied Knowledge*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970: 79, 82. Whether they are a derived or defining characteristic, however, a claim to ethical behaviour is a part of what we understand to be a profession. With respect to the degree of autonomy Freidson further writes that 'control over work need not be total: what is essential is control over the determination and evaluation of the technical knowledge used in the work; important but secondary is control of the social and economic terms of work. Thus, a professional may remain a professional when he is socially subordinate to someone who does not belong to his profession as long as he is not technically subordinate . . . (T)he para-professional occupation (is distinguished by) being technically subordinate to a profession.' (pp.185-86.)

¹³ Even Freidson, who is uncertain that professions really are unique with regard to (a) acknowledges the existence of (b). Freidson, pp.81, 185-201.

Thus the professional has a propensity to translate into collective goods the pressures and demands of politicians and participating citizens, which otherwise would produce private goods of sub-optimal benefit to society. Without political and citizen pressure administrators are likely to relax into service of their own group interests; they do need to be energized by others. But if they reshape the energy of interest group demands so as to serve collective rather than private ends, they are fulfilling their professional mission.

Professional norms also reduce the likelihood that the professional will turn the situation to only his or her own personal benefit, for example through corruption. And professional standards press the practitioner to provide service of a high technical quality.

Furthermore, when exercised by those with authority, high professionalism has a positive effect on organizational behaviour. Other professionals, even though they themselves may not be behaving professionally, accord respect only to those who perform at the level of the profession's standards and norms. As respect is a vital component in stimulating staff to extra effort and to the solution of unanticipated problems, organizations that are not headed by highly professional individuals will deteriorate rapidly into minimal and formalistic behaviour.

Finally, when professionalism is matched with the existence of professional opportunities outside of the country or government, it promotes risk-taking, for those who lose career opportunities because of their maintenance of professional standards or values can be rewarded with alternative opportunities.

This list of the positive features of professionalism is mitigated by a number of criticisms that the professions have evoked both among progressives in industrialized countries and among development specialists. The major themes are:

- (a) that developing country professionals are too wedded to elitist peer-oriented standards and methods, leading them to 'state-of-the-art' practices that were developed for the industrial world and are inappropriate to the real needs of their (generally poor) clients;¹⁴
- (b) that professionals, in being oriented toward their peers, are not responsive to the expressed needs of their clients and are not open to client participatory structures; and
- (c) that many so-called professions have in fact become nothing but self-enhancing status groups.¹⁵

There is a good deal of truth in these criticisms, but a response can be made to them. First, the fact that professionals do 'translate' client demands into professionally congenial forms, which is unresponsive, is actually part of their advantage in the conditions of patron-client politics. It makes them more likely to resist demands for purely private goods and to turn them into collective ones. Everett Hughes once suggested that, 'The quack is the man who continues through time to please his customers but not his colleagues.'¹⁶ Note that this quote is not suggesting that client responsiveness is bad, only that it must be matched by faithfulness to collegial norms. Obviously this is what critics such as Chambers really want, for they are not enthusiastic about the way politicians respond to citizen demand either.

Another part of the criticism is not so much of the existence of professional norms and standards but of their content. Chambers, for example, can be read as not so much wanting to challenge professionalism as to change some of its values, thus altering the types of clients toward which it gives primacy, redefining its methods, and seeing participation as part of its professional methodology. It is instructive that Chambers calls for a 'new professionalism.'¹⁷

Finally, the deterioration of professions into corrupted status groups is a problem and has to be addressed through attention to the content and sustenance of professional norms. The point is to compare the dedicated professional not against some (perhaps utopian) image of what a professional could be, but against the career-oriented bureaucrat or political patron who is the real alternative. There is a 'stage of development' issue here. In the absence of social groups that represent collective goods effectively in the body politic, developing countries need all the substitutes they can get, however imperfect their form. In any case, what I am arguing for here is not the promotion of professional status groups as ends in themselves but as one of several devices for promoting professional ideals in people's behaviour. On balance, I think it is clear that Africa would be very well served by the extension of professionalism, both in its public and private sectors.

PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM

How then is professionalism to be promoted in Africa? Professionals are not produced and certainly are not sustained simply through the exposure of individuals to professional training. The mastery of technique **and**

¹⁴ Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Longman, London, 1983.

¹⁵ Ragia Abdin, Paul Bennell, Olufemi Fajana, Martin Godfrey and Bachir Hamdouch, *A World of Differentials*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1983.

¹⁶ Everett C. Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, The Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1958. Cited in Wilensky, p.154.

¹⁷ Chambers, p.168. Emphasis added.

the socialization in professional norms that are provided through this training **are** of critical importance. But training and socialization alone will not sustain the candidate professional in the face of strong contrary pressures in the environment.

Only when the candidate professional has other professionals as an important (if not the most important) reference group in his or her work life will he or she be transformed into a true professional. The group of peers provides the social structure that permits the professional to resist the otherwise powerful pressures to fall short of professional norms.

The ideal model is that the professional association would formally sanction or bar someone who violated professional standards. Even short of formal sanctions, however, the existence of informal criticism from a group of people whom one respects and identifies with is a powerful social sanction.

In most of Africa, however, the indigenous professional community is too small and too weak to fulfill this peer group function effectively alone. In this circumstance the professional association is likely to be only a self-enhancing status group, if it exists at all. Only those individuals who are strongly oriented toward the **international** profession and see their international peers as a central reference group for their behaviour are likely to behave appropriately. This was precisely the explanation for the behaviour of two of the four 'African Successes' in Kenya I wrote about.¹⁸

In order to strengthen African professions strong links to international professional organizations are needed. To begin with, this implies active participation in international professional associations and gatherings by a relatively substantial number of African professionals — not the present tokens only.

Also implied is the involvement of the relevant international professional organization in national certification and in-service training functions until such time as the counterpart national association is able to cross a certain threshold in standards, size, and autonomy. African professionals will be rightly insulted at any implication that they are any less dedicated to standards than their international compatriots. But this is not the issue. The point instead is that Africa's professional associations at the moment are not closely connected to the academic centres that are generating new professional knowledge. They also are too small and fragile to be able to withstand the substantial political and social pressures that are put on them in their home countries, threatening their

integrity and autonomy. African professionals need connections and support in order to meet the professional standards **to which they themselves aspire**. International links can help accomplish this.

An 'international grand corps' of African public service professionals

I want to advance a rash proposal for giving strength and autonomy to the professions in the public service in Africa. It would need to be refined and advanced by Africans themselves if international organizations were to take it seriously. Thus I put it forward, not as a finished proposal, but as the germ of an idea for African professionals to develop if they feel it has merit.

At the moment professionalism in African civil services is undermined by two major factors:

(a) The siren call of international salaries for those who are widely recognized as exceptional drains Africa of its best talent — public servants who could do far greater good at home than they are likely to achieve working overseas, even in international development organizations.

(b) Those professionals who do remain in their home countries generally suffer from a lack of autonomy, a factor so important to the generation of professionalism that it is generally used as part of its definition. In most African states, for most of the professions, there are few viable alternatives outside the public sector for those who fall from political grace. This factor **makes** professional public servants timid and conservative in their behaviour. They become so anxious to avoid offending their political masters that they actually don't serve them very well.

My proposal for dealing with these problems is inspired by the prestigious corporate bodies of professionals in the French civil service known as the 'grand corps'. Each of these corps recruits its members through an exceedingly competitive selection process which assures it of being composed of 'the best and the brightest.' Although each of these corps is responsible for certain distinct state tasks, these are not necessarily their most important functions. Instead they compete with one another to provide cabinet ministers with staff who can enjoy their confidence. These appointees serve at the full discretion of the political leadership and provide them with most of their policy advice and administrative assistance. No matter where they serve, however, members of the grands corps derive their salaries from their corps and not their positions. Individuals in a grand corps who enjoy the confidence of the political leadership will serve in the most important policy-making positions in the government; those whose views are out of favour at the moment will

¹⁸ Ishmael Muriithi and Harris Mule as described in Leonard, Ch. 7-10, 12.

hold more routine posts in the civil service and constitute a kind of administrative and policy 'staff in waiting,' who will be available when the political winds change. Those who enjoy the political confidence of the moment enjoy the same tenure in their corps as those who do not. They receive similar salaries. This material security encourages members of the grand corps to maintain high professional standards, be innovative and take risks, which serves well both society and the government of the day. However the fact that these elite administrators only hold positions that are critical to public policy when they have the confidence of the political leadership assures political responsiveness.¹⁹ African governments would be well served if they were to have available to them a similar group of highly talented and professional higher civil servants who were politically responsive and adaptive to policy change.

Specifically, then, I propose that for each profession one creates an Africa-wide 'grand corps' with the following attributes:

1 People would be nominated for candidate membership who had the appropriate minimum qualifications for their profession, who had 5 to 10 years of public sector work experience, and who were judged to have been outstanding in their performance of those duties — both as to technical quality and as to the 'publicness' of values served.

2 Those elected to become candidate members would attend a professional upgrading course of, say, two months duration with all of the other candidates of that year. The course would contribute to professional competence but would also build peer ties. Upon successful completion of the course, which would not be guaranteed but which would be usual, the candidate would become a junior member of the corps.

3 Junior members would receive a substantial supplement to their incomes as long as they were in the service of an African government or (possibly) an indigenous non-governmental organization. They also would be guaranteed a post in an international organization (UN, IBRD, WHO, etc.) if their careers became blocked despite their having performed their duties at a high level of professional competence. The former provision would encourage them to continue working in poorly paid positions without turning to corruption or private business for supplementary sources of income. The latter provision would encourage both risk-taking and adherence to professional standards and ethics, for being faithful to them would give them security. Thus it would promote professional autonomy within the structure of the civil services.

4 An annual membership conference of the corps would be held for, say, three days and the corps would pay the costs of members in attending.

5 After not less than 15 years total of public service and at least 5 years in the corps, junior members could be nominated for senior membership. Senior members would receive a still higher stipend under the same condition as junior members. They also would elect candidate members, junior members and senior members.

6 The total number of people in any one corps would eventually be about 500, so that its membership was always quite select and élite.

7 These grand corps would be fully autonomous, African-controlled bodies. The initial group of senior members would be comprised of a dozen Africans who were selected for their exceptional professionalism by a relevant international professional organization. They would select the other members and establish the governance structure of the corps.

8 Each corps would be internationally financed, perhaps by a consortium or the World Bank. The justification for this finance would be that keeping these professionals in their own countries would have both direct effects on developmental performance and spread effects on other civil servants that would have a higher rate of return than most donor projects.

9 It is expected that at any given moment some of these grand corps professionals would be out of favour with their political leaders and therefore might be serving internationally. The corps scheme, however, would produce higher standards of service among those professionals who remained and would facilitate the return to national service of professionals if and when they returned to political favour.

10 The purpose is **not** to impose international professional policies on national political leaders. It is presumed and would be encouraged that within the bounds of professionalism there would be substantial differences in the policy views of those elected to membership in a corps. Instead the intention is to provide a national political leader with the ability to choose among a **range** of dedicated professionals, leading to the selection of ones who simultaneously inspire political confidence, have high competence, and have sufficient autonomy to be able to channel the energy and direction of political will into professional forms that will more likely serve the collective interests of the country.

POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE

There is no presumption in these proposals that professionalism alone can rescue Africa from the

¹⁹ Ezra N. Suleiman, *Politics, Power and Bureaucracy in France: The Administrative Elite*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974.

Ezra N. Suleiman, *Elites in French Society: The Politics of Survival*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978.

serious problems of public policy and administration into which it has fallen all too frequently. All I hope for is the creation of 'pockets of excellence' within the civil service that can provide good service within their own domains, grow as conditions permit, and serve as an example to the rest of the government of what is possible. There is substantial evidence that national civil services need not be uniformly good or bad. Even states with quite dismal standards in most of their

public services frequently have exceptional enclaves of high performance. These 'pockets of productivity' become the growth points for positive change when political and social conditions were favourable.²⁰

It is such 'pockets of professional excellence' that we need to create and sustain in order to provide for the future of African development.

²⁰ Robert Daland, *Exploring Brazilian Bureaucracy: Performance and Pathology*, University Press of America, Washington DC, 1981. Wolfram Fischer and Peter Lundgreen, 'The recruitment and training of administrative and technical personnel,' in Charles Tilly

(ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975: 527-43. Leonard White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History: 1829-1861*, Macmillan, New York, 1954: 16, 349, 352-53, 357.