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INSTITUTION [UN]BUILDING: DECENTRALISING GOVERNMENT AND THE CASE OF RWANDA

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EUROPEAN REPORT ON DEVELOPMENT

Institution [Un]Building:
Decentralising Government and the Case of Rwanda

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Abstract

The challenge of institution building in African countries remains a major threat to the establishment of peace and justice, and the entrenchment of sustainable social and economic development. This may be attributed largely to the dynamic and complex social landscape of most African countries. While single borders bring political definition to post-independent countries, such countries often struggle to find a single national identity that transcends numerous tribal, ethnic or historic identities. The role of central government in creating an effective structure of governance is crucial in the steps towards post-conflict nation-building. However, national institution building is not necessarily the right answer, especially in contexts difficult to govern, such as vast geographic areas or complex social and ethnic realities. It is in this sense that this paper – and the initial states of this research – seeks to find an alternative to 'institution building' as a way forward in good governance practices, suggesting rather a decentralised and localised approach. The case study that will be brought to be bear as an example of this is Rwanda and a recent governance mechanism – Imihigo – as an approach that has helped create a new national identity while instilling a culture of service delivery and accountability amongst its public servants and political leadership. What this paper will seek to argue – in looking at the approach by Rwanda in decentralising its government – is that institution building is not necessarily the way forward in Africa's 'good governance' discourse. Instead, this paper – and the broader borders of what my research is seeking to explore and understand – seeks to present a reformed approach to good governance in Africa, especially contexts that have been divided along complex lines such as ethnicity, geography, national identity, or the competition for natural resources. Though it will be beyond the scope of this research paper specifically, intended environments that this research is hoped to be applicable – and will therefore involve further research around the applicability of such – include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi and Sudan.

Keywords

Introduction[*]

The challenge of institution building in African countries remains a major threat to the establishment of peace and justice, and the entrenchment of sustainable social and economic development. This may be attributed largely to the dynamic and complex social landscape of most African countries. While single borders bring political definition to post-independent countries, such countries often struggle to find a single national identity that transcends numerous tribal, ethnic or historic identities. The role of central government in creating an effective structure of governance is crucial in the steps towards post-conflict nation-building. However, national institution building is not necessarily the right answer, especially in contexts difficult to govern, such as vast geographic areas or complex social and ethnic realities. It is in this sense that this paper seeks to find an alternative to 'institution building' as a way forward in good governance practices, suggesting rather a decentralised and localised approach. The case study that will be brought to be bear as an example of this is Rwanda and its recent governance mechanisms and approaches that have helped create a new national identity while instilling a culture of service delivery and accountability amongst its public servants and political leadership.

Theoretical Premise

Much of the recent governance discourse has focused on institution building and the many challenges therein. Moreover, many of Africa's post-colonial developmental issues from issues of poor governance. Accounts are endless of the poor languishing in exacerbating squalor while the coffers of a small ruling elite seem ever expanding. What I would like to present, and what this paper hopes to argue, is that this general approach to institution building as a fundamental to good governance in African and the developing world generally may be fundamentally unhelpful to the promotion of good governance and development. What is more is that as much as good governance has been widely accepted as requisite to progress in sustainable development and improved service delivery, I wish to argue that service delivery itself should be identified as a key indicator of good governance. Within the governance discourse is needed a shift from complex indicators of to a simplified approach that views service delivery as central focus and ultimate outcome.

It is most likely widely accepted that the mandate of the government of a developing country reaches beyond the simple guardianship of its people's liberties and freedoms as many developed countries might espouse, to be largely tasked with the country's social, economic and environmental development. The service provision, then, is fundamental to such development. One might argue this point differently – that the mandates of government of both developed and developing worlds are in fact identical: to guard and promote its citizens freedoms and liberties and fundamental human rights. The point of departure comes in the challenges to do so, where the developing world is tasked with a more fundamental *provision* of many of these rights, rather than their *protection* or safekeeping. The developing challenge – by its very nature, as its name would suggest – is one of *attaining*, not yet having attained, then to *retain* and protect.

As such, this paper argues for the need to revise our view of governance indicators accordingly.[1] The provision of services provides a key underpinning for the measurement of effective governance and intimates at good practice, as the government can be seen to be engaging and delivering to its citizenry, not self-absorbed in the acquisition of power and its often associated evils. For the purposes

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of this discussion, the Government of Rwanda has also articulated its own vision of decentralised government vis-à-vis a good governance framework for poverty reduction which places poverty reduction at the centre around which revolves several forms of governance, such as economic, political, managerial and civic governance. But all point to the objective of poverty reduction. Hence, basic on this premise, the overriding argument of this paper is that decentralisation is key to performance and service delivery, all of which are bolstered by strengthened accountability, clearly defined poverty alleviation objectives, and the ownership – the *prendre aux mains* of the specific needs and solutions at community levels – occurring at the local levels of government and amongst their respective citizenry.

Rwanda – the Context

Rwanda emerged from the 1994 genocide, beginning the rebuilding of every portion of its society, from virtually nothing. Government was turned upside down and virtually entirely replaced as the Rwandan Patriotic Front descended on the country, forcing the *genociders* beyond its borders. Yet the country has shown remarkable success in rebuilding itself. And much of this success has been attributed to its president, Paul Kagame, for both the strong leadership that he has governed with, and the reconciliatory approach that he adopted from the outset in eroding the dialectic identities that had polarised the country and precipitated the genocide. The progress made was done under a sense of urgency to make rapid in-roads in the reconstruction of social capital, basic infrastructure, promotion of the private sector, and modernising agriculture.[2]

At the heart of this advance was the prioritisation of service delivery in bringing about such rapid and grass-roots development. And it was a vigorous prioritisation: 'Our country recognises the fundamental importance of an efficient public service delivery system for the well being of its population and for the reconstruction of our society.'[3] Moreover, the delivery of such services was understood to be positioned on the effectiveness of its public institutions, which themselves required clearly defined and achievable objectives and an engaging level of accountability with its citizenry. Therefore fundamental to the achievement of service delivery was seen to be through strengthened public institutions with increased public engagement. And thus grew a dynamic decentralisation policy that began its emergence in 2000 and placed at its centre an intensive emphasis on accountability: 'The entire focus of this vision is centred on the concept of "accountability" by "putting people at the centre of service provision."'[4]

This vision took policy form firstly through the National Decentralisation Policy, issued in 2000, which formed a crucial component to the longer-term Vision 2020, aimed at complete eradication of extreme poverty by 2020. The Decentralisation Policy of 2000 aimed at good governance, pro-poor service delivery, and sustainable development. It was implemented through a consultative process, eliciting public input through a variety of localised community meetings and forums. From this input, the vision was translated into a three-phased implementation strategy, the first (2000-2003) of which was aimed at '*establishing democratic and community development structures and attempting to build their capacities*', followed (2004-2008) by a consolidation and expansion of decentralisation by '*emphasising service delivery to communities through a well-integrated accountability network*'. These two phases are then meant to be followed a final phase of supporting, improving and sustaining these previous two.[5]

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[2]   *Making Decentralised Service Delivery Work in Rwanda: Putting the People at the Centre of Service Provision*. A Policy Note. Ministry of Local Government, Community Development, and Social Affairs, Government of Rwanda, 2006.

[3]   Ibid.

[4]   Ibid.

[5]   Ibid.

The government's vision of decentralised service delivery is therefore premised on promoting *enhanced accountability*, and follows three basic principles: firstly, putting Rwandan citizens at the centre of service provision; strengthened incentives for providers to serve the poor and improve accountability and clarity of goals; and increasing the effectiveness of all resources available (note that this does not involve heightened fund raising, but making more effective use of *available* or *existing* funds). By placing the citizen at the centre of service provision and accountability, this decentralised approach is able to truncate the effects of a diverse population with a multitude of interests and needs, not to mention the gravity of the recent past that Rwanda has emerged from.

As the government's policy note indicates, *'Decentralised service delivery is meant to meet the various and often uniquely diverse needs and expectations of the population.'*[6] And this is the heart of the vision for Rwanda's decentralisation policy, and the context in which Imihigo emerges as a means of holding public servants accountable at two levels – firstly to the population they are servicing locally, and the President they are serving nationally. It is a two-tiered system of accountability that ultimately places the citizenry as beneficiaries at the highest priority, and the president in a 'father-like' figure, presiding over the public servants' delivery of their set-out objectives.

Imihigo – The Background

Imihigo is a concept that dates back several centuries in Rwandan culture that relates most closely to a performance contract. The concept developed as an idea of a public commitment from prominent military leaders to their king to achieve a specific object, such as the conquest of an enemy or region. Achieving their set goal would result in both the access to a 'pot of beer' – or to the prestigious dinner table of the king – designated as the reward for such achievement, as well as acclaim amongst the tribe for the achievement. Similarly, failure to achieve would result in the inability to access the designated reward, as well as an associated shame for not achieving the goals. This idea has been both modernised and institutionalised into the political system in which mayors make public annual commitments to the president to deliver on specific goals laid out in the national development agenda and localised in the district development plans. The commitments are therefore two-fold in their direction – firstly to the President, to deliver to him specific set-out targets and objectives; and secondly, to the citizenry specific to the area being governed by the official. Since its inception, Imihigo has now been effected every cadre of society insofar as these commitments are found within government departments, schools, even in families.

An interesting manifestation of Imihigo's inherent accountability structure is what has become a public meeting around the various Imihigos in the country, called an Imihigo Day. This generally occurs quarterly, and is arranged according to region, involving all the district majors of a region to present in an open public gathering, presided over by usually the Minister of Local Government and often a few other prominent leaders, such as a city or regional mayor or minister of state. The format may vary, but the general substance of the meeting will involve the mayors presenting to the entire group the specific progress being made under their Imihigo. This will be constituted by various community-based projects, such as a heifer project, agricultural terracing, schools or other public infrastructure, small enterprise bead or tailoring projects, or many other such local development projects. While conducting research around this intervention in Rwanda, I was able to attend the Kigali Imihigo, and witness the event. The presentations were of the highest quality: full colour-photo power point presentation, often displaying statistics of growth for as small a period as a quarter – since the previous Imihigo Day – and even take the form of a filmed presentation with explanative narration and interviews with the people involved in the various projects.

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[6]   Ibid, 6.

The point of note here is not necessarily the high level of quality of the presentations themselves, but of the pride taken in the presentation of the Imihgios by the mayors, and the even higher degree of pride shown towards their community members who are implementing the projects and benefiting from them. This display also showed the multifaceted aspects of the Imihigo Day insofar as the crowd responded to the various project in ways that displayed great interest when something of a new idea was presented, often inciting applause at the innovation being displayed. Concomitantly, when less than desired goals were achieved – and unsubstantiated as to why that was – the group would often arrive at a strong exhortation to increase performance and show greater results at the next quarter's presentation; or when results were not achieved for explained reasons, the group would often rally to offer suggestions at problem solving or further encouragement.

Another significant component of these accountability days is the display of ownership showed by the mayors presenting and by the community members present at the meeting and involved in the implementation of the projects. There is pride amongst all when the projects are presented; and there is camaraderie amongst the whole group attending to raise their own levels of achievement in competition with each other and in achievement of their own goals. This forum allows for the mayors to have a remarkable degree of ownership of the programmes because it is he or she who is presenting these initiatives to the highest levels of central government, as well as to their own communities. Both levels of accountability mark the shifting degree to which mayors themselves are increasingly viewed as servants of their communities, and accountable to deliver as such. And should they cease to show vested interest in doing so, their own communities will be the first to ensure that re-election does not occur.

In these different forms, there is shown to be much at stake for public servants in Rwanda. Service delivery is attainable only through very diligent and applied work and is the true substance of what public service is intended for. A number of the mayors who were interviewed even went as far as to express a degree of fatigue in conducting their jobs because of the extensive degree to which it demanded of them and the pressure to deliver. Yet in that pressure and even in that fatigue was, again, a seemingly ubiquitous pride at achieving, at delivering, at the stories of success of the individual members in their communities.

Findings

On a recent visit to Rwanda, I was able to conduct a series of interviews with key civil servants around questions of Imihigo as it relates to increased leadership capacity development for development progress. The research is being conducted for the World Bank on their Global Leadership Initiative, involving a number of key interventions in several countries. During this time in Rwanda, we were able to interview 15 civil servants on Imihigo specifically, and its relevance to building network and relational capacity in Rwanda. The interviews were conducted through a structured protocol, so as to ensure a rigorously standardised approach to the research across a wide variety of interventions and contexts.[7]

When asked of the purpose of Imihigo and its institution in national policy, a majority of the respondents stated reasons around needing increased levels of performance vis-à-vis service delivery and general tasks from civil servants – and their increased ownership of their given tasks; moreover, greater accountability amongst civil servants was frequently identified as a key issue that the intervention was seeking to address. Also mentioned was the perceived need to involve community members in the development process, such as the identification and the implementation of projects, as well as the general need for improved levels of service delivery. Moreover, one of the areas that were seen to be problematic within civil servant performance was the lack of clearly defined goals and

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[7] The results of this research are forthcoming and anticipated to be in official or accessible format by the end of this year (2009) as published by the World Bank.

specific targets to deliver on. Associated with poor performance was a lack of accountability and monitoring of performance, as well as a fundamental lack of ownership of any developmental projects or initiatives, or an urgency to involve themselves in such activity.

Having identified these various problem areas as those which Imihigo was introduced to address, *all* respondents said that these issues have in fact been better addressed since the launch of the initiative, and that Imihigo did indeed contribute directly to this progress. Having thus established the indisputable success of the initiative, the deeper reasons for this success was sought from the respondents. The overwhelming response to this question that respondents answered in various forms and locations throughout the interview was, fundamentally, that Imihigo helped entice greater performance amongst the civil servants. And once again, this was done or accomplished more specifically through, firstly, the large public presence at both the annual inception of new Imihigos, where civil servants state their goals and commitments for the year to the president and to their communities; secondly, for the clarification of their goals that the processes instils; thirdly because of the increased involvement of the communities as beneficiaries and therefore planners in the process of identifying and prioritising needs and selecting relevant projects; and finally, the fact that Imihigo is based in tradition and thus draws on existing knowledge places it as being conceptually fundamental to the success of the initiative.

Analysis

Thus the public service situation in which Imihigo was introduced was fundamentally viewed as one of poor service delivery. This was caused, primarily, by generally poor performance amongst civil servants. And this poor performance was attributed primarily to three primary sources: 1) little accountability, due largely to the lack of performance monitoring; 2) unclear goals or objectives in service delivery, potentially attributable to the lack of involvement of local communities in identifying priorities and implementing solutions, so planning from the central government tended to be nebulous and detached; 3) and by a lack of ownership of projects undertaken by the government, instead being imposed on the local authorities by central government, rather than initiated locally. Having established the difficulties of performance and service delivery amongst the public service in Rwanda, the respondents also stated that these have been addressed, virtually directly, through the initiation of Imihigo. There are certainly still challenges in the implementation of the intervention, but it has been met with resounding success.

The problems themselves, however, were noted as having been directly addressed in the following ways: in the first place there was improved performance amongst the civil servants, which relates directly to the *delivery of services*, being the key performance indicator. And the *performance* itself was fundamentally addressed by three key components: improved levels of *accountability*, clearly defined *goals* and objectives, and *ownership* of the problems by every stakeholder, which includes local authorities and community members. The involvement of community members as beneficiaries in any poverty alleviation or socio-economic development project allows them to articulate genuine needs and priorities in their communities and bring clear definition to projects in partnership with the various levels of local authorities. If drawn, the framework of this process may look something like the following diagram:

Community-Based Service Provision
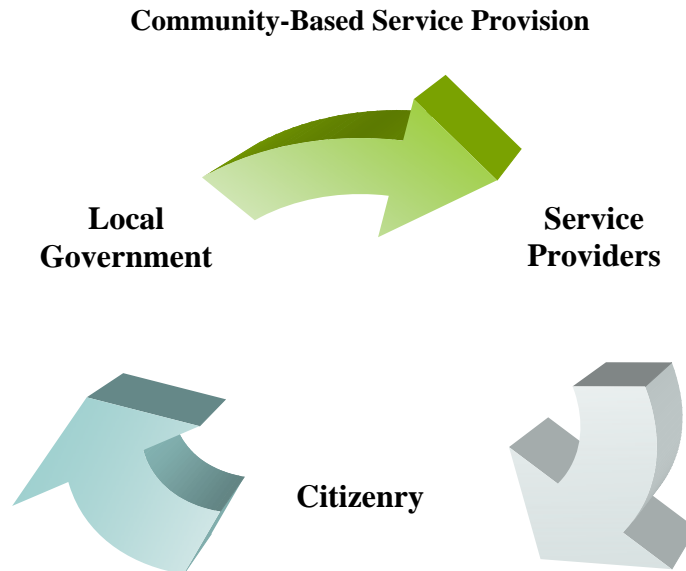
This process firstly clarifies goals for government to deliver on, defining what might otherwise be nebulously conceived plans at a central level that have little practical relevance at community levels. In addition, by the authorities availing themselves to the involvement and participation of the community in this process, they are made beholden to deliver on such or else face the consequences of non re-election from their community or the shame amongst their civil servant constituents of not delivering on their objectives, thus instilling a multifaceted level of accountability. However, this accountability implicates everyone – beneficiaries are more inclined to involve themselves in the projects as their interest is primarily with the delivery of their needed services, not the political longevity or removal of their political leader. Thus involvement in creating solutions is seen as more valuable than simple criticism when problems arise, benefiting both authorities and beneficiaries. In this way these three fundamentals – accountability, clear objectives and ownership of the problem – aid in increasing the performance of elected leaders and civil servants, thereby simultaneously resulting in greater efficiency and relevance of service delivery at the most basic community level.

Where to From Here?

This Rwandan example of accountability-based and performance-based decentralised government offers a variety of approaches and methods to learn from vis-à-vis decentralising government and raising the effectiveness of service delivery. I would like to reiterate here that the intention of this paper is not to undermine the importance of institution building in Africa, but that this may not always be a helpful prioritisation in establishing practices of good governance in complex and often fragile situations. The first such approach should be a general prioritisation of decentralising government rather than intensively focusing on national institution building. One might argue that strong central government is requisite to decentralisation, but this need not necessarily be the case. And that I would like to put forward as being caused by the following strengths and characteristics that Imihigo demonstrates, translatable into a variety of contexts.

The first point of importance and prioritisation is the elevation of relevant, tangible, effective and efficient service delivery on the part of the public servants. This returns to the theoretical premise above that locates the provision of services as a fundamental mandate of developing countries. As such, service delivery itself should be prioritised as a key governance indicator. The World Bank Institute offered a series of indicators that locates service delivery as a component of its third indicator
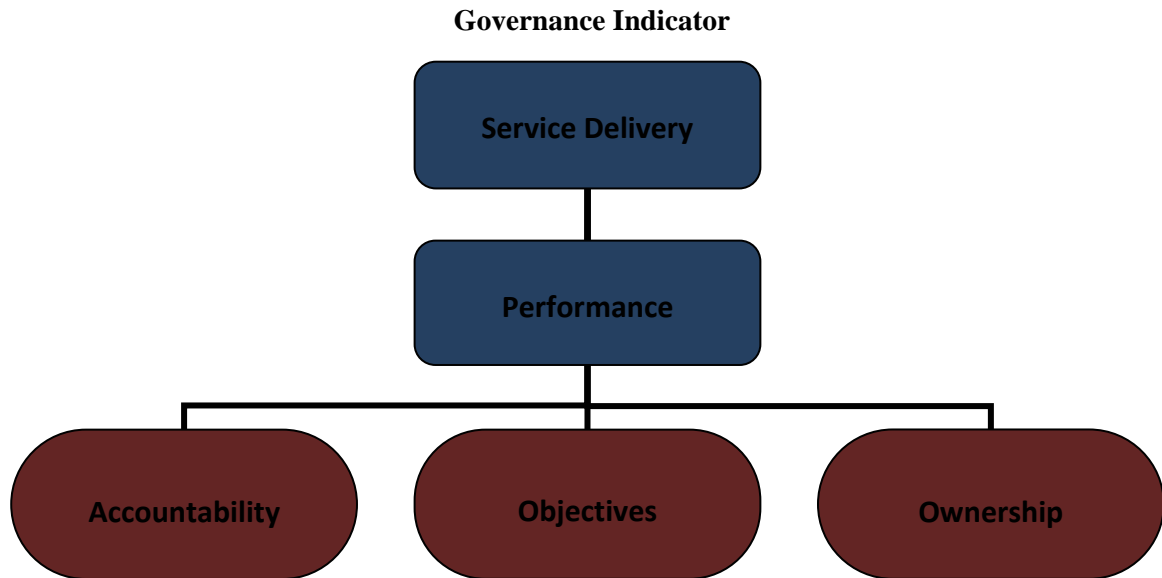
of 'effective government',[8] which is a step towards including service delivery, yet still places it as only a component of a number of other indicators, which again may not be helpful in establishing good governance practice in an unstable or highly complex developing climate. By raising the priority of service delivery, many different components that support this may be included as components that lead to effective service delivery, understood in a very flexible model that can be easily appropriated into a variety of contexts. For example, effective service delivery relies on 'good' levels of performance from public servants who are administering development initiatives or projects from a government basis. This performance is itself ensured by three key factors, drawing from the research findings above and the characteristics of Imihigo's success: firstly, accountability. A description is provided above of the different accountability mechanisms that constitute Imihigo, such as a public quarter presentation of progress underway on projects, which involves a leader's citizenry and his or her political leadership. This is one of several. Yet it encourages achievement. Moreover, it also encourages competition to succeed and innovation in the avenues for delivery. This adds a further strength to this form of accountability, insofar as the accountability is affirmative, rather than negative, and promotes rather than criticises, encouraging achievement and innovation through camaraderie and empathy amongst all stakeholders involved.

Secondly, and key to effective and relevant service delivery, is the clarification of goals and objectives in doing so. The involvement of community members on this point specifically is imperative and fundamental. A frequent issue arising in the implementation of national development policies is that these policies are developed generally at a macro level, and often contain nebulous formulation in their delivery. The most frequently mentioned problem with nationally conceived development initiatives is their implementation. And this again is largely due to their conception nationally rather than locally, where they are intended for implementation. They often meet with irrelevance or unclear objectives or vague methods for implementation. By involving community members with local government structures, this issue can be most effectively curtailed. The problems or needs here are real and specific; and most likely, their solutions may be equally tangible and attainable when conceived and addressed this way. Such a consultative process is also infinitely helpful in instilling a sense of partnership between local government and their citizenry as both parties can be seen to be engaging with the other – the citizenry can become sympathetic to challenges that local government faces in attaining funding and support from the national level; and the local government structures are made more aware of the exact needs of their citizenry.

And thirdly, the issue of ownership lies within the fabric of the previous two components just discussed. Through the consultative process of clarifying goals between citizens and local government, and their shared levels of accountability in doing so, the real tangible needs of their communities are felt, and felt tangibly in their hands as they *prendre aux mains* the real issues. They are able to take full ownership of their stake in the process of poverty alleviation by understanding their neighbour's needs and how they themselves are affected by these needs. This ownership is most often characterised by a deep-seated motivation unfounded in the prescription of policies or projects from distant centralised institutions, because their relevance is indisputable and their results directly visible. Ownership of poverty is the first step to its alleviation. And ownership must occur at all levels and between all stakeholders.
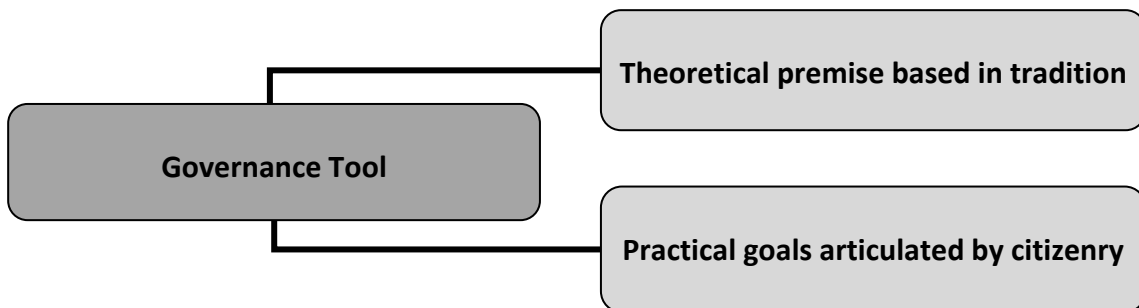
This discussion of the key components in a governance indicator model of service delivery and civil servant performance might be shown as the following:

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[8]   Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996-2004

Governance Indicator

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │   Service Delivery   │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                              │
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │     Performance      │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                              │
        ┌─────────────────────┼─────────────────────┐
 ┌──────────────┐     ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
 │ Accountability│     │  Objectives  │      │  Ownership   │
 └──────────────┘     └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
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There is one additional feature of Imihigo that I would like to discuss which is the second fundamental component that has brought it such great success (the first being service delivery and performance prioritised in the decentralisation process). And this is the fact that Imihigo, conceptually, is an entirely indigenous idea. Knowledge of it and its meaning could be found throughout society long before it was institutionalised (and I use the term with caution) into Rwanda's service delivery framework. It was indeed a platform upon which central government was able to appeal to its local leadership – and society as a whole – to prioritise increased performance for the sake of improved service delivery. It thus appealed to a knowledge rooted in ancient customs and traditions now made applicable in a modern context of performance to address real needs of poverty and development. And it was perhaps this component of Imihigo that underlies its success entirely, that without this ability to appeal to an understood code of performance, delivery and accountability, that the other measures of decentralisation and increased performance may well not have enjoyed the sustainable success that they do today.

Governance Model

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                              ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Theoretical premise based in tradition│
                              └──────────────────────────────────────┘
 ┌──────────────────┐        │
 │  Governance Tool  ├────────┤
 └──────────────────┘        │
                              ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Practical goals articulated by citizenry│
                              └──────────────────────────────────────┘
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This is the final component that this paper wishes to address and propound as key to good governance – that specific aspects of it be entirely localised and relevant. Imihigo offers an example of a flexible model because it is conceptually broad but clear in its purpose. It states that its goals are static, but the processes may vary. It is this indigenous nature of Imihigo that I propose to be its first and foremost exportable element. But its exportability is not Imihigo itself, it is the idea that such a governance tool be premised in the communities or contexts in which it will be utilised, and thereby gain the virtues of flexibility and the platform for applying needed governance and service delivery structures.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, it is not the basic intention of this paper to undermine or argue against the importance and need for governance institutions generally, but to put forward the idea that there are clear challenges to this in African which could be alleviated by shifting the focus to a more decentralised approach by making use of indigenous concepts, institutionalising these in the local political frameworks. Imihigo is an example of a decentralised governance approach to service delivery that is highly efficient in clarifying both goals and strategies for achieving these goals amongst district leaders. It has also proven a formidable measure of accountability both to the communities that local government serve as well as to the president to whom the mayors have committed themselves. It also serves as a valuable example to other countries in Africa struggling to implement a truly decentralised approach to governance and who remain ineffective in service delivery based a purely centralised approach. This would allow for some of the following needed growth points:

- Greater community participation in the political process;
- The promotion of democratic functionality at every local level;
- Low training and programme development and implementation measure because the concept appeals to an already understood concept;
- Curtails the challenges to institution building by shifting the approach and emphasis all together to a decentralised model;
- Promotes accountability through the community's direct involvement in the political process;
- Prioritises service delivery as a keystone of good governance;
- Mobilises government at central and local levels to deliver on services that are fundamental to their mandate to provide for the basic human rights entitled to their citizenry.

As diverse as so many of the contexts are in Africa in which improvements in governance are so desperately required, the example of Imihigo may be well considered to borrow from. This would entail the research of local concepts and maxims rooted in local traditions and customs that speak to similar concepts of performance and delivery that could be easily modernised around a specific decentralising framework of a central government to the relevance and benefit of the local extensions of government. What is found in Imihigo – and what this paper hopes to have presented – is a unique but very real example of a genuinely 'African' governance mechanism. It is dynamic and flexible, and most importantly, birthed within the language and culture of the people it serves.

It also provides a framework that needs to be more carefully considered in the governance discourse relating to developing countries, insofar as it encourages an indigenous approach that may well be more formidable in establishing the various virtues of good governance that the developed world looks for and that are considered requisite to sustainable development – accountability, transparency, service delivery, community participation. Moreover, it is a more decentralised approach to governance that is possibly more often required in the demanding contexts of cultural diversity and conflicting interests than a centralising and institution building approach to governance that would be more effective. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, quoted from Rwanda's decentralisation policy

and tying together the need for service delivery through a decentralised approach, '*Decentralised service delivery is meant to meet the various and often uniquely diverse needs and expectations of the population.*' And in Africa – and perhaps most developing countries – this is possibly the ultimate purpose and goal of good governance.

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