

The Scope and Significance of Public Administration to Organizational Settings and Processes

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Abstract

This article examines the scope and significance of public administration to organizational settings and processes. It examines the utility of the various public administration theoretical perspectives that have been used as explanations and descriptions of organizational settings. The paper further reviews how public bureaucracies are structured and organized, and in the process highlights some of the problems associated with the nature and form of their operations.

Keywords: public administration, bureaucracy, organizational settings.

1.0 Introduction

This paper focuses on the scope and significance of public administration to organizational settings and processes. It examines the utility and relevance of the various public administration theoretical and practical perspectives that have been used as explanations and descriptions of organizational settings. The paper further explores how public bureaucracies are structured and organized, and in the process highlights some of the problems associated with the nature and form of their operations.

2.0 Public Bureaucracies

The term public administration is so vast that there is no way to encompass it all with only one definition. However, defined, its vast scope encapsulates whatever governments do (Shafritz, Russell and Barick 2015: 28; Agagu 1997). Modern conceptualizations in the discipline of public administration dictate that it is the tool that guides the delivery process of public sector management (Kuye, 2014). Public administration is a key mechanism of society's attempts to sustainably improve the human condition by delivery of essential services. Society suffers when public administration is weak (Ibid.). The State and its main agent, the public bureaucracy are vital to service delivery and the coordination of national development objectives.

Public administration can be construed as the instrument of executing political decisions (Priffer and Presthus 1967:108). The classical theory of public administration asserts that public administration is the "government in action" (Wilson, 1887:16). Underscored here is that public administration is a conduit through which government goals and objectives are realized.

Gleaned from the foregoing discussion is that public administration is a political system and process (Lane, 1978). Implied is the notion that public administration cannot exist outside its political context and is tasked with the accomplishment of politically determined objectives.

James Perry (2007), states that public administrators are expected by society to focus on the following:

- Maintaining constitutional order;
- Achieving technical competence;
- Coping with public expectations;
- Managing complexity, uncertainty and change; and
- Behaving ethically.

Most social scientists associate public administration with large scale complex bureaucratic Organizations. They identify these bureaucracies as forms of social organization that have been tolerated and accepted over time. As Krislov (1974:87) puts it:

Bureaucracies... grew silently, inexorably in the underbrush - seldom noticed, little analyzed. Convenience and necessity, not ideology and legitimacy are their life-blood; they are not loved or respected, but rather tolerated and depended on.

For the purpose of this paper, public bureaucracies are viewed as institutions defined in terms of the basic structural characteristics outlined below.

3.0 Features of Bureaucracies

Bureaucracy in the contemporary world refers primarily to government agencies that are characterized by day-to-day policy implementation, routine procedures, specialization of duties, rights of authority and status and resistance to change (McCurdy 1977).

The elements of Weber's bureaucratic model characterize the structure of most government agencies in the contemporary world. The term 'bureaucracy' has generally been used to describe these agencies.

It must be noted that Weber regarded his model of bureaucracy as the most efficient. To him, the bureaucratic type of administrative organization is superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability (Max Weber 1964:337).

To Weber, bureaucracy is the most efficient form of administrative Organization because experts with extensive experience are best qualified to make technically correct decisions. Other elements that Weber considered are that discipline and performance in bureaucracies are governed by abstract rules and coordinated by a hierarchy that fosters a rational and consistent pursuit of Organizational objectives. In Weber's view, each of the different elements of his model contributed to meeting the efficiency criteria required of an administrative system designed to meet the complex and large-scale administrative needs of a mass industrial society. As a theorist, Weber was offering an 'ideal-type' organization.

While several authors are agreed that the majority of public organizations approximate the 'ideal type' as propounded by Weber, they are concerned that some of the characteristics of the model that are presented as virtues give rise to certain tendencies that pervert its purpose. In order to highlight these negative aspects, the following discussion on how bureaucracies operate in the contemporary world is necessary.

3.1 The Power of Bureaucracies.

There is no doubt that bureaucracies have emerged as powerful entities in contemporary societies compared to other political actors. Guy Peters (1978) has dwelt at length on the sources of bureaucratic power. He argues that bureaucratic agencies are the custodians of information and expertise. In addition to the information held, bureaucrats have the technical expertise to understand and interpret that information. The combination of the expertise and information held is used as leverage against the generally less informed political executives. It is now widely accepted that bureaucrats are key players in public policy formulation and implementation. They control much of the government's administrative process and can accelerate or delay decisions through their mastery of procedures. For example, policies may be labeled infeasible because they have not been done that way before. Since bureaucrats possess much more technical information about the provision of government programs, other competing groups in society are likely to depend on them.

Gouldner (1955) asserts that when a comparison is made between bureaucracies and other political institutions, especially legislative assemblies, bureaucracies generally emerge as more efficient entities. Unlike legislatures, bureaucracies have very few procedural rules that require public discussion, voting and the like (Guy Peters, 1978:170). They do not have to be as sensitive as the legislatures to political pressures. Compared to legislative assemblies, bureaucracies are therefore in a position to act more rapidly on many issues. A common emphasis, which shows up in the work of many authors highlight behavioural traits which are basically negative, dysfunctional, pathological or self-defeating, tending to frustrate the realization of the goals toward which the bureaucracy is supposed to be working. Morstein Marx (1977: 15) has pessimistically argued that the strength of bureaucracy and "in extreme cases all of it - is drained off constantly by vices that paradoxically spring from virtues."

Robert Merton is concerned, like Morstein Marx (1977) that the very elements that are supposed to spearhead efficiency can also produce inefficient tendencies in some instances. These concerns provide a rationale for a discussion on some of the key characteristics of bureaucracies that can lead to some dysfunctional challenges.

3.2 Bureaucratic Challenges

i) Rules and Regulations

The most general argument on the adherence to bureaucratic rules and regulations has been proposed by Robert Merton (1982). Acknowledging that bureaucratic rules and impersonality produce a high degree of reliability and predictability, he points out that conformity can be detrimental because it reduces flexibility. Rules and regulations become so emphasized that they take on a symbolic meaning of their own. These rules and regulations may result in goal displacement and loss of organization effectiveness.

Rules and regulations, according to Gouldner (1954 & 1955) tend to define minimum levels of acceptable performance. As such, people employed in a bureaucracy will just do the bare minimum amount of work. The rules become interpreted as setting the maximum standards for performance rather than identifying unacceptable behaviours.

ii) Competition for resources

Within each public agency, certain expectations exist with respect to the budgetary process. At the lower levels, junior level bureaucrats expect that their chief executive will argue, on their behalf, for increased funding to enable them to carry out their activities adequately. Lower level managers' views are that their department's expenditure is only a small part of the total budget, so that any substantial increase in their budget will have an insignificant impact upon the total. In reality this demand for power and influence that comes with increased funding expectations lead to national budget demands that may not be sustainable in the long run.

iii) Political Neutrality

The bureaucracy is expected to be under the control of elected politicians and yet accept responsibility for its own actions. The bureaucrats are also expected to assist in policy formulation and yet be politically neutral. A key feature of the civil service is that its public officials are expected to be politically neutral. It is generally accepted that government come and go through elections. The civil servants are supposed to remain loyal and neutral to any government in power at a particular time. They are expected to discharge their duties in a non partisan manner. They should treat all citizens equally and must act without fear or favour in the discharge of their normal duties. It is critical that citizens have public confidence in their government bureaucracy given the critical role it plays to their everyday lives.

iv) Accountability

One area of contention is the extent to which the bureaucracy is accountable for what it does or does not do. Liberal democracy theorists view bureaucratic authority as an imposition. To them, bureaucrats are appointed, not elected. Expertise and professionalism are emphasized over participation. Secrecy is stressed over openness which is a key element of democratic politics. Formally, citizens may complain to the elected representatives about bureaucratic action, but bureaucratic secrecy makes redress difficult.

In practice, the civil servants are expected to be guided by widely accepted principles in order to be able to discharge their duties in an effective manner. First, political patronage should be eradicated to ensure that management of public service matters is accessible to all citizens without paying any regards to their political affiliation. Second, there is a need to assure citizens that there is equal and fair recruitment and selection of people into the public service. Finally, public bureaucracies need to execute their duties professionally and must be guided by principles that adhere to the promotion of meritocracy, morality, impersonality, efficiency and the insulation of civil servants from political victimization. The expectation is that for these principles to be fully operational, they need to be enshrined in the constitution of the country.

4.0 Government Organization

So far, the paper has discussed the role and operations of bureaucracies. We have also highlighted some of the problems associated with the operations of contemporary bureaucracies. We will now analyze how the bureaucracies (government agencies) are organized and structured.

In the more specialized vocabulary of public management, an organization is a consciously coordinated social entity with a relatively identified boundary that functions on a relatively continuous basis to achieve a set of common goals (Harman and Mayer 1986). This definition recognizes the need for formally coordinating the interactive patterns of organization members through some organization structure. This structure is effective or ineffective to the extent that it contributes to or detracts from achieving the goals or objectives of the organization. The environmental conditions under which a governmental structure operates have a direct bearing on the size and operations of that structure. Before proceeding, there is a need to clarify what we mean by the environment; and then assess its relationship to the government structure. The general environment facing a governmental Organization would include factors such as political and economic conditions, technological conditions, the social milieu, legal structures, cultural conditions, to mention only a few. Decisions on the structure and size of governments are influenced by the executives' perceptions on what they consider to be the most important environmental factors affecting their organizations.

There is of course no universally agreed-upon framework for classifying the parts and structure of government organizations. The orthodox principles identify four bases for organizing. The four bases are: (a) purpose, (b) process, (c) clientele and (d) place (Denhardt 1984). Some departments such as a ministry of housing or defense are organized on the basis of purpose or function. All activities within that functional category are grouped together to maximize the contributions from that function and to facilitate problem solving peculiar to that functional classification.

There is no permanent optimal structure for government; political necessity, personalities, leadership styles, human and financial resources, policy changes- all vary from country to country. Variations in the size of governments are a result of distinct demographic, technological, cultural and ideological elements in the environment. Structural decisions that executives make to align their organization with the degree of uncertainty in their specific environment will depend on what they perceive as the most important environmental factors affecting their Organization.

In all cases, no matter how the political power or policy is distributed, the formulation and implementation of policies is carried out by the Executive branch, including the cabinet, and the departments and ministries, bureaus, boards, commissions, committees and other units under the ambit of the Executive Branch. In making such an assertion, I am not overlooking the key role played by the legislative and judicial branches in policy making. I would like to limit the present discussion to the policy-making power of the executive branch of government.

4.1 Cabinets and Central Management Agencies

The cabinet is made up of cabinet ministers who are charged with the overall responsibility for the efficient running of government. The cabinet is normally headed by a prime minister in the case countries that follow the Westminster mode of governance or President in countries that have presidential systems. For our purposes, the head of cabinet shall simply be referred to as the chief executive.

An effective cabinet is one that has well coordinated central policy-making machinery which has the capacity to set the major objectives of government, to ensure their consistency, define the constraints within which the objectives are to be sought and determine the basic organizational framework within which the major departments or components of government operate. Such a 'central guidance cluster' is critical because of the complexity and magnitude of government functions which makes it impossible for the chief executive to make all major decision single handedly.

The chief executive and his/her ministers constitute the strategic apex group in government organizations. They are assisted in their day-to-day deliberations by technocrats who are on the one hand, advisors to ministers and on the other, administrative heads of their ministries. They are tasked with the responsibility of managing and standardizing operations within their respective departments in line with the overall stated objectives and goals of the cabinet.

The main coordinative machinery is the committee system. Standing and ad hoc cabinet committees have become a permanent feature of every cabinet. The number and composition of the committees is determined by the chief executive who is often chairperson of the most important committees, leaving the minister mostly directly concerned, to chair the other committees. The circumstances under which matters considered by cabinet committees must be taken to the full cabinet must be clearly laid out to avoid 'overloading' cabinet with issues that could have been resolved at the committee level.

There is therefore, a need to specify through formal written rules the relationship between a specified committee and the full cabinet and the nature of decisions that can be made without the concurrence of the full cabinet.

4.2 Central government departments

Structurally, most regular government agencies, departments or ministries follow closely the bureaucratic model as described by Weber. Central agencies have highly formalized rules and regulations which permeate the entire structure. Authority is centralized and decision making follows a chain of command and an elaborate structure with a sharp distinction between line and staff activities. Activities with similar and related occupational specialties are grouped together under the leadership of functional executives at the middle management level. These middle level managers oversee their occupational specialties but are in turn, responsible to the administrative head of the ministry.

The primary strength of public bureaucracies emanates from their ability to perform standardized activities in an efficient manner. Putting like specialties together results in economies of scale and minimizes duplication of activities.

The major weakness is the obsessive concern with following rules. When cases arise that do not precisely fit the rules, there is very little room for modification. There is however a consensus that public bureaucracies have emerged as fairly efficient entities that have the capacity to implement routine standardized work. They thrive under a centralized structure that has routine operations. We are now generally aware that no organization can really function if it relies on centralization to the total exclusion of decentralization.

4.3 Centralization and Decentralization

Centralization and decentralization are in fact two sides of the same coin. It is now recognized that too great a concentration of decision making at the strategic apex level causes delay, increases costs, reduces efficiency, limits initiative and leaves the various governments units without the authority that is necessary for efficiency and innovation. On the other hand, complete decentralization of authority would mean complete anarchy. In any extreme form, neither system would work. In the real world, centralization and decentralization always go hand in hand. No organization can really function if it relies on one to the exclusion of the other. Decentralization of authority has emerged as the most rational strategy given the difficulty of 'centralizing' operations of large complex organizations. In countries influenced by the British system of government, it has been utilized usual to differentiate between two types of decentralized system. These encapsulate the devolution of authority to legally established and locally elected political authorities and deconcentration of administrative authority to civil servants who are representatives of central government units.

In the case of devolution, the activities of central, state and local government authorities are clearly differentiated, each having its own legal powers and responsibilities. One example is a federalist system where different levels of government have specified powers and taxing authority. Another example would be local government authorities which are semi-autonomous bodies that are expected to employ their own staff and run their own financial affairs. In the case of deconcentration, decision making is done at the central level, and the local level unit only effects authorized decisions. Officials at such levels do have some elements of discretion and responsibility over the nature of those services at that level.

On the whole, decentralization is viewed as a means of improving the performance of organizational tasks in many different ways. Peter Aucoin and Herman Bakvis (1988:118) note that:

Decentralization is necessary to overcome information overload, insensitivity to soft data and field intelligence, and administrative and operational paralysis.

The argument is that given the complexity and large-scale nature of government operations, it is no longer possible for central government to deal with all day-to-day administrative problems in an exhaustive manner.

Les Metcalfe and Sue Richards (1987) view decentralization as a means of liberating employees' potential shackled by bureaucratic restrictions. Their thesis is that decentralized structures create an 'enabling environment' in which innovative and entrepreneurial talents can flourish. The assumption is that individual talents such as creativity and initiative are best met in an environment in which individuals are allowed to participate freely in the decision making process. In most of the literature, the bias of discussion is often towards the assumption that decentralization is good and centralization is bad. There is need to tread carefully and not simply regard decentralization as an easy and self-evidently beneficial prescription for improving public management.

A proper approach is one that recognizes that the proper functioning and management of complex large-scale organizations requires the existence of both. Some central direction and control is always present, otherwise organizations simply fragment and disintegrate. The problem is how to combine the two (centralization and decentralization) in a manner that will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector organizations.

5.0 Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has put into perspectives the concept of public administration and its relevance to organizational settings and processes. The article examined the utility of the various theoretical perspectives that are used as explanations and descriptions of organizational settings. It further assessed how bureaucracies operate and in the process highlighted some of the problems associated with the nature and form of their operations.

All in all, it is important that the identified operational problems that may inhibit effective service delivery be addressed in a holistic manner with a view to enhance the operational effectiveness of public bureaucratic organizations. The implementation of various public sector reform measures designed to enhance service delivery can assist in the development of modern public bureaucracies that are efficient, effective and responsive to the service delivery needs of their citizens.

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