

(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## The guardians of Governance: Unveiling the indispensable roles of public administration in modern societies

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### Abstract

The great Philosopher Confucius (551-479BC) discovered that “without learning, the wise become foolish, by learning, the foolish become wise”. Learning has made it conspicuous that public administration is the backbone of our societies. Without it, there will be chaos; the environment we are living in becomes unbearable. Due to public administration, we are governed from the tomb to the womb. Public administration has various roles in the contemporary society but to be explored are the crucial roles which include the instrument of social change and economic development, for executing the laws, policies and programmes formulated by the state, national integration stabilising force in the society as it provides continuity and it is the basis of government whether in monarchy or in democracy or in communist country. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, this article demonstrates the indispensable nature of public administration in promoting effective governance and improving the well-being of citizens.

**Keywords:** Administration; Public Administration; Public; Contemporary; Society

### 1. Introduction

Public administration is the machinery that enables governments to deliver services, implement policies, and enforce laws (Denhardt, 2011). Despite its importance, public administration is often overlooked and underappreciated. This article seeks to rectify this oversight by exploring the crucial roles that public administration plays in modern societies. In today's modern state and in developing countries, the functions and role of public administration are imperative. Public Administration is in an unenviable position that studies social phenomena subject to continuous change (Thornhill and Dijk, 2010). We are living in the DVUCADD environment, an environment characterised by dynamic, volatile, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, diversity and disruption. This environment requires public administration. We are governed from the womb to the tomb through public administration. One is governed at conception, at birth, growth, death and even after death. Roseland (2012) alludes that, “it is impossible for any contemporary government organisation with characteristics of bureaucracy to exist and function without public administration”. Public administration has so many roles which include an instrument of social change, economic development, for executing the laws, policies and programmes formulated by the state, national integration stabilising force in the society, continuity and the basis of government.

### 2. Definition of key terms

This article focuses on the generic view of administration. Administration, as propounded by Gladden (1966:11), “is concerned with the management of human affairs. Thus administration is as broadly based as the whole range of social activities”. Administration can be viewed as the organisation and direction of human and material resources to achieve the desired end. It aims at ensuring efficient behaviour on the part of its members (Pffifner and Presthus 1967:6).

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Administration is an activity or process mainly concerned with the means for carrying out prescribed ends". Similarly, Simon, Smithburg and Thompson (1950:3) define administration as "the activities of groups cooperating to accomplish common goals". Administration and public administration, therefore, consists of those specific activities that are common or generic to all institutionalised group effort made for the achievement of public goals, namely policy, organisation, finance, personnel, procedures and control (POFPPC).

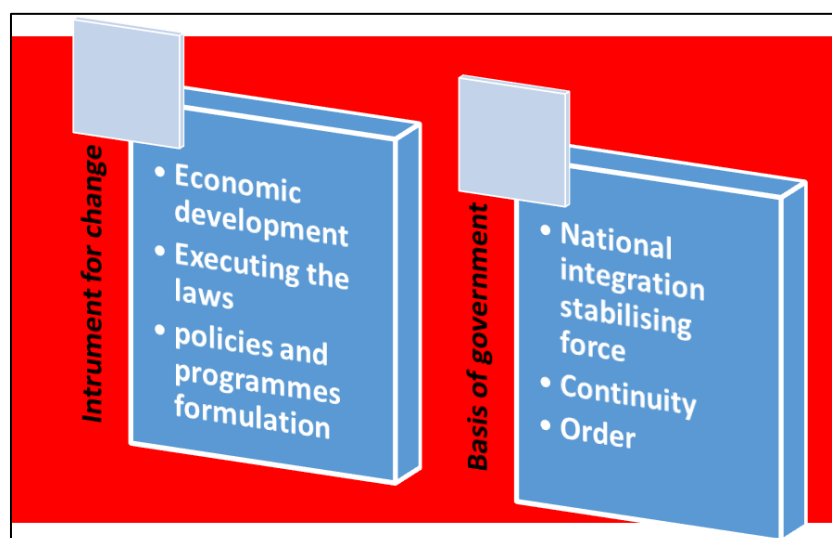
## 2.1. Public administration

White (1926:1), one of the pioneers of the study of Public Administration avers that "public administration consists of all those operations having for their purpose the fulfilment or enforcement of public policy". Henry (1980:26) defines public administration as "a broad- ranging and amorphous combination of theory and practice," Pfiffner and Presthus (1967:7) describe public administration as "the coordination of individual and group efforts to carry out public policy". As a discipline, Public Administration involves the study of human beings engaged in administrative and managerial duties in organs of the state (Thornhill and Van Dijk 2010:95). Public administration is an expansive field that covers the services needed for communities to effect positive change, advance the common good and strengthen society. Public administrators can manage government at the local, state and federal levels, and they possess skills that transfer to the private sector. Thornhill (2005:180) delves that the generic and integrated functions (classified into conceptual and managerial) performed by all public service organisations could be divided as follows:

- Systems and processes for policy-making;
- Development of organisational structures;
- Development of systems for appointment and utilisation of human resources;
- Development of systems for the acquisition and utilisation of financial resources;
- Development of efficient and effective work methods and procedures; and
- Development of systems for the maintenance of effective control and accountability.

Marume (2015) opines that public administration, as a subject, as a science, as a discipline and as a profession, is based upon, directed at a reality to, those generic processes whose aim is good realization within any institutionalised group activity and it does not include all the activities of a specific group of members, but a specific activity of all the members. Allen (1958) reiterates that once the administrative processes have run their course, the results of administration, that is, the output or product must be evaluated in the light of the formulated objective and policy. Specific control measures can be used from time to time to ascertain whether the desired goals are being kept in sight. Control measures include ratification or confirmation of concluded transactions, right of appeal, in circumstances where a citizen considers himself unjustly treated by official action and auditing of accounts and other statistical returns. In administration and Public administration, there is need for proper controlling and accountability such that it can be seen whether the administrators are in a right track hence leading to effective Corporate Governance.

## 2.2. Crucial Roles of public administration in the contemporary society



**Figure 1** Roles of Public Administration

### *2.2.1. It is the instrument of change in the society*

Public administration is regarded as an instrument of change and is expected to accelerate the process of development. For example, the government undertakes the task of levelling down the economic inequalities, spreading education among all abolishing untouchability securing equality of status, rights of women and effective and all round economic and industrial development. The burden of carrying out these social changes in a planned and orderly way rests upon the Public administration of the country. Public administration is not solely a preserver of the civilized life as we all know it these days. However, it is conjointly the good instrument of social amendment and improvement (Edubirdie.com). The success of Zimbabwean democracy will depend not only on the wisdom of the legislature but more on the capability and sense of purpose on the part of the administration. Some examples of public administration driving change include:

- The New Deal programmes in the United States, which aimed to address the Great Depression and promote economic recovery (Kettl, 2017).
- The civil rights movement in the United States, which led to significant policy reforms and social changes (Berman, 2016).
- The sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations, which aim to promote environmental sustainability and social justice globally (Cooper, 2017).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an international human rights convention which sets out the fundamental human rights of people with disability. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol ([A/RES/61/106](#)) was adopted on 13 December 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and was opened for signature on 30 March 2007. Zimbabwe also has the *National disability policy* (2021) that also clearly provides for accessibility as enshrined in the CRPD.

### *2.2.2. It is the instrument for executing the laws, policies and programmes formulated by the state*

Public administration works in the execution of laws, policies and programmes formulated by the state. Ramsay Muir quoted by Marume (2019) avers that while governments may come and go, ministers may rise and fall, the administration of a country goes on forever. No revolution can change it and no upheaval can uproot it. It results in continuity and acts as the standard operation procedure. For example, it will be easy to execute the Urban Councils Act. The three tiers of government will be effectively followed which encompass the Central Government, the Provincial Government and the Local Government. Thus it leads to the implementation and execution of governmental decisions. Public administration in Zimbabwe plays a crucial role in implementing government policies, laws, and development programs. It ensures that state decisions are translated into tangible services, regulations, and public goods for citizens. However, challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and resource constraints often hinder effective execution. Public administration agencies are responsible for translating laws and policies into action. For example, the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1: 2021-2025) is implemented by ministries such as Finance, Agriculture, and Local Government to achieve economic growth, infrastructure development, and poverty reduction. The Land Reform Programme through the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water, and Rural Development oversees land redistribution and agricultural support schemes like Command Agriculture. Government departments provide essential services to citizens. For example, in Education, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education administers the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) to support vulnerable children. In Healthcare, the Ministry of Health and Child Care runs public hospitals and clinics, and it implemented basic health programmes like vaccines.

### *2.2.3. It plays vital role in the life of the people*

Public Administration plays a crucial role in the lives of people, serving as the backbone of societal operations. As Donham, quoted by Marume (2019), aptly stated, that if our civilization fails, it will be mainly because of a breakdown of administration. This statement underscores the indispensable nature of public administration in maintaining order, delivering essential services, and ensuring societal progress. In modern times, nearly every aspect of human life falls under the purview of Public Administration. Governments rely on administrative systems to manage critical sectors such as, health, education, community services, portable water provision, waste management, road maintenance, sewage management etc. We are being managed from birth to death— “from the womb to the tomb”. Public Administration is responsible for delivering services that shape individuals' lives. It ensures public safety through law enforcement, facilitates economic growth through policy implementation, and upholds justice through administrative law. Moreover, Public Administration is the foundation of governance, regardless of the political system, be it a monarchy, democracy or communist state. Its efficiency determines a nation's stability, development, and ability to meet citizens' needs. Without effective administration, even the most well-intentioned policies would fail, leading to

chaos and societal decline. Thus, Public Administration is not merely a bureaucratic function but a lifeline that sustains civilization, fosters development, and enhances the quality of life for all.

#### *2.2.4. It is a stabilizing force in the society as it provides continuity*

Public administration is carried on by the public administrators who are the permanent executives. Political executives such as ministers may come and go, systems of government or constitutions may undergo change but administration goes on forever. Hence, Public administration is a great stabilising force in society in Zimbabwe. It is a preserver of the society and its culture, therefore preserves our national heritage. Gerald Caiden in his popular book, as quoted in Laximikanth (2006 : 8), says that the public administration has assumed the following crucial roles in modern society such as the Preservation of the political system, maintenance of stability and order, institutionalisation of socio – economic changes, management of large scale commercial services, ensuring growth and economic development, protection of the weaker sections of society, formation of public opinion and influencing public policies and political trends.

#### *2.2.5. It is the basis of Government*

It is possible for a state to exist without a legislature or judiciary; but not even the most backward state can do without administrative machinery. The modern state cannot confine its field of activities to merely maintenance of law and order, dispensation of Justice, collection of revenue and taxes and participation in welfare activities. The modern welfare state is expected to provide more and more services and amenities to the people. Public administration is the machinery used by the state to place itself in a position to make plans and programmes that can be carried out. In the context of a modern welfare state, public administration is expected to deliver a wide range of services and amenities to citizens. This includes healthcare, education, infrastructure development, social welfare programs, and more. As such, public administration is not just a supporting mechanism but a critical component that enables the state to formulate and implement policies, plans, and programs that benefit society as a whole. The significance of public administration lies in its ability to translate government policies into actionable programs and services that directly impact people's lives. It is through effective public administration that governments can ensure the delivery of essential services, promote economic development, and enhance the overall quality of life for their citizens. In essence, public administration is indispensable to the functioning of any state, particularly in today's complex and dynamic world. Its role is multifaceted, and its impact is felt across all sectors of society. As governments continue to evolve and adapt to changing societal needs, the importance of efficient, responsive, and citizen-centric public administration cannot be overstated.

#### *2.2.6. Safeguarding citizens' lawful rights*

A harmonious society is not an ultra-stable society under authoritarian control, but a democratic society that adheres to the rule of law. The Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees basic rights to all citizens—equality before the law; the right to vote and stand for election; freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, demonstration, and religious belief; personal freedom, personal dignity and inviolability of abode, the right to work, to rest, and to receive an education, the right of those who are old, ill, or disabled to receive material assistance from the state and society, the freedom to engage in scientific research, literary and artistic creation, and other cultural pursuits. As these agencies grow to accommodate the needs of society, public administrators act as special advisors to satisfy the public's interests and needs Crosswell (1981). Government belongs to the people. Hence, its primary responsibility is to safeguard citizens' basic rights and to create conditions and provide the necessary guarantees for those rights to be realized.

#### *2.2.7. Systematic economic and social development*

Systematic economic development and ever-improving productivity are the economic foundation of a harmonious society and a sound social structure and social order are its social basis. In the past, the Government was unaware of economic and social development theories, and could not give systematic guidance to economic and social development. Today it can, with the help of advances in the social sciences for example in economics and sociology. As the public sector character and attributes continue to evolve globally, the notion of accountability is identified as the pivot, around which effective public management and good governance revolve (Kakumba, and Fourie, 2007). Governments at various levels must therefore study economic and social development theories to guide economic and social development. In this way, detours can be avoided, development costs can go down, waste can be reduced, and economy and society, and man and nature, can benevolently interact.

#### *2.2.8. Providing public goods and public services for economic and social development*

As living standards improve, the demand for public goods and public services also grows. The people want better education, a more secure and effective public health system, more convenient transportation and communication

facilities, a safer social environment, a better natural environment, cleaner air and drinking water. Public administration ensures adequate availability of services for public interests in different ways to improve livelihood of people Tsoabisi (2012). Satisfying the people's growing need for public goods and services is safeguarding their lawful rights, which is the primary function of government in building a harmonious society. If it earnestly performs this function, the Government can create a favorable environment for socioeconomic development, rally the enthusiasm of the social sectors, enhance creativity, and energize the society. But if the Government does not perform this function satisfactorily, people's reasonable needs will not be met, there will be popular resentment, and our drive to build a harmonious society will be seriously undermined.

#### *2.2.9. Systematically and reasonably regulating and controlling social and economic development*

Building a harmonious society calls for coordinated and sustainable social and economic development. But market mechanisms do not help in realizing this goal because market regulation is mainly post-regulation. Players try to maximize their own interests instead of the public interest. Without macro control by government, the economic structure cannot be rationalized and the macroeconomic environment stabilized; neither can coordinate and sustainable economic and social development be realized and a harmonious society built. In recent years, the Government has taken macro control measures to deal with such issues as overinvestment, overdevelopment, slow growth in farmers' income, and underemployment. These measures have had some effect, but they have not succeeded in rooting out the problems and conflicts. These will be a constant headache in our drive for coordinated and sustainable social and economic development and a harmonious society. The central Government must therefore strengthen its macro control.

#### *2.2.10. Government should effectively supervise the society*

A harmonious society is stable and orderly. In the process of modernization, social order and harmony do not happen without human intervention. A social supervision system must be established and improved to effectively supervise, manage, and control the society, and to ensure social order and humane dealings. Government makes laws and regulations to steer social and economic activities and to safeguard social order. By strengthening public administration, governments can enhance their ability to supervise society effectively, promote stability, and address citizen needs. This also involves crisis management and ensuring resilience. A critical aspect of supervision is a society's ability to withstand and recover from shocks. Public administration builds and manages the systems for emergency response, disaster relief, and public health crises. This involves not only having plans in place but also maintaining the logistical, communication, and operational capacity to execute them, thereby ensuring societal continuity in the face of adversity. Supervision of the society also incorporate ensuring equity and protecting the vulnerable: Effective supervision requires a commitment to justice. Public administrators are tasked with implementing policies that protect vulnerable groups from exploitation and ensure a level playing field. This includes enforcing anti-discrimination laws, regulating labor markets to prevent abuse, and providing a social safety net. By doing so, the government mitigates the social tensions that arise from extreme inequality, thereby reinforcing long-term stability. Thus Public administration plays a great role in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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### **3. Conclusion**

The success of government is dependent on the ability of public administration. The future of civilized government rests upon the ability, to develop a service and philosophy and a practice of administration competent to discharge the public functions of civilized society. Everyone is governed from the womb to the tomb through public administration. Public administration serves as the backbone of governance in modern societies, ensuring that government policies translate into tangible outcomes for citizens. As guardians of governance, public administrators play indispensable roles in steering societies toward stability, equity, and progress. From implementing regulations to delivering essential services, public administration touches every facet of community life.

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### **Compliance with ethical standards**

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