

The critical role of political commitment, transformational leadership, and human resources in governance innovation: an African perspective

by

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Abstract

That government and public service leaders have a major role to play in the design and implementation of innovative, beneficiary-targeted, practices is by now well settled. In fact, to argue that the provision of quality service is contingent upon transformational leaders' sponsorship of cutting-edge service delivery initiatives is to state the obvious. Good governance is, after all, a daydream until there is a critical mass of individuals that are fired by the determination to bring the benefits of organized government to the principal stakeholders, especially, citizens, taxpayers, and service beneficiaries. Transformational leaders they are not who fail to champion innovations enabling those things to happen which the majority want to see happen, while at the same time warding off developments perceived as injurious, or otherwise, unwelcome.

If we argue that the success of efforts at expanding access to quality service depends on visionary and transformational leadership, are we suggesting that change cannot happen without the leaders' signing off on it? Proceeding from the premise that change happens with or without leadership "say-so"—that is, spontaneously, regardless of anyone's wish--this paper contends that transformational and citizen-centered leadership can still make a difference. Specifically, transformational leadership can promote a broad measure of consensus not only on the underlying governance values, but also on the innovation deemed critical to improving access to essential services, including turning sluggish economies into robust, globally competitive, ones.

As far as heterogeneous societies are concerned, the factors that shape the character and tempo of governance and public service innovation include the extent to which the leaders and their followers agree on the underlying governance and public administration values, the 'soft' and the 'hard' environment institutions' receptivity to change, the synergy between innovation plans, on the one hand, and human resource management practices, on the other, and above all, the 'demonstration, snowball, effect' of the leaders' choices. Tracking the logical

relationship between and among the variables is the remit of the first section. How the variables interact in real life to influence the tempo and direction of change across African countries is the theme explored in the succeeding sections.

Transformational leadership, the hard environment and institutional credibility: a theoretical framework

Change is a constant in the material, spatiotemporal, world. It is inescapable, regardless of whether human beings deem themselves captives of their environments or see themselves as proactive agents endowed with the capacity to shape their destiny. A leader who stands still will sooner than later notice that the world around her/him is not stationary but is constantly on the move. The signs of unrelenting change are too visible to be ignored. Time, for one, changes by the second, from minutes to hours, from days to weeks, and from one epoch to another. New technologies keep emerging to influence the way we think, act, and live. High-speed computers and smart phones hardly hit the market before becoming obsolete and getting supplanted by others. Space tourism, once a sci-fi fantasy, is gradually becoming a reality. AI has even gone several steps further, thinking for us humans, offering to draft letters and to respond to email messages, redefining 'the truth' as we know it, changing reality before our very eyes, altering the images of celebrities and putting made-up words in their mouths, and helping to write college essays and conference papers (except this one!). Similarly, African economies may remain stagnant and continue to wrestle with structural rigidities and miscellaneous obstacles to growth. That has not stopped other economies--like those of China and the Asian Tigers--forging ahead with export-oriented industrialization, constantly upgraded infrastructure, and a highly educated workforce.

If change, in the generic sense, is preordained, innovation is a choice. The import of this is that, faced with the inescapability of change, leaders yet have a chance to make a difference. They can still leave their marks by investing time and resources in problem-solving, value-adding, innovation projects, thereby navigating the turbulence created by, and influencing the direction of, change. The shift towards innovation will see the leaders commit towards growth instead of stagnation, affluence rather than poverty, and self-reliance in place of the perpetual dependence on external support.

Governance and public service innovation is, as earlier noted, far from being an automatic, self-activating, and self-sustaining process. Its success depends on the subsistence of some underlying factors. In the context of the prevailing heterogeneity in Africa, the factors that determine the success of innovation projects include the degree of consensus on the prevailing governance and public administration ideals (e.g., democracy, equality, justice, inclusiveness, respect for

human rights, observance of the rule of law, due process, accountability, transparency), the extent to which the behavior of institutions in both the ‘soft’ and the ‘hard’ environments accords with the prevailing governance ideals and with the innovation goals, how far human resource management practices aid or hinder innovation efforts, and above all, the ‘demonstration and snowball effect’ of the leaders’ noticeable acts. Needless to add that opportunities for, and benefits of, innovation will continue to elude a nation whose leaders and citizens choose divisiveness over inter-group bridge building, laxity over discipline, and pandering to the whims and caprices of the hard environment over uncompromising enforcement of its soft counterpart’s codes of virtuous conduct (Balogun, et al, 2025).

Consensus as innovation’s launchpad

The first precondition for the successful implementation of innovation is a broad measure of consensus on governance values, norms, and ideals. This consensus is, sometimes assured by affinity of language, culture, belief, as well as a shared history. At other times, consensus does not emerge spontaneously. It waits until explicit measures are adopted to build unity out of diversity. Regardless of whether it is inherited or fostered, unity cannot be sustained without a broad measure of agreement on the terms of association. That is why a typical state (whether of the monarchical or the republican type) starts with the promulgation of a constitution. Besides spelling out the constitutive ideals of state formation or what others term the fundamental principles of state policy, a typical constitution provides for the rights and obligations of the associating parties, enacts a framework for enforcing the “rules of the game”, and outlines the power and functions of key institutions, especially, the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary (Adriana and Balogun, 2005). The single, all-embracing, constitution will ideally supplant or override the edicts of sub-national units that might have been active before the emergence of the new, modern, state.

Institutions: custodians of tradition or change catalyst?

Government and public service leaders can hardly enforce order, much less, spearhead change, except with the support of institutions. As noted elsewhere, an institution’s primary function is to provide meaning to human interaction, create order and reduce uncertainty in society. It should not be viewed merely as an entity constituted solely by formal rules but also as one underpinned by values and beliefs (Alberti and Balogun, 2005). Broadly two types of institutions exist in sub-Saharan Africa, the formal and the informal.

The first category comprises the modern institutions bequeathed by the colonial authorities and operated by their post-independence successors. Established as an integral part of the ‘soft’ environment, these modern institutions are formally and

explicitly constituted, hierarchically structured, rules-bound, functionally specific, and underpinned by logical-positivist, or rationalist, principles. To give them an aura of mystery, it is not unusual to invest them with extraordinary qualities and to associate them with totems and taboos that would presumably govern the conduct of the institutions and the operators.

The second category of institutions is made up of the vast array of loosely organized informal groups and networks in the 'hard' environment. As indicated later, the hard environment is the domain of institutions carried over from the traditional, pre-colonial, society. Like the soft environment institutions, each of the non-state institutions faces ongoing challenges guided by its own aspirations as well as the ingrained norms, totems and taboos. However, unlike the formal institution which enforces its will, as stipulated by law, the hard environment institutions rely on age-old beliefs (and, at times, superstitions) to guide the members' behavior and ensure compliance with injunctions.

Soft environment institutions

The 'soft' environment, as here described, is one that is theoretically governed by law, underpinned by rationalist logic, and independent of personalities. Going by Talcott Parsons' pattern variables, the behavior of institutions located in this environment (especially, the legislative, the executive and the judicial branches of government) is supposed to be guided by the principles of affective neutrality, collectivity orientation, universalism, achievement (or merit), functional specificity.

The 'soft' environment institutions are almost invariably headed by a single sovereign. The title by which the sovereign--the custodian of the constitutive ideals--is known varies from one society to another. In a monarchy, the chief of state is a king or queen (assisted by a prime minister, ministers, provincial governors and other principal state officials). In a republic, the constitution normally provides for the office of president and commander-in-chief, the office of vice/deputy president, and, at times, that of prime minister, ministers, and provincial or state governors. Public service agencies (among them, the civil service, the police and the defence forces, the electoral commission) come under the executive branch. In executive-presidential systems, the president is the head of the executive branch and the career public service answers to him or to his proxies. In parliamentary systems, a prime minister not only presides over the cabinet but also oversees the day-to-day running of government. A defining attribute of a parliamentary form of government is the doctrine of 'collective responsibility'.

The executive branch is not the only principal state institution. In the contemporary world, a constitution will be deemed incomplete if it does not provide for the creation of two other branches of government, notably, the legislature and the judiciary. The legislature is the body formally charged with the responsibility for law-making, budget scrutiny, and general oversight. The judiciary, by contrast is the chamber in which disputes over the language, the intent, and the interpretation, of the law are adjudicated.

Taken together, these modern institutions (the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary) are located in the ‘soft’ environment. By the time they come of age, the institutions would have fallen into the hands of different personalities, rolled with good and bad times, and eventually have matured sufficiently to be set in their ways. The “tried and tested” ways of resolving state formation challenges define the character of each institution and provide the basis for order.

Under the supreme authority of the sovereign (the personification of the state), the ‘soft’ environment institutions, notably, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary, project an image of national unity and orderliness. As institutions with a national, cross-provincial, reach, they not only guarantee the order necessary to enforce the will of the modern state, but they also serve as vehicles for the formulation, implementation and adjudication of innovative policies, policies aimed at turning primordial, agrarian, societies, into modern ones.

The doctrine of Separation of Powers ensures that no branch of government will usurp the power of another or, except as provided for in the constitution, dictate how another should discharge its stipulated responsibilities. The delineation of functional boundaries is what ensures the effective operation of checks and balances in modern systems of government. However, a constitutional crisis sometimes erupts when the will of one branch clashes with another’s, and there is no forum at which the dispute could be resolved.

To ensure that disputes over power boundaries do not spin out of control, it has been suggested that a National Governance Summit be established to iron out differences between and among the three branches (Balogun, et al, 2025). Bringing together the head of state, the principal officers of the legislature and the judiciary, as well as representatives of the governing and the opposition parties, and civic bodies, the forum will serve as a clearinghouse for the arbitration of ongoing or unforeseen constitutional disputes. The summit will also serve as a vehicle for transmitting agreed reforms across alternating regimes (Balogun, et al, 2025).

Hard environment institutions

The modern institutions do not exist alone. Operating parallel to (and frequently, at odds with) the soft environment institutions are those located in the 'hard' environment. The later set of institutions includes primary and secondary ones like the family, the clan, the tribe, traditional chiefdoms, age grades, private sororities and secret societies, religious and sectarian bodies, civic, non-state, organizations, and political parties.

The standards by which the 'hard' environment institutions are judged contrast sharply with their soft opposite numbers' role expectations. Where modern institutions are required to be affectively neutral when discharging their responsibilities, the traditional ones are given to affectivity, sentiments, and emotions. In place of the soft environment's collectivity-orientation, the hard environment tolerates, and at times, applauds, 'self-orientation'. The other values underpinning the hard environment institutions are particularism (meaning, parochialism as against universalism), ascription (in place of achievement), and functional diffuseness or the discharge of multiple roles by one and the same person (instead of functional specificity or demarcation of functional boundaries).

From one republic to multiple fiefdoms

Innovation proceeds smoothly where the stakeholders subscribe to common governance and public service ideals. Without consensus, neither the soft nor the hard environment can command undivided allegiance. Where the hard environment serves as a divisive agent each institution located therein will proceed with its own notion of right and wrong, and the line separating the lawful from the unlawful will be constantly blurred. Where heterogeneity serves as a justification for anarchy, the soft environment's edicts will not be obeyed, and its writs will not run. If divisiveness is the enemy of order, it constitutes a singular threat to the implementation of change. Innovation stalls or derails completely at the point where the values and wishes of the soft environment conflict with those of its hard counterpart.

The state's presence may be visible, witness the vast array of officials that the citizens encounter daily. However, the state's impact on daily life is a different story. If elements in the 'hard' environment are not busy manipulating state institutions to serve personal ends--like a party in civil proceedings bribing registry officials and using the courts to harass his/her adversary--state agents may be found colluding with outside parties to frustrate their principal's will (Oba and Ismael, 2020; and Omole, 2019(a)).

The challenge facing many sub-Saharan African countries can in fact be summarized as how to balance the soft environment's (the modern state's) developmental, nation-building, thrusts with the informal networks' retrogressive, primeval, self-seeking, inclinations. The single, presumably indivisible, republic that the colonial administrations handed over to each of the newly independent states is likely to compete with the splintered fiefdoms in the hard environment. Unless government and public service leaders move proactively to impose a modicum of order and to banish emotions with reason, allegiance to one republic is likely to give way to conflicting allegiances and derail the modern state's innovation plans. Among the informal networks that the leaders must watch are those that directly or indirectly interfere with the work of public administration. A few have already been mentioned--family groupings, ethnic and cultural associations, faith groups, civic organizations, secret societies, street and neighbourhood gangs, and political parties.

The formally constituted republic (meaning, the soft environment and its institutions) frequently demands adherence to a uniform set of rules. Among these are the rules requiring actors to be objective, public spirited, universalistic in outlook, devoted to the cause of merit and achievement, confined to their areas of specialization and authority precincts. By contrast, the informal networks operating in the 'hard' environment live by their own notions of right and wrong, their own ideals, and their own rules. Popping up like unwanted children in familiar or unexpected places, the fiefdoms are wont to counter the soft environment's stipulations with their own "rules of the game". They, the loosely organized fiefdoms, are liable to scorn objectivity and submit to emotions; to sacrifice collectivity-orientation at the altar of self-interest; to disparage merit and embrace nepotism; to view public challenges from narrow ethno-religious, instead of 'national', angles; and to ignore functional and authority boundaries (Balogun et al, 2025).

The typical formal, soft environment, institution is founded on a combination of law and reason. It thereby expects all to be treated equally. By contrast, its traditional equivalent is not averse to relatives enjoying privileges denied to "outsiders". This is based on the engrained belief that failure to bend public rules in favor of a needy family member risks courting the wrath of the ancestors and making the gods angry. Unfortunately, the modern setting in which the soft meets the hard environment has not succeeded in resolving the ensuing contradictions. So it is that a public decision which makes the gods of one community mad is liable to make another community's gods gleeful, possibly, ecstatic. One singular challenge facing the contemporary modern state is how to get followers of rival gods to obey the unified state's law and to submit to the dictates of reason.

In the meantime, the conflict of mindsets cannot but give way to moral ambiguity. It is this ambiguity which allows actors in both the soft and the hard environments to serve narrow parochial and individual self interests, engage in fictive thinking, rationalize plainly bad behavior, and evade responsibility for untoward developments. Whatever plan the soft environment may have to implement beneficial innovations (e.g., reform of the law enforcement and security sector, process re-engineering ending with the revitalization of justice administration, and tax and revenue administration reform designed to control rising governance costs) is all but sure to be disrupted by individuals and groups acting under the influence of the 'hard' environment. Moles planted in the law enforcement and security agencies by hard environment actors will sooner look out for their personal or their sponsors' interests than secure citizens' life and property.

Human resource management practices and innovation

Innovation proceeds smoothly where merit, competence and accomplishments are the paramount considerations in the recruitment, discipline, and deployment of staff. Innovation plans derail where human resource management decisions are based on pre-modern considerations, such as self-orientation, particularism, ascription (i.e., family or ethnic ties), failure to demarcate functional boundaries and enforce accountability, and the emotions and moods of each decisionmaker.

Considering their impact on the implementation of change, motivation and incentives must also be accorded high priority in human resource management practices. The measures to be instituted here go beyond pay and bonuses. They include the application of sound human relations and team building techniques. Effective management of diversity, a subject so far overlooked, must now be one of the aims of human resource management. Sound management of diversity management entails, among other things, acknowledging staff members' strengths and assisting to them to overcome their weaknesses, recognition of their contributions, eschewing favoritism in all forms, and adopting a participative and inclusive approach at brainstorming and decision-making stages.

Demonstration effect of leadership choices

Whether the soft environment will successfully resist its hard opposite number's unsavory influences and forge ahead with innovation depends largely on the leaders' choices. Unless discipline starts from the top, not only will innovation plans persistently go sideways, but the system will also constantly malfunction. *The evil that leaders do will not wait until after they leave office to cause maximum damage.* It will live with the leaders to undermine the morale and motivation of the

workforce, sabotage the implementation of programmed objectives, and wreck innovation plans.

High-level indiscipline takes various forms. It includes leaving gaping moral and the accompanying image questions unanswered; preventing key institutions from performing their designated functions; outright disdain for justice, the rule of law and due process; tempering with election results; frequent and unwarranted politicization of ongoing challenges; pampering of cronies in the full view of hardworking but unacknowledged contemporaries; blatant nepotism and cronyism; inclination towards weird and arbitrary exercise of power; granting corrupt political associates immunity from prosecution; tolerance of mediocrity and bad behavior; failure to establish information storage and retrieval mechanisms; as well as reluctance to hold government agencies accountable for accomplishments and for lapses.

Fortunately, an increasing number of government and public service leaders have begun to acknowledge the need to impose order and enforce discipline as a first step in the design, implementation, and consolidation of innovative service delivery initiatives.

The next section highlights the development and related challenges facing the African continent and their implications for public governance and service innovation. The third highlights the steps taken to respond to the challenges and to implement governance and public service innovation. The fourth and final section identifies the additional measures that should be adopted to extend and consolidate reform gains.

Africa's Development Challenges: Background to the quest for Governance and Public Service Innovation

Africa is confronted with challenges that call for the application of innovative, or at least, unconventional responses. In fact, the more one follows the Africa's arduous journey from the 1960s to date, the more compelling is the question why is it that the continent has remained stationary for so long while the rest of the world was constantly on the move. If Africa has been moving but remains stuck at the same spot, it is probably because it has been running at a slower pace than economies that were formerly behind it, and those that had always been ahead of it. That still does not explain the whys and wherefores of Africa's stagnation.

In the 1960s, the then newly independent African countries dreamt of 'catching up with' the developed economies. That hope has since been dashed. Asian economies that were less developed than their African counterparts in the 1960s—economies that had earlier been dismissed as basket cases--have since risen from

penury to join the ranks of the Newly Industrialized Asian economies. Meanwhile, African economies have either stagnated or grown at a slower pace. The 2021-2024 snapshot provided by Table 1 partly reveals the gravity of Africa's economic situation vis-a-vis the other regions.

Table 1: Real GDP Growth, 2021-2024 (%)				
	2021	2022	2023	2024
World	6.3	3.5	3.2	3.2
Advanced Economies	5.7	2.6	1.6	1.7
United States	5.8	1.9	2.5	2.7
Euro Area	5.9	3.4	0.4	0.8
Japan	2.6	1.0	1.9	0.9
Other Advanced Economies	5.8	2.7	1.8	2.0
Developing Economies	7.0	4.1	4.3	4.2
Developing Asia	7.7	4.4	5.6	5.2
Developing Europe	7.5	1.2	3.2	3.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	7.3	4.2	2.3	2.0
Middle East & Central Asia	4.5	5.3	2.0	2.8
Africa	4.9	4.0	3.2	3.5

Sources: IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2024, and Afreximbank Research

Africa ranks low in terms of GDP per capita. It is not difficult to understand why no African economy makes the list of the ten countries with the highest GDP per capita (See Table 2). However, it is telling, though difficult to understand, that the countries with the lowest GDP per capita are all, with the exception of Yemen, African (Table 3)!

Table 2: Top 10 Countries with the Highest GDP per Capita (US Dollars)

COUNTRY	GDP PER CAPITA - IMF 2025
Luxembourg	\$141,080
Switzerland	\$111,716
Ireland	\$107,243
Singapore	\$93,956
Norway	\$90,320
Iceland	\$90,111
United States	\$89,678
Macau	\$84,276
Qatar	\$72,760
Denmark	\$71,967

Table 3: 10 Countries with the Lowest GDP per Capita in the World (US Dollars)

COUNTRY	GDP PER CAPITA - IMF 2025
Burundi	\$157
South Sudan	\$334
Malawi	\$448
Yemen	\$455
Central African Republic	\$549
Madagascar	\$576
Sudan	\$595
Mozambique	\$685
DR Congo	\$744
Niger	\$752

Source: United Nations

It gets worse. Between 1960 and 2023, the gap between the developed and the African economies widened considerably (see Table 4). Equally significant, economies that were less developed than Africa's in the 1960s have, under visionary and transformational leadership, since shed their basket-case image and have been assimilated into the ranks of economically formidable Asia Tigers and the Newly Industrialized economies.

Table 4: Per capita GDP: Africa, Asia, and World Averages, 1960-2023

Year	Per capita GDP (world average in US Dollars)	Africa's Per capita GDP (US Dollars)	Africa per capita GDP as % of World Average	Per capital GNI (Thailand, South Korea and other Asian economies)	Africa's GDP as % of Asia average	
1960	\$3,690	\$1,320	35.8%	\$300	440 %	
1990	\$7,170	\$1,458	20.3%	Not available	Not available	
2023	\$13,920	\$2,273	16.3%	\$19,900	11.4%	

Source: Compiled from data obtained from Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, Banji, and Abejirin, Oyebanke, 2024, *From Reversal of Fortune to Economic Resurgence: Industrialization and Leadership in Asia's Prosperity and Nigeria's Progress* (London: Anthem Press)

In 1960, the average GDP per capita worldwide was US\$3,690, while Africa's stood at US\$1,320 (roughly 35.8 per cent of global total). The World Bank's Economic Outlook database of 1962 clearly indicates that, in terms of GNI per capita, practically all the Asian countries that are today hailed for their economic accomplishments were less developed than comparable African economies. For instance, at a time when Africa posted a GDP per capita of US\$1,320, Malaysia's GNI per capita was \$300, and Philippines' was \$210. Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea even scored lower, with each posting GNI per capita of just US\$100.

By 1990, the global per capita GDP on average reached US\$7,170, while Africa's average was US\$1,458, representing 20.3 per cent of global average. In 2023, the global average GDP per capita was US\$13,920 while Africa's stood at US\$2,273 (or a mere 16.3 per cent of the global average). Asia's average GDP per capita in 2023 is US\$19,900, meaning that Africa's figure is 11.4 per cent that of Asia (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Abejirin, 2024).

While African economies were moving at a slow pace, the population was growing rapidly. The annual average rate of population growth in the last 30 years is 2.6 percent. This is higher than the global average of 1.5 percent. Between 1980 and 2015, the continent's population grew by 708 million, leaving the current total at 1,546,090,113. This represents 18.83 percent of total world population.

Roughly 45 percent of Africa’s population live in urban areas. Nigeria alone accounts for an average annual growth of 3.1 million¹.

Table 5: Countries with the Highest Human Development Index (HDI) in 2023

COUNTRY	HDI 2023
Iceland	0.972
Switzerland	0.970
Norway	0.970
Denmark	0.962
Germany	0.959
Sweden	0.959
Australia	0.958
Netherlands	0.955
Hong Kong	0.955
Belgium	0.951

Source: UNDP

With resources shrinking and the population growing by leaps and bounds, it is not surprising that Africa consistently ranks low on the human development index. Access to basic services—like jobs, education, health, electricity, potable water, environmental sanitation, police protection, fair and expeditious justice dispensation—is highly restricted on the continent. No African country is on the list of the top ten countries with the highest HDI scores (Table 5). With the exception of Yemen, all the countries with the lowest HDI scores are in Africa (Table 6). If it is any consolation, Mauritius is among countries with “Very High” HDI scores, followed by South Africa and Botswana (“High”). The others in the “Medium” HDI category are Angola, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Table 6: 10 Countries with the Lowest Human Development Index (HDI)

COUNTRY	HDI 2023
South Sudan	0.388
Somalia	0.404
Central African Republic	0.414
Chad	0.416
Niger	0.419
Mali	0.419
Burundi	0.439

¹ Worldometer and the United Nations

COUNTRY	HDI 2023
Burkina Faso	0.459
Sierra Leone	0.467
Yemen	0.470

Poverty is the enemy of peace. The constant struggle for access to material resources probably explains the rising incidence of conflict and civil strife across the continent. While North and Southern Africa are largely peaceful, West Africa and the Sahel region are the epicentre of banditry, terrorism, and kidnapping. Between 2011 and 2021, approximately 34,000 Nigerians were killed by kidnappers and bandits. This number does not include the 23,000 victims of Boko Haram attacks in the Northeast (Moghalu, 2021). According to Nigeria's Security Tracker 484 kidnapping cases were reported across Nigeria in 2017. The number increased to 987 the following year, to 1,386 in 2019, and to 2,860 in 2020. In the first six months of 2021 alone, 2,844 were reported to have been kidnapped (Balogun, 2022:21). Frequent clashes between cattle herders, looking for grazing land, and farmers, protecting their crops, have slowed down activity in the food and agriculture sector. The outcome was a worsening food crisis, one that would take the application of policy analytic and conflict arbitration techniques to de-escalate.

Frequent attacks on military installations and civilians have also spiked in recent years. According to an estimate, the number of persons killed in militant raids in 2024 is 18,900². Moving into ungoverned spaces, militant groups are reported to have carried out attacks in West Africa, the Sahel region, and the Horn of Africa, particularly, Somalia.

Responding to Africa's development challenges: governance and public service innovation priorities

If, as generally believed, the Africa continent is endowed with abundant human and natural resources, what plausible explanation can one offer for its stunted growth? While taking note of other intervening variables, leadership failure will appear as the pivot around which these variables revolve. Overcoming the structural and other obstacles to growth and to peace, at the minimum, calls for a new class of leaders, specifically, visionary and transformational leaders that are imbued with the determination, and are ready to assemble the brains needed, to turn the continent around. In plain language, Africa needs men and women with

² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Infographic*, 18 February 2025, "Militant Islamist Groups in Africa Sustain High Pace of Lethality", <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2025-militant-islamist-groups-in-africa/>

brains in the heads, fires in their bellies, and the will to design and implement innovation projects with optimum benefit.

At least four topics should feature prominently on the leaders' governance and public service innovation agenda. These are constitution reform, particularly, reform geared towards the consolidation of democracy and the advance of good governance; institution recalibration and strengthening (including the liberation of the soft environment from its hard counterpart's stifling and corrupting grip); revitalization of service delivery processes; and monitoring and evaluation of service delivery gains and deficits.

Constitution reform

It is natural to ask why individuals should give up fractions of their rights and pledge allegiance to the state leviathan. This question was skirted by many African countries in the immediate post-independence period. Instead of embracing democracy as conventionally understood, these countries took citizen obedience for granted, replacing multi-party competition with one-party, one-party dominant, and in extreme cases, outright military rule.

The struggle for democracy and popular participation thus dates back a long time. The major driving force was the severe economic crisis of the 1980s which entailed the implementation of draconian Structural Adjustment Programs/SAPs. The 1990s uprising was, however, different from the military overthrow of civilian regimes in the 1960s. By the 1990s, not only civilian, but also military regimes had become targets of popular resentment. French-speaking West and Central African countries led the way, with the convocation of Sovereign National Conferences in Benin, Mali, Gabon, Congo (Brazzaville, as it was then known), and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo). Participants at these 1990s conferences included representatives of political parties, civil society organizations, and the military. The outcome of their deliberations was mostly the promulgation of new draft constitutions paving the way for the emergence of multi-party democracy.

In no time, the convulsion set off by the Sovereign National Conferences in Francophone West Africa had spread to countries under one-party or military rule elsewhere. Among countries that ditched one-party or military rule in favour of multi-party competition in the 1990s are Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Liberia, Senegal, and Nigeria. By the time the Arab Spring of 2010 turned into the Arab Winter around 2012, one-party dominant states like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had themselves witnessed a fair degree of turbulence.

Despite recent advances in the march towards democracy, a few challenges persist. Widening trust deficit is one of such challenges. According to a study carried out in Nigeria in 2024, two classes of state officials (31 percent of political officeholders as against 50 percent career officials that participated in a national survey) rank the level of citizen trust in state officials low. The assessment by the non-state respondents (civic actors, taxpayers, service beneficiaries) to the survey questionnaire was even more critical, with 62 percent of the non-state respondents rating citizen trust in state officials either “low” or “very low” (Balogun, et al, 2025:161;198). Growing voter apathy and declining voter turnout are other manifestations of the widening trust deficit.

Yet, innovation cannot proceed smoothly unless the trust deficit is narrowed. This entails seizing the opportunity for constitutional reform to build a broad measure of consensus around a few abiding values, notably, the constitutive ideals of liberty, citizen sovereignty, democracy, popular participation, justice, due process, accountability, transparency, and merit-based inclusiveness. This naturally warrants ensuring the effective participation of those so far excluded from conversations on constitutional review and amendment. Conversations about substantial amendments of the constitution (especially, proposals on state restructuring, devolution, power sharing and/or rotation, revenue allocation, impeachment and recall, and legitimization of constitutional amendments at plebiscites and referenda) should no longer be restricted to an elite-dominated body, like the legislature, but should be thrown open to the public at large.

Institution recalibration and strengthening

The institutions that will implement successful innovation projects will not only be rational and law-abiding but will also be collectivity-oriented, autonomous, unprejudiced, and predictable. In other words, the institutions will exhibit the attributes similar to those of institutions that have powered the development of modern industrial societies. Such institutions are rare in Africa. Most have succumbed to the dictates of strong personalities, and the wiles of the hard environment.

Unfortunately, and except in a few instances (like in Mauritius, Botswana, Mandela’s South Africa, as well as Jerry Rawlings’ and John Mahama’s Ghana) the discipline needed to transform weak, anything-goes, institutions into strong, achievement-oriented ones is yet to be enforced. Worse still, institution recalibration and strengthening is not often listed as a core element of governance and public service reform. President John Mahama’s innovative approach to governance deserves to be highlighted. Launching a Code of Conduct for political officeholders on 6 May 2025, the President demonstrated

the will to rein in the ‘hard’ environment and keep it in its lane. Warning that there would be no sacred cows, he declared that the Code of Conduct aimed at nothing less than “a new political culture grounded in transparency, humility, and ethical leadership”. Specifically, the Code required all political appointees to:

- Serve the public with integrity and impartiality
- Place the national interest above personal interests
- Avoid misuse of office or state resources
- Declare and manage any potential conflict of interest
- Eschew opulence and be accountable for the use of public funds
- Demonstrate humility in service, measured language, and respect for citizens
- Refrain from insider-trading practices (like the purchase, either in one’s name or in the names of fronts, of government land, vehicles, and assets and shares).

Gift-giving, a traditional practice, that frequently served as a cloak for exchange of favors, was, under the Code to be firmly regulated, with public officials forbidden to accept gifts (or favors) from entities that had business relations with the government. Above all, political appointees could no longer recommend relatives for contract awards or for public employment³.

Hopefully, Ghana’s Code of Conduct will back its intent with action. The public must remain vigilant and take advantage of the opportunity provided on the dedicated whistleblowers’ portal to report violations. Similarly, the President’s Office must stick to its promise not to allow exemptions or give sacred cows safe passage. Also, it is expected that the next generation of reform in African countries as a whole will include explicit plans to transform public institutions into agents reputed for consistency and reliability, predictability, achievement-orientation, innovativeness, transparency and responsiveness. This will require government and public service leaders enforcing discipline at all levels and acting decisively to liberate the soft environment from its hard counterpart’s corrupting influences. The leaders must ensure that the soft environment’s will prevails over the hard environment’s fantasies and foibles. Where the soft environment’s process is proved to be irrational, wasteful, or otherwise problematic, the leaders must move proactively to establish a formal process for altering, re-installing, and faithfully operating it.

³ Code of conduct for political officeholders in Ghana
https://youtu.be/3AoVgWV2T_Y?si=D92DLRvU6FXeLCoB

Revitalization of service delivery processes

Service delivery is one field that will benefit immensely from process review and re-engineering. Again, except for countries like Mauritius, Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, and, to some extent, Ghana, the services provided by public agencies tend to be supply-driven. The usual practice is for each agency to decide the quantity, quality, time schedule, and cost of public goods to produce, and to confront the service beneficiaries with a “take-it-or-leave-it” ultimatum. It does not matter whether the service is issuance of visas, responding to crime victim alerts, collecting fees and charges. Innovation will usher in a new era in government-citizen relations, an era when public agencies cease unilaterally deciding what services to offer and telling the service beneficiaries when enough is enough. Other priorities in service delivery innovation are:

- Establishment of customer-oriented standards and indicators (based on indices of government effectiveness, notably, input, output, time, and quality indices);
- Drafting and ultimate promulgation of Service Pledges;
- Review, re-engineering, and simplification of systems and procedures (to eliminate cumbersome, wasteful, and time-consuming procedures, elongated but redundant decision layers; thirteenth signatures, complicated form filling);
- Redesign of service perimeters (to facilitate seamless service delivery, provide for comfortable waiting lounges, impose a queue order, display service directories conspicuously, and provide service beneficiaries help desk support);
- Customer-care training for service delivery agents and for beneficiaries;
- Internal, within-agency, and beneficiary evaluation of service quality.

Monitoring and evaluation of service delivery gains and deficits

Regular monitoring of the impact of service delivery innovation is necessary to spot aberrations and consolidate gains. Among the instruments for the monitoring and evaluation of impact are individual performance appraisal or evaluation forms, ministerial/agency performance contracts and delivery reports, ICT software for monitoring program accomplishments on a dashboard, *in real time*, and the conduct of beneficiary/customer satisfaction surveys either by service delivery outlets or by external consultants.

Transformational leadership, innovative human resource management practices and quality service: the nexus

Institutions are as good as those operating them. A self-oriented, self-absorbed, employee will scarcely grasp the concept of public spiritedness. A parochial manager will always see national challenges from his/her tribe's standpoint. A beneficiary of patronage can hardly be expected to acquit himself in a job, say, web or software design, for which he lacks prior preparation.

What the preceding examples demonstrate is the necessity to ensure a good fit between, on the one hand, the jobs to be carried out, and, on the other, the education, skills, aptitudes and temperaments required for exemplary performance. Here lies the relevance of transformational leadership. Leaders that are anxious to turn Africa's economies around and reposition them for the challenges of global competitiveness must first start by assembling the best brains and task them with the responsibility for finding solutions to make-or-break challenges. The leaders must move quickly away from patronage or spoils system to open, competitive personnel recruitment.

Kenya's approach to the recruitment of the country's Chief Justice represents to-date the most reliable method of balancing the demand for inclusiveness with the considerations of merit and competence. As provided for under Article 166 of the Kenyan Constitution, the process starts with a vacancy announcement inviting applications from qualified and interested individuals. Thereafter, the Judicial Service Commission constitutes a Selection Panel which shortlists candidates based on the advertised requirements. The Judicial Service Commission then recommends the most qualified to the National Assembly which may decide to hold public hearings to assess the qualifications of the top candidate(s). The Assembly eventually forwards its own recommendation to the President for approval.

Since patronage is a tool that political actors customarily apply to acquire and consolidate power, throwing vacancies open to competition represents is likely to encounter stiff resistance. Yet, this is one personnel selection innovation whose time has come. Without open competitive recruitment, government leaders will succeed only in slotting their favourites in cushy jobs but will find it difficult staffing public offices with competent individuals, enlisting the spontaneous support of the workforce, or embarking on the revitalization of the economy. The sense of belonging that is critical to the success of governance and public service innovation efforts will be lacking where *all are called but only a few are arbitrarily chosen*. As it so happens, favouritism in personnel selection is corruption's passageway. An

observer's comment on the judiciary is illustrative, "If the appointment of judges are not based on merit, corruption would have been introduced from the very beginning."⁴

Open competitive personnel selection is of course only one of the mechanisms for aligning human resource management with the goals of development and innovation. Throwing vacancies open for competition is, to put it differently, a necessary but insufficient condition for successful revitalization of governance and public service institutions. Equally critical to the success of innovation efforts are the implementation of a job-related and competency-based training program; the installation of tools and mechanisms for performance standard setting, performance monitoring and evaluation, and enforcement of discipline. Finally, it is necessary to embrace practices which enhance rank-and-file morale, promote esprit de corps, and optimize the benefits, while minimizing the costs, of diversity.

Needless to add that failure to institute changes in human resource management practices will undermine ongoing governance and public service innovation efforts. Take Ghana's recently launched Code of Conduct for example. Unless the Code is backed by a corresponding shakeup of human resource management practices, it (the Code) will go the way of its predecessor, and of comparable ethical rebirth initiatives launched elsewhere⁵ with fanfare one minute and discarded the next (Sakyi and Nyigmah, 2010; Rasheed and Balogun, 1993; and Wamalwa and Balogun, 2000; Tanzania Leadership Code, 1973).

Conclusion

To reap maximum benefits from governance and public service innovation, it is necessary to get a grip on the environment, especially, the 'hard' environment which has persistently constituted itself into a stumbling block in the discharge of its soft counterpart's statutory functions. As part of the effort at liberating the soft from the hard environment's suffocating grip, government and public service leaders must reaffirm the values underpinning the operation of governance and

⁴ Omole, Charles, 2019, "Some Remedies to Judicial Corruption in Nigeria", April 10 2019, <https://thenigerialawyer.com/some-remedies-to-judicial-corruption-in-nigeria-by-dr-charles-omole/>.

See also Anene, C.P. and Iyala O. Theodore, 2023, "Corruption in the Nigerian Judicial System: The Way Forward", *International Journal of Advanced Research in Global Politics, Governance, and Management*, Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2023, p. 161-162

⁵ Countries that had at one time or the other introduced codes of conduct for public officers, but in which the codes were honoured more in the breach than in the observance, include Ghana itself, Nigeria, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Others are Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and much later, South Africa

public service institutions. Restoring the credibility of the institutions will be the first step towards repositioning them for the challenges of structural transformation, economic resurgence, and political stability. With the foundation duly laid, attention should shift to the inculcation of a culture of service. This will entail the MDAs working collaboratively with non-state actors to draft and promulgate Service Charters and Pledges for various categories of service. This should be followed by the preparation of codes of conduct for different classes of public officers, political functionaries and career officials, included. Monitoring and evaluation, as well as competency-based training, should also be integrated into the quality service programme. To ensure that training serves its purpose, due consideration should be given to periodic conduct of training needs surveys.

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