

AFRICA'S 'UNSUNG HEROES' AND COVID-19: BESIDES CELEBRATION, THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN CAPACITIES

By **Camilla Rocca**, Head of Research

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of nurses, doctors and other key service providers. At the same time it has exacerbated the already existing capacity gaps and challenges that prevent public services from operating at their full potential. Public services in Africa were already under increasing pressure from Africa's rising and urbanising demography. Public service is a cornerstone of governance but is seldom assessed and included in discussions about Africa's development. In the light of this pandemic, there is an opportunity to embed lasting change. Public services must be reassessed to ensure that this crisis sees public servants placed at the heart of Africa's shared development, equipped with adequate resources and duly recognised as 'unsung heroes'.

The 2018 Ibrahim Forum was dedicated to *Public Service in Africa*. In his keynote speech, Mo Ibrahim, Chair of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, underlined the timeliness and significance of such a discussion in Africa: "Our public services are vitally important, but we are not talking about them. Without strong public services and committed public servants, at local, national, regional or continental levels, there will be no efficient delivery of expected public goods and services, nor implementation of any commitment, however strongly voiced".

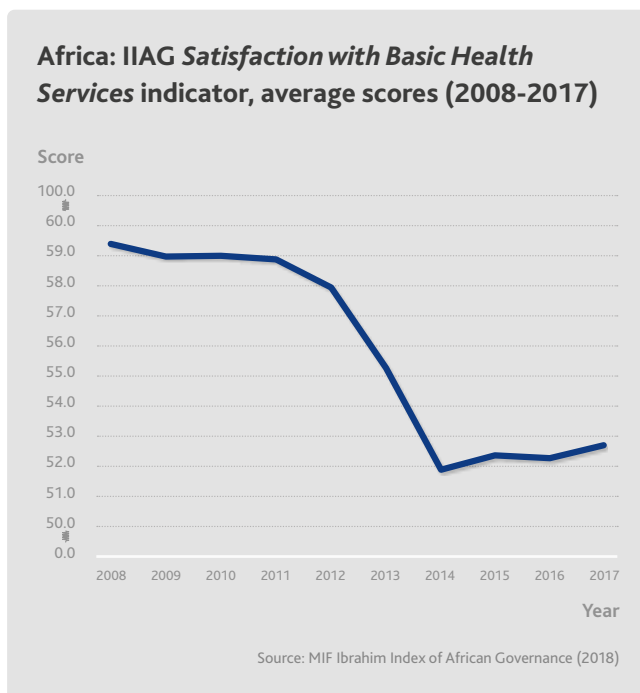
Exactly two years later, the COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the crucial role of public sector workers in responding to the immense challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The COVID-19 emergency has placed a significant burden on public services. Almost overnight, public servants found themselves at the frontline of the response to the pandemic: healthcare workers keeping medical systems functioning and families safe around the clock, as well as civil servants ensuring implementation of prevention, social distancing and mitigation measures.

The crisis has also highlighted severe capacity challenges and structural weaknesses in the public sector as an employer, compromising optimal public service delivery. Despite the vital role it plays in governance and leadership, public service in Africa is seldom assessed, is often a niche topic and attracts very little interest from those who gather to discuss Africa's potential. Building on the conclusions of the 2018 Ibrahim Forum, key areas of public service need renewed engagement to ensure the momentum around public service in Africa continues and to transform the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity that finally places public service at the heart of Africa's development efforts.

Growing demands and growing dissatisfaction

Health

COVID-19 hit at a time when African public services were already failing to meet citizens' expectations, due to rising pressure and demands. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) indicator *Satisfaction with Basic Health Services* is the only indicator in *Health* to show decline across the IIAG ten-year time series (2008-2017) highlighting the fact that Africa's citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the delivery of basic health services. The average score of *Satisfaction with Provision of Water & Sanitation Services* in 2017 is lower than in 2008.



Within public service, the area of health is one that requires renewed attention and resources to address the supply of funds and equipment. A proxy variable commonly used to measure the quality of healthcare is the number of physicians per 10,000 people. At the regional level, sub-Saharan Africa's average for the years 2010- 2018 is the lowest (2.1 physicians per 10,000 people). Compared to this, in Europe & Central Asia and Latin America & the Caribbean, the two best performing regions, the average number of physicians amounted to 24.9 and 21.6, respectively.

Education and socio-economic integration of youth

The IIAG indicators *Satisfaction with Education Provision* as well as *Promotion of Socio-economic Integration of Youth*,

measuring efforts of governments in creating accessible programmes for youth in the areas of education, housing and/or employment, are on a negative trajectory. This is worrisome given their importance for a continent with around 60% of the population is under the age of 25.

Public management

Effective systems for planning, management and resource allocation, and coordination and implementation are all essential when it comes to a functional public service. With an African average score of 43.3 in 2017, *Public Management* is however the third lowest scoring of the 14 IIAG sub-categories and is declining in more recent years (-0.4 between 2013 and 2017). In addition to a decline in the quality and the sustainability of fiscal policies, a decreased effectiveness of central government in designing and implementing policy, delivering public services and managing human resources is driving this concerning trend.

Data, data, data: civil registration and vital statistics are key

The civil registration system, by which countries can maintain continuous and complete records of vital events such as births and deaths, is critical for establishing the legal identity of individuals, providing them with access to public services and securing basic human rights. However, only eight African countries have a birth registration system with a coverage rate higher than 90.0%. Strengthening this capacity is core to well-functioning and effective public service delivery, and to leaving no one behind.

Attract the brightest and the best

The emigration of skilled nationals, or brain drain, results in a depletion of skilled human resources in their country of origin. Young skilled Africans flee to join competitive European and American job markets, and even other countries' public services. Brain drain is particularly pervasive in the health sector: too many African countries have more locally born physicians working outside than in the country. In 2015, 86.0% of all African-educated physicians working in the US were trained in Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. One in ten doctors working in the UK comes from Africa.

Low wages and weak prestige and scarce opportunity for career advancement do not make a public service career attractive for many young Africans. Things are changing however. In cities such as Kampala and Johannesburg, a new generation of mayors are taking the lead in modernising public services, supported by teams of young and motivated Africans. For instance, programmes in Liberia and Ghana succeed in attracting youth talent into public service. Rwanda has been at the forefront of ensuring performance in public service through the use of performance contracts (Imihigo), rooted in the country's cultural practice.

Africa's advantage in leapfrogging and attracting collaboration

The good news is that Africa has a unique capacity to leapfrog the application of innovation and technology to public service delivery. In Rwanda, drones deliver blood and medical supplies. Likewise, in Côte d'Ivoire, drones ensure the maintenance of the country's electricity network. In Kenya, through Huduma, public services are available electronically and offline communities are reached by mobile offices. In Nigeria, digital applications monitor the implementation of government projects. Senegal and Ghana are leading the African response to COVID-19 with the development of quick and cheap testing kits and innovative testing procedures, respectively.

On an equally positive note, as well as public services, other actors have emerged offering opportunities for complementary collaboration. The COVID-19 spread in Africa has prompted philanthropists and business leaders to pledge money to support African countries. Former New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg announced a \$40 million commitment to support the fight against the spread of the coronavirus, particularly in Africa. Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma pledged to donate over one million testing kits to the continent, six million masks and 60,000 protective suits and face shields. In Nigeria, the private sector coalition anti COVID-19 (CACOVID), led by the Aliko Dangote Foundation, has been deploying massive efforts to strengthen health structures, testing capacities and isolation center availabilities, as well as to provide food relief packages.

Civil society and local communities are also engaging to fill the gaps in social protection. The Nigerian government only provided cash relief to 3.6 million poor households during the lockdown, a tiny figure in a country where 95.9 million people live in extreme poverty. The People's Food Bank is just one of several citizen-powered welfare initiatives that have sprung

up in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, feeding 3,000 people daily in Nigeria.

A new social contract with citizens to match supply and demand

To ensure an efficient match between a rising demand and a still weak supply, a sound contract must be built between citizens and public service providers. A social contract benefits ownership and accountability on both sides, where taxpayers become stakeholders through taxes as electors do through the ballot box, and public service providers become accountable to taxpayers as governments are to their electorate. This leads to improved processes to strengthen transparency and accountability, and more ways for citizens to monitor, oversee and participate in public service delivery – all key pillars of sound governance and effective public policy ownership.

Effectiveness of the Public Service is the fourth most correlated indicator to overall governance score in the 2018 Ibrahim Index of Africa Governance (IIAG). This indicator captures the effectiveness of the civilian central government in designing and implementing policy, delivering public services, and managing human resources. The correlation demonstrates that countries doing better in public service effectiveness also share higher scores in overall governance.

Conclusion

Public servants have been in the shadows for too long, with few thinking, talking about or praising these 'unsung heroes' of developing countries for their role as pillars of public service delivery. As a result of COVID-19, almost overnight, public servants found themselves in the spotlight, and everywhere in the world nurses, doctors, and providers of fundamental services to citizens have been celebrated. Post-pandemic governments in Africa have a chance to establish lasting change by acting now to equip public servants with adequate resources and recognise them with a central role in Africa's future.