The political-administrative interface

The key to good public sector governance and effectiveness in Commonwealth Africa

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Introduction

A successful political-administrative interface within the public service is at the core of good public sector governance and effectiveness, which in turn is critical for improved public service delivery and the achievement of national development goals. Although improving public sector effectiveness in service delivery and facilitating socio-economic development in Africa has been at the centre of the development debate in the last few decades, strengthening the political-administrative interface has not received as much attention as it deserves.

Quality leadership that focuses on the common good has been identified by most public sector practitioners, academics and commentators as one of the key factors that will enable most African countries to realise the visions included in their national vision statements. In the context of the public service, this leadership is at political, technical and administrative levels. While there has been commendable effort among many Commonwealth African countries to develop the capacity of administrative leadership, most technical leaders and political leaders have not been adequately exposed to formal leadership training. This has, in some cases, contributed to leadership challenges that undermine the effectiveness of government ministries and departments to deliver the necessary outputs and outcomes in order to realise their national development aspirations.

Another important aspect of leadership that has not been given adequate attention is the interface between political and non-political leadership in the management of government business. Experiences of most Commonwealth countries in Africa indicate that a negative and/or non-productive relationship between a minister and a principal secretary, for example, can divide a ministry, turn it into a micro-political battlefield and undermine its overall effectiveness. A positive relationship between these two on the other hand can motivate the whole organisation to deliver, regardless of the level of technical, managerial and leadership competencies of the minister.

This paper defines and discusses the political-administrative interface by looking at the relationships between ministers and principal secretaries. It draws from the experiences of Commonwealth countries in Africa that came to light during workshops for cabinet ministers and principal secretaries, held by the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Governance and Institutional Development Division (GiDD) between 2005 and 2009. These workshops enabled ministers and principal secretaries to appreciate the principles of good governance, the importance of a high performing public service, their respective roles, and how they can work together effectively to enable government to achieve its strategic goals.

What is the political-administrative interface and why is it important?

Defining the political-administrative interface is critical to understanding why this interface is important for good public sector governance and effectiveness. Miller and McTavish (2009) define the political-administrative interface as ‘the intersection of leadership roles within...a tradition of a dichotomous relationship between political and administrative realms’. This definition implies that although the roles of elected and appointed politicians are traditionally distinct from those of professional and career civil servants, this distinction is becoming increasingly blurred as the roles intersect at a certain point. It is this point of intersection that normally creates conflict between ministers and their principal secretaries and therefore needs to be carefully managed for the two to effectively work together for the common good. But who manages that point of intersection? Ideally, it needs to be managed by the minister, the principal secretary and the person who connects civil servants to politicians – the Head of Public Services, who also serves as Cabinet Secretary in most Commonwealth countries.

Good governance requires separation of the political functions from the administrative/technical ones, while at the same time ensuring a clear point of connection between the two, since both functions are mutually reinforcing. The minister’s role must be clearly documented and must not overlap with that of the principal secretary. While ministers set the policy agenda based on the political manifestos of the ruling party, principal secretaries ensure that adequate technical input and advice is provided and that policies are implemented effectively. Both offices need each other and neither one can succeed without the other. The two offices should, therefore, be in sync in the pursuit of the common good, co-operating and collaborating at all times.

Ministers are accountable to parliament and the electorate for the performance of their ministries and the entire executive branch of government, which includes the public service. The performance of ministries and the entire public service, however, depends on civil servants who are led and managed by the principal secretaries. Ministers, therefore, need to develop and maintain harmonious
and collaborative relationships with their principal secretaries in order for them to succeed as politicians.

Principal secretaries are accountable for the performance of their ministries to their ministers, Cabinet and, to some extent, parliament. A principal secretary has to provide sound, honest, professional and comprehensive advice to his/her minister to ensure that the minister’s decisions and actions are compatible with the priorities and operations of the ministry and the public service as a whole. A principal secretary who fails to provide the minister with sound and honest advice fails to deliver on the obligation of his/her position, while a minister who does not follow the principal’s sound advice might complete his/her tenure without making a significant contribution to society. The consequence is that the nation suffers as citizens fail to receive the services they deserve, while the ministry’s failure to deliver compromises the realisation of national development aspirations.

Ministers may not necessarily come from a technical or public service background. This means their policy decisions must depend on the informed and honest advice they receive from their principal secretary and other civil servants. Even ministers with good technical backgrounds require the support of the principal secretary, who is responsible for managing all resources (including human resources) in a ministry. Civil servants, however competent and experienced they might be technically, also require policy direction from ministers, since they are the ones mandated by the people to govern and to deliver on the development needs of the people. Ministers and principal secretaries cannot, therefore, work independently of each other, as both are required for any government to realise national development aspirations.

Roles of ministers and principal secretaries

The minister’s role

Ministers are members of the executive arm of government and have both a collective and individual role. As a collective, ministers support the head of state and government to ensure that the change that society desires happens. They are responsible for making sure that the promises they make to the electorate through the political manifesto are delivered. They also support the head of state and government in promoting and defending government policies, decisions and actions. They are collectively accountable for the government’s performance, whether good or bad. Ministers must speak for and defend other ministers to the public. This requires a minister to have a comprehensive understanding of other portfolios and the programmes, projects and services in those portfolios, as well as the progress that is being made.

As individuals, ministers are political heads of their ministries and also the ministry’s public face. They set the policy agenda for their respective ministry, based on the overall government policy framework and the political manifesto, and provide political direction and guidance for their ministry to realise strategic policy goals critical for national development. Ministers also help to mobilise financial resources for policy implementation; articulate their ministry’s programmes and priorities in Cabinet; and provide information on their ministry’s performance to parliament and the electorate. In the African context, the public looks up to ministers to deliver on the political manifesto and the promises made during their political campaigns. This is why members of the public channel questions on development to ministers through their Members of Parliament. Sometimes, the public demand certain development projects directly from relevant ministers, particularly if the ministers are their Members of Parliament.

Ministers should not be involved in the day-to-day management of their ministry, nor in the hiring and firing of civil servants.

The principal secretary’s role

The principal secretary, as chief advisor to the minister and the administrative/technical head of a ministry, has a vital leadership and management role. He/she offers technical advice on policy issues in the most objective, impartial and professional way, and provides the minister with options to choose from. The principal secretary also plays a very critical role in ensuring that the minister settles into his/her role and functions effectively. This entails briefing the minister on the ministry’s goals, programmes, projects and constraints; providing information on general government procedures and operations on a regular basis; and ensuring that the minister does not become involved in conflicts of interest or embroiled in any form of impropriety. The principal secretary must also promote and defend the minister’s decisions, even if the decision made goes against the advice of the principal secretary, thus allowing the minister to maintain his/her integrity.

As a leader, the principal secretary ensures that policies related to the ministry are translated into action, that the necessary resources are mobilised, and that the civil servants under them are inspired to deliver on the ministry’s performance agenda. As a manager, the principal secretary ensures that the necessary resources are effectively utilised in order to attain the ministry’s strategic goals. The principle secretary is, in short, the bridge between policy intentions and the outcomes of policy implementation, as well as the link between the minister and the ministry’s civil servants.

Finally, as a member of the senior management team within the public service, the principal secretary is involved in the management of the entire public service, together with other principal secretaries under the leadership of the Head of Public Services.

Establishing, nurturing and sustaining an effective political-administrative interface

There are many positive examples in Commonwealth Africa of ministers and principal secretaries working together successfully and supporting each other to achieve the common good. There are, however, other examples where the relationship between ministers and principal secretaries has not been properly established or successfully maintained. The next section discusses how a positive relationship can be established, nurtured and sustained, based on common challenges experienced in most Commonwealth countries.

Establishing and sustaining mutual trust

Trust is the bedrock of any effective relationship. It is difficult for ministers and principal secretaries to effectively work together in a relationship of mistrust. Trust is normally eroded when a principal
secretary provides the minister with the wrong advice, embarrasses him/her, or when misunderstanding arises. Mistrust in the majority of cases can lead to a culture of blame, even where there is no cause for blame. For example, during one of the joint workshops, one of the principal secretaries said that principal secretaries were not able to deliver on most programmes and projects because of lack of political will – a common excuse for bureaucrats. When one of the senior ministers requested the principal secretary to give an example of what they had proposed and which Cabinet had not approved, the principal secretary was not able to give any evidence of lack of political will. This is an example of how mistrust can lead to misperception, which can consequently lead to a culture of blame.

Managing different backgrounds

Most politicians in Africa become ministers by virtue of securing a parliamentary seat on the back of the ruling party, and may come from different backgrounds. In a few countries such as Mozambique, ministers are not necessarily Members of Parliament, and have to relinquish their position as a Member of Parliament once they are appointed minister. Some ministers may not have public service experience or a thorough understanding of public service regulations and operations at the time of taking up their ministerial position. Principal secretaries, on the other hand, are appointed by virtue of their technical/administrative knowledge as well as their experience in the public service. They generally have sound knowledge of the operations and regulations of the public service.

Conflicts usually arise when a principal secretary fails to brief the minister adequately on important matters, or conducts business with the underlying belief that the minister does not understand the issues. In such instances, the minister feels undermined and may sometimes use his political power to make the principal secretary’s life difficult. In other cases, a principal secretary may be very supportive, but the minister may feel uncomfortable working with a highly technical and experienced principal secretary and so may abuse his/her power against the principle secretary. Both scenarios are not conducive to a productive working relationship.

One of the proposals that were put forward in the joint workshops for ministers and principal secretaries was the need for ministers to go through an induction programme once they were appointed; this would enable them to better understand the operations of government, including rules and procedures, as well as their roles as ministers. Another proposal was the need for principal secretaries to prepare a brief for the new minister on all the ministry’s policies, programmes, projects and operations, as well as on all the stakeholders of the ministry and how the ministry interacts or is supposed to interact with them. The principal secretary should also ensure that the minister has the latest information regarding the ministry at all times.

Respect and understanding between the two offices is critical. Principal secretaries need to respect their ministers regardless of their background, because the political leader is more senior.

Managing the intricacy of the roles of ministers and principal secretaries

In the 1960s and 70s, ministers in Commonwealth Africa were more dependent on the advice of principal secretaries. Since the 1980s, however, the role of ministers has changed to the extent that most ministers are not only involved in policy-making, but are also interested in ensuring that those policies and relevant programmes and projects are effectively implemented. As more educated ministers with public sector experience are coming on the scene, the tendency for ministers to do much more than their predecessors is increasing, with some of them performing roles that traditionally belong to the principal secretary. It is very natural for ministers to sometimes usurp the roles of a principal secretary, particularly when a minister perceives that the principal secretary is not being supportive.

A comment made during one of the joint workshops was that politicians should understand and stick to their roles and stop becoming ‘super’ principal secretaries, since providing political leadership is very different from management of a ministry. One can also argue that if the principal secretary does his/her job well and supports the minister, then the minister would not feel undermined and want to assume the responsibility of a principal secretary. Both parties have to realise that they need each other to succeed, and the strengths of each office need to be acknowledged.

Some African Commonwealth countries, such as Swaziland, hold both the minister and principal secretary accountable for the effectiveness of the ministry in producing the intended outputs and outcomes. The current Prime Minister of Swaziland, the Right Honourable Dr Barnabas Sibusiso Dlamini, has introduced performance contracts for ministers and principal secretaries. The Swaziland Government recognises that it takes both a minister and a principal secretary to perform their roles well for the ministry to produce the necessary outputs and outcomes. Conflict can arise if one party believes the other party is not performing its role effectively, as neither party can be effective without the other. It is therefore critical for the two to be in continuous dialogue on the ministry’s performance.

Managing the multiple roles of ministers

Most ministers are also Members of Parliament. They therefore have a responsibility in government, in parliament and in their respective constituencies. As ministers, they are accountable to parliament and the electorate in relation to the performance of their ministry. As Members of Parliament, they are accountable to their constituents and must effectively represent them in parliament and deliver on their development needs in line with campaign promises. In addition, they are responsible for passing legislation, approving government budgets, holding the executive branch of government accountable, and upholding a collective vote on policy decisions and matters of national interest and concern.

For most ministers, conflicts of interest arise when they want to use ministry resources to fulfil their obligations to their constituents, and yet as ministers they are supposed to be pursuing agendas that benefit the whole country. Conflicts with a principal secretary may arise if the principal secretary advises the minister against such actions, since as the controlling officer, he/she must prevent ministry resources from being used for the minister’s constituency agendas. Such principal secretaries are sometimes labelled as disloyal and disrespectful to the minister. In countries where a high premium is placed on political affiliations and patronage, such principal secretaries’ jobs can be at risk.
Another proposal made during the joint workshops was that ministers need to realise that in their capacity as ministers, they are working for the national good and not for their constituencies. If they need a development project in their constituency, they should negotiate with the relevant ministry, and should understand that their request can only be considered in the context of the overall national development priorities and plans. Ministers also have the responsibility to explain to their constituents the national development agenda and why certain measures cannot be carried out in their constituency at a particular time. This implies that ministers need to thoroughly understand the national development agenda and priorities so that as they are campaigning for the position of Member of Parliament, they do not make promises they will find hard to fulfil, as this can undermine their credibility and may cost them their seat in future.

**Maintaining the neutrality of the public service**

Neutrality of the public service requires civil servants to be apolitical in carrying out their functions, and impartial in implementing government policies, programmes and projects. It is the neutrality of the public service that allows civil servants to serve different governments and ensure that everything continues to run smoothly during the transition between two governments, which may not necessarily be formed by the same ruling party in multi-party democracies. In a neutral public service, appointments, promotions and tenure of civil servants are not dependent on a particular ruling party or minister being in power, but on the prescriptions of public service acts and regulations. This minimises the possibility of civil servants serving partisan political interests instead of national interest.

While political neutrality is supposed to be part of the public service ethos, the reality is that most public services in Commonwealth Africa are not as apolitical as they are supposed to be. With the advent of multi-party democracy in Africa, there has been a trend in some countries for civil servants to over-align themselves to the ruling political party, a situation that militates against political neutrality. Some countries have not been able to optimise utilisation of the talent they have because some talent is perceived as belonging to opposition parties.

The trust between ministers and principal secretaries is also eroded if a minister perceives the principal secretary as not being actively involved in the activities of the ruling party. This can lead to conflicts that can affect the effectiveness of the ministry, or may result in the principal secretary paying more attention to the demands of the ruling party than to delivering on the performance agenda of the ministry.

Principal secretaries are supposed to work for the government of the day to help them deliver on the priorities set out in their political manifesto during the tenure of their rule. This does not necessarily require civil servants to behave like politicians and get involved in active politics. An effective political-administrative interface requires an understanding by both parties that principal secretaries do not have to be political to support the government of the day to deliver, and that politicians do not have to get involved in the day-to-day running of the ministry for them to have their policies implemented.

**Managing the long term versus the short term**

In most African Commonwealth countries, governments come to power for four to five years. This means politicians have a short time frame in which to deliver to the people who have elected them to power. The operations of principal secretaries within their ministries are guided by the long-term perspective provided by the national visions, which are operationalised through the national development plans. Although politicians also subscribe to long-term national aspirations, they often want to be seen to have delivered something tangible in the four or five years of their tenure so that their party can return to power. To manage the political-administrative interface effectively, principal secretaries need to understand the perspective of politicians and identify some quick wins within the medium- and long-term framework in order to help them demonstrate to the electorate that they can deliver.

**Conclusion**

The key message in this paper is that a productive political-administrative interface is key to effective public sector governance and performance, and this can only be achieved in a situation where there is mutual trust and respect between ministers and senior civil servants; where the public service is relatively apolitical and there is minimal political patronage; where ministers manage their multiple roles effectively and avoid confusing their responsibilities as ministers with those of their constituency responsibilities; and where principal secretaries realise and acknowledge that ministers only have a short period of time in which they must deliver.

Ministers and principal secretaries’ roles are mutually reinforcing, neither can do without the other – they need each other to succeed. As countries in Commonwealth Africa are designing and implementing their leadership development programmes, attention must be given to those programmes that aim to strengthen the political-administrative interface.

**References**


