

**ADDRESSING THE POLITICAL AND BUREAUCRATIC CHALLENGES OF  
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE FOR AFRICA: LESSONS  
FROM CHINA**

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**Abstract:** *Local governance is an important conduit for delivering developmental initiatives to the citizenry. It empowers the people through broader participation in policymaking and governance through the decentralization of authority. Public administration is an indispensable part of local governance structure, but not without political and bureaucratic challenges. These challenges are more glaring in developing countries due to weaker institutions, corruption and increased rate of political interference. Africa is seemingly the least developed continent of the world but working assiduously through the political and economic engagements with other advanced nations for her development. In that regard, China's relation with Africa has reached an unprecedented level, with China currently being Africa's largest trading partner. Studies into China-Africa relations are on the rise, but very few discuss how the relations can be useful in addressing the political and bureaucratic challenges of public administration in the local governance of Africa. This paper by employing a qualitative research method and applying the interaction school of thoughts in public administration, analyzes the political and bureaucratic influence on public administration in Africa's local governance. It further discusses how Africa can draw lessons through her cooperation and engagement with China for addressing such challenges. The study concludes that China provides many opportunities at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels for interactions with Africa. Africa should through such avenues, learn from China's reforms and the fight against corruption, then human resource development through direct contacts, to help in addressing the challenges.*

**Keywords:** China-Africa relations, Public Administration, Governance, Development

**Research Area:** Social Science

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A major disconnection from the citizenry and a breeding ground for corrupt and unaccountable public administration is the lack of good governance. Ake (1990) demonstrates that such a situation leads to complete dissociation of public policy from the developmental and social needs of the people. To address this problem, developing countries have been encouraged, assisted and pressured by donor agencies and international organizations to practice decentralization as part of public administration reforms to promote good governance and development. Decentralization and local governance was historically part of colonial Africa. It was termed as "indirect rule" in Anglophone colonies and "association" in Francophone colonies (Mamdani, 1996). Local governance in Africa was practised in various forms and structures after each of the World Wars, the Independence era

from the 1950s-1970s, which was interrupted by a number of coup d'états, and in the current democratic regimes since the 1990s. The relevance of local governance is also evident from the Sustainable Development (SDGs) by the United Nations for the addressing of disturbing global challenges in promoting a suitable future for generations. Most of these challenges such as poverty, peace and justice, and inequality are very common to African countries. The consultative process for the SDGs involved a special recognition of the fact that there are differences in the challenges faced by developing countries as they work to achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Another report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) conceptualizes key issues like accountability, rule of law, necessary administrative capacity, fiscal management, information availability and capital formation in local governance to the achievement of SDGs (UNDP, 2016).

In an empirical assessment of performances of African countries in local governance with the use of an integrated methodology, there is the research claim that democratic involvement and selection process into local governance have weaknesses as a result lapse in legislation and policies of most African countries (UCLGA, 2015). The situation as existing in the African countries about the selection process of officials, politicians, technocrats, stakeholders and any other citizen to be part of the local government and decentralization process involve complex activities of democratic elections, executive appointments, political placements and civil service employment. In general, local assembly members and executive bodies in local governance are selected through elections that are conducted in a whole country, elections throughout some parts of a country, electing local assembly members but appointing executive bodies or appointing both local assembly members and executive bodies (Ibid).

By and large, Africa is considered the least developed continent of the world. It is however not isolated in working for her own development. The interconnectivity and the integration of the global economy have created a lot of cooperation between Africa and other developing or advanced countries. In recent years, China's engagement with Africa has become an area with immense interest. A burgeoning body of literature including, Alden & Large, 2019; Xing & Farah, 2013, keep exploring how China-Africa relations is advancing, with China likely to be considered a most reliable developmental partner to Africa in spite of few asymmetrical debates. However, very few studies, if any, investigate into how China-Africa or Africa-China engagement could lead to reformations and lessons for a better public administration in local governance for African countries. This paper is aimed at addressing such a research gap, and in so doing, draw the attention of other researchers to carry out more studies around that area.

In juxtaposing the governance system and structure of African countries with that of China, one identifies clear differences, especially in governance and political model. Be that it may, China's focus on the use of political power for public administration reforms is an area from which Africa can draw lessons. Aside from that, local governance performance tend to be more of stronger administrative structures rather than which political ideology that a particular country is identified with. Can African countries, therefore, learn from China's model and practice to address the effects of politics and bureaucracy in local governance on

development? What are China's public administration practices in local governance that promote development, and how can Africa use relations with China to draw lessons from China's practices?

This paper, by making use of a qualitative research method, seeks to answer the above-mentioned research questions through the appropriate research techniques. The research employed a desk study to analyze data sourced mainly from the internet, libraries, seminars and lectures. Probably of the most important, is the researcher's work and academic experience in Africa and, academic exposure in China. As a Ghanaian, the researcher has worked in local governance and politics as an elected member of a municipal assembly for a period of four years. This exposition led to a rich understanding of the politics and the practices of local governance in Ghana, which could be a reflection for most of the African countries. Lastly, having stayed in China for two years for master's degree and further in Hong Kong for a PhD, the researcher obtained adequate knowledge regarding governance and politics of China, which is useful and applied to this study.

## **2. POLITICAL AND BUREAUCRATIC INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN AFRICA'S LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

Rahman (2015) in demonstrating the link between politics and bureaucracy is of the opinion that the existing relationship between politics and administration with its effect on the administrative process depends on the type of interaction between political leaders and administrators. A number of studies indicate how political leaders and administrators use the relationship either in frustrating each other or in working to enhance development. Svava (2006) asserts that the debate may expand, contract, rise or fall but may never go away.

Since the role played by politicians and the administrative bureaucrats cannot be swept away in governance and development, it is important that continual studies are conducted into their activities to meet the dynamics of time. In most African countries, politicians have become major suspects of corruption either perceived or real. It has usually been the case that, after the change of government, previous government officials are investigated, with the intention of smearing political opponents guilty of financial malfeasance or embezzlement. It, however, rarely happens that, political leaders investigate and prosecute public officials within their own parties, in spite of the allegations that may be levelled against them. According to van den Bersselaar and Decker (2011), it is common for new heads of state in West Africa to initiate series of legal and administrative measures to cleanse the "bureaucracy of corruption" associated with their predecessors. Interestingly the so-called cleansing processes tend to be disguised attempts to deny political opponents' access to finance and resources that could enhance their political challenge in consequent elections. It also assists the new leadership to create business and employment opportunities for their sponsors and political affiliates. We see that the intentions for such interventions are more of political persecution for weakening their opponents and strengthening their own parties, rather than national prosecution for strengthening public administration.

Africa has largely embraced democracy with functioning legislations and policies that guide governance and public service administration. However, politicians keep using cunning

ways for political opportunism. Governance by policy structure largely encourages bureaucratic systems, which politicians tend to manipulate when they come into the office. Most politicians with executive positions, especially with responsibilities relating to local government, work directly with the bureaucratic systems and are the appointed types that do not account to the people through elections. This becomes an easier route for the government in power to utilize such appointed executives to work around the bureaucratic administration to the benefit of political parties, thereby affecting growth and development. The government in power also has the executive function of electing ministers, chief executives, and board members for managerial positions. In Alden & Large (2019), the issue of how '*extraversion and patrimonialism in Africa*' affect Africa's development. African elites appropriate resources as they concentrate political authority to accumulate wealth. The study indicates that

Neo-patrimonialist rule in Africa increasingly came to be equated with highly personalistic and autocratic presidential rule...use of state resources to reward supporters and appropriation of state funds for self-enrichment...modern institutions and bureaucratic procedures coexist with an informal authority based on inter-personal relations...and office is often used for personal benefit rather than the public good. The "Big Man" also uses his authority to undermine opposition political parties by co-opting its members in exchange for some privileges and personal favors. (Alden & Large, 2019, p. 244)

The complex inter-relationship between leaders, public officials and the bureaucrats provide an opportunity for such governments to take advantage of the bureaucratic processes in local governance that leads to dire effects on ordinary individuals' access to developmental opportunities. The bureaucratic processes instead of acting as checks and balances tend to be rather exploited to create economic ventures and resources for the welfare of the political party in power and its party members. It is a common problem experienced in the case of Ghana. Moreover, it is generally a problem for developing countries especially in Africa because of weak institutional structures and policies. The scope of most studies such as the above-cited focus on why Africa may not be gaining from China-Africa relations. This paper rather turns to how to draw lessons from the relations to address such domestic challenges that prevent the full benefits thereof.

### **3. CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS: DRAWING LESSONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN AFRICA'S LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

From the third largest trading partner, ahead of the United Kingdom and behind the United States and France, with Sino-African trade at USD 55.5 billion in 2006 as compared to USD 5 billion in 1997, and USD 106 billion in 2008, China is currently Africa's largest trading partner since 2009. There was a recorded trade volume of USD 149.1 billion in 2016 (Eom et al, 2017; Xinhua News, 2017). China has been helpful in terms of the provision of administrative infrastructure for West Africa with the most recent one being the grant to build a new ECOWAS headquarters at the cost of 31.6 million USD. (ECOWAS, 2018). Another continental example is the building of the African Union headquarters, and a national example is Ghana's Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. These are all grants without strings,

which transcend into infrastructure even in cities, towns and rural communities. Africa has for some time now, become the highest recipient of China's aid (State Council, 2014). China's relation with African countries has reached a level that should avail China's administrative practices to Africa for its developmental modelling. Such cooperation and assistance should also lead to the effective strengthening of public administration and good governance practices, especially in local governance.

China's relation with Africa may not lead to the deserved development for Africans with weaknesses in local governance and public administration. The UNDP (website) emphasizes the importance of local governance as the closest avenue for basic needs, services and participation in policy processes. It ensures the most accessible level of engagement between the state and the majority of the citizens, for exercising their rights and improving lives. Effective local governance systems and practices help reduce inequality and promote relations between people and public institutions. The *interaction school of thought in public administration* proposes an effective collaboration between politically elected/appointed executives and administrative officials without compromising each other's position and policy outlook. Svava (2001), Nalbadian (1994) and Waldo (1980) call for the cooperation between administrative officials and politicians in policymaking. China in accordance with its political rise and economic development has made gains in the interaction between politicians and administrators.

Although it could be argued that China has not satisfied most of the expectations of ideal local governance, it is the opinion of this paper that China has made improvements that needs emulation. There may be bias with China's rating especially by pro-Western scholars and institutions because they assess China in comparison with the standards set by the West. China has within a short period, achieved the meeting of basic needs, bridging poverty gap and improving lives resulting in an increase in development. Africa, on the other hand, has been entangled in the ideals of Western ideology for a long time but still lagging behind. It is thus the time that Africa's engagement with China exploits the improvements made in China's public administration in the area of decentralization and local governance.

### 3.1. What and How Africa Should Learn from China?

The first aspect worth emulation by Africans is the number of reforms that China has undergone since the major reform in 1978. Other reforms followed in 1982, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013 and a more recent one in 2018 (Lyu, 2018). These consistent reforms have helped China to draw lessons from previous ones to improve upon meeting the dynamics and changes with time. According to Hofman (2018), the understanding of the circumstances, history and the path that China has taken with its reforms are necessary to realize the importance of the economic growth and development of China. It is thus important for other nations of the world to reflect on China's reforms as they can be worth emulating.

The reforms though broader in scope, have had a positive impact on public administration, decentralization and public governance. A number of downsizing in public sector workers has helped in minimizing bureaucracy, cutting cost and increasing efficiency. Stronger decentralization of power delegation and the closeness of governance to the ordinary

people has greatly been achievable despite the huge geographical and population constraint. This is because problems identified overtime were addressed in the consequent reforms. China's reforms have been timely in bringing about effective coordination and improvement in civil servants performance. African countries hardly undergo reforms, even when they do, the effectiveness is hard to realize. China's series of reforms could, therefore, serve as a lesson to help effect reforms that will give more power to the people not only in ideological principle but also through practical realities that could be felt among the citizenry. Local autonomy and healthy interaction between politics and public administration for accountable governance with the features of power decentralization are the core success that such reforms can achieve for Africa.

The second area of discussion is the fight against corruption. There is generally a stronger link between power and corruption. The British historian Lord Acton simply puts it, "*power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely*". As observed in this paper, African politicians with power exploit local government bureaucracy and tend to connive with public administrators to involve in acts of corruption for personal and political gains. To draw lessons from China does not mean that China has totally solved its corruption problems, but rather, Africans should emulate the rapid strides that are made through preventive mechanisms and stiffer punishments. Transparency International (2018), 2017 Corruption Perception Index places China at 41 points, 77<sup>th</sup> out 180. Even though it is not a very enviable position, China is among the best performance in the Asian countries, with a rise from 2.2 (22) in 1995, and better than most African countries despite the complexities of its public administration system.

The issue is not just about the reported improvements by China but also, the policies that are currently in place to help in fighting corruption among public officials and civil servants. China has since its economic and social reforms, initiated actions against corruption. Since 2012, and with President Xi Jinping's leadership, there began a more radical approach to fighting corruption. Despite criticisms against some of the forms of arrest and trials, China is reportedly among the countries with the highest number of high-ranking public officials been investigated for corruption, with a number of them been prosecuted (Shih, 2018). Comparatively to Africa, this could be a great lesson since it is less common that senior public officials or political executives especially from the same ruling party are seriously investigated political for prosecution.

There is a strong policy document, *The Work Plan (2013-2017) of Building the Corruption Punishment and Prevention System*. It admits among other factors that; bureaucracy is a major challenge to fighting corruption in China. This is parallel to the situation in African countries but less has been done in limiting bureaucracy but rather, emerging political influence is making matters worse. China's policy document reiterates that there will be unreparable damage to governance and national development if the corruption problems especially relating to public administration are not solved. It is of no surprise that this bold decision is reflecting in actions over the past six years. The number of reported officials investigated and disciplined for corruption has more than doubled in 2015 as compared to the 2012 figure (Lyu, 2018). The commitment and the approach by China in

fighting corruption among officials is a great lesson for African countries to adopt in checking the powers of political leaders as they influence bureaucrats in local governance to perpetrate acts of corruption.

Lastly, the study discusses the opportunity for African politicians, administrators and bureaucrats to interact with their counterparts from China. This is more about how Africans could learn from China than what we should learn. Clearly, what to learn is not much important than how to learn it. The best opportunity for this suggested learning process for effective public sector reforms will be through the practical interactions with Chinese officials, diplomats, scholars and any other citizen. The Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) for instance, is a regional framework that has been providing avenue since 2000 for the interaction between African and Chinese leaders, diplomats and politicians on various issues. The FOCAC further contains the following sub-forums: *'China-Africa People's Forum, China-Africa Young Leaders Forum, Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Health Cooperation, Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, China-Africa Poverty Reduction and Development Conference, FOCAC-Legal Forum, Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation, and China-Africa Think Tanks Forum'* (FOCAC, Website). The above sub-forums are platforms that provide broad-based opportunities for Africans from different work experiences in administration and governance.

According to King (2013), China provides a lot of short-term training, scholarships, and seminars that promote human resource development for Africa. This provides an environment to learn about the Chinese from the Chinese, and to help in promoting development for Africa through the knowledge transfer about China's development to Africans. King, however, cautiously notes that China by so doing is not intending to impose its practices on Africa, but rather for Africa to draw lessons from and apply them based on their own models. It becomes an opportunity for Africa to tap into the engagement with China for the benefit of not only infrastructural development, but to learn through interactions, training and educational opportunities for the promotion of good governance and fighting corruption. Aside from the forms of interactions that are indicated, the human resource development engagements should involve visits, active tour to public institutions, exposure to decision-making processes and some level of personal contacts with senior politicians and public servants in China. This will assist such individuals to have a feel and appreciate China's institutional structures and governance system. Additionally, there ought to be arrangements particularly for the personnel of the local government and decentralized institutions to have exchange correspondence with Chinese counterparts, which will provide the platform for sharing of ideas, and challenges that they face in their day-to-day administrative activities.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

China-Africa relations have created a number of platforms for interactions and connections between Africans and Chinese. These are high-level platforms like the Forum on China-Africa Corporation (FOCAC), multilateral and bilateral conferences among ministers of state and ambassadors, diplomatic delegations for official visits, and technocrats that meet

to draft and conclude the implementation of aid and developmental projects. The inter-relationship should not only provide the opportunity for developmental projects, investment and trade, but the opportunity to help in improving the public administration for African countries.

Both China and Africa can learn from each other but this paper rather considers how Africa can learn from China because of the progress made by China especially in its public reforms and the fight against corruption. This is important because the study illustrates how China's economic progress is moving alongside the improvement in interventions for effective local government and public administration reforms. African countries could, therefore, learn from China in order to reform and address the political interference with bureaucracy and public administration, which leads to inefficiency and corruption in local governance. Indeed, Africa tends to be comfortably turning east, because the east (China), is ready to work on the policy lines of non-interference, win-win and rising together (Alden et al, 2007; King, 2013), but the greater responsibility remains that, Africa utilizes the engagement in ensuring that the continent receives its fair share from the China-Africa cooperation.

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