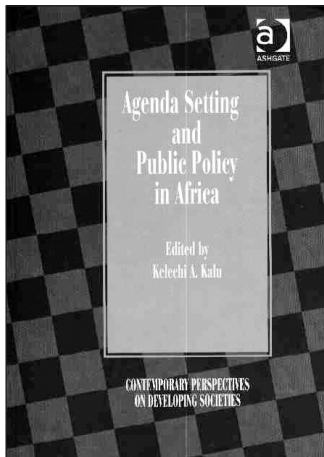


AGENDA SETTING AND PUBLIC POLICY IN AFRICA

Contemporary Perspectives on Developing Societies

KELECHI A KALU (ED)

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African countries have, since independence, remained costly prisoners of foreign development paradigms. If the continent is to achieve sustainable growth then there is a clear need for development strategies that respond to socio economic and political realities. Mr Kalu's book, *Agenda Setting and Public Policy in Africa*, provides an integrated account of the theoretical and practical aspects of public policy challenges in developing societies. It points toward the need to infuse 'novelty' into public policy making processes to reflect indigenous societal interests. Contributors to the book tackle critical policy issues that have emasculated the growth of policy objectives that are sensitive to African needs. The book demonstrates that the lack of long-term strategic thinking and indigenous African inspiration are some of the factors that have hindered the continent's development priorities. The text, made up of a dozen chapters, is the result of collaboration by African scholars who examine some public policy challenges and outline possible alternatives. After the introductory chapter, chapters two to six constitute section one and examine general theoretical and analytical issues in policy making and management in Africa. Chapters seven to 12 (section

two) discuss specific country case studies and issues of public policy. In the introduction, the author discusses the link between societal problems and the process of devising public policies that alleviate those problems.

The book's central theme is that ideas are products of a given context in which the thinker finds him/herself. Such ideas may therefore not necessarily be relevant to dealing with problems in a different environment. The wholesale adoption of Western development paradigms by African countries is a clear example of disparities between the contexts. There is a need to anchor development approaches to African settings. It is this line of thought that runs through the entire of the textbook. The African continent continues to grapple with questions about why the continent cannot find solutions to its problems. There has been much rhetoric in the recent past about 'African solutions to African problems' but, in reality, the continent persists in relying on Western development strategies and agendas regardless of their relevance. It is essential for African policy makers to prioritize and to focus Africa's policy renewal on issues of education, empowerment and capacity-building. Once the majority of the African people have capacity and knowledge, they can participate meaningfully in the process of agenda-setting and public policy. Development processes in Africa should be harnessed to well-planned strategies that integrate relevant ideas with an African vision, knowledge and interests. This is a prudent way to fashion systematic and indigenous approaches to development and growth and a good way to reduce some of the increasingly threatening environmental problems.

Most states in Africa are poor because of institutional inadequacies, most of which were inherited when the states gained independence after a period of colonialism. The quality of life in Africa has, ever since, either improved minimally or not at all. Institutional structures adopted at independence have lacked the capacity to constrain the state and its leadership. This has led to many governments being hamstrung by mismanagement and corruption. The remedy lies in reconstructing the state to provide constitutionally limited forms of government and economic systems that guarantee economic freedoms. In Africa, the process of

coalescing issues into the public policy milieu has often been determined by Western states and other international institutions. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) are a good example of cases where Western economic policies were adopted and which, according to some analysts, perpetuated controlling Western interests in Africa. Dominant political and economic forces in the world have certainly played a central role in influencing policy processes in developing countries. Most international organizations operate in Western capitals and their policies are greatly influenced by those developed countries.

It is also true that most African countries have very weak constitutional frameworks and social movement structures. In the end, a combination of factors makes it very difficult for locally motivated concerns to evolve into public policy; this leaves the agenda setting to be externally determined. It is also plausible to argue that public sector organizations in Africa have contributed to the exacerbation of government inefficiency. Various administrative problems such as bureaucratic inertia and bloated government systems coupled with poor pay compound the problem. These sectors obviously need to be reformed so as to enhance efficiency and accountability. But these reforms need to be secured within the bounds of an African socio-cultural environment.

In recent times, Western states often attached tough conditions to financial support for public service reforms. One such condition is the retrenchment of civil servants without considering the African social context. In Africa, most families still practice the extended family system where individuals end up supporting many of the members of that extended system. Retrenching one person has a big (and negative) snowball effect that should be considered when prescribing reforms. Mr Kalu observes that efficiency and accountability can be made possible by putting in place strategic and professionalized designs. He argues that for Africa to play a meaningful role in the 21st Century, governments should aim to reform public institutions through professionalization, decentralization and embracing mechanisms for accountability in order to enhance efficiency and effectiveness and promote development.

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as an instrument for development is another policy concern for Africa. African states have sought to use ICT to transform its development fortunes but few policy makers have questioned whether ICT (a Western-oriented technology) is a suitable way to meet Africa's development needs. African countries should 'unpack' this technology and figure out how it can be fashioned to address local peoples' needs and concerns. The continent should also try to develop and manufacture easily-accessible spare parts for the machines required.

Maternal mortality is another perennial problem in Africa. Most of the social factors that lead to it can easily be overcome. Africa has witnessed widespread maternal deaths resulting from unsafe abortions, inadequate diet, multiple pregnancies and lack of basic health information. African governments need to make their citizens' health a priority. If governments were able to stem corruption and mismanagement, they could then afford more medical facilities, provide qualified personnel and enhance access to information and awareness of maternal and child healthcare. Another issue involving women is the long-running debate on integrating women into development programmes in Africa. There is no doubt that, in this era, women need to be involved in decision-making processes. Many people in Africa are realizing that women are capable of participating effectively in areas that were traditionally regarded as a male domain. African countries can facilitate inclusive societal development by empowering women and other disadvantaged groups so as to reduce poverty.

Africa governments can also use privatisation programmes as a policy tool. They can stimulate economic growth by revitalizing the public sector, non-profit organizations and the private sector. These are crucial steps toward sustainable development but most African governments have been reluctant to let go of the political and economic systems of patronage that the public sector can provide.

African policy-makers have also had to grapple with the policy of environmental degradation. Economic strategies and public policies play a significant role in the deforestation practice. Economic activities such as timber harvest-

ing and human habitation often take precedence over forest preservation. African countries put institutional structures in place in order to deal with factors such as human demography and socio-economic and cultural activities. These factors are often responsible for the depletion of forests and environmental degradation.

Non-governmental organisations also have a role to play in policy making in Africa. In fact, the proliferation of NGOs on the continent has not only paved way for increased governmental responsiveness and accountability but has also enhanced civil society's institutional capacity to intervene between governments and their citizens. Most local NGOs, however, depend on foreign funding to run their operations. Foreign funding institutions sometimes prescribe the particular programmes that they will fund. This restricts the local organisations' programme choices. Local African NGOs need to overcome their dependency on external donor funding; they need to find innovative ways of generating revenue to pay for their operations. This will help them develop their own original approaches to influencing public policy.

Another contemporary policy concern for Africa, especially after the end of the Cold War, has been the issue of constitutionalism. Participatory approaches to constitution-making and the continuous observance of the constitution can be a good strategy in reconstructing the state and public policy institutions. Participatory constitutionalism helps build strong institutions with new values and establishes relationships that promote democracy, social justice and the rule of law. Constitutionalism can be a very viable way to construct effective public policy. Constitutionalism is, however, a process and not an event. It calls for a lot of political goodwill, especially in Africa where most African leaders are afflicted with the absolute power syndrome.

In a nutshell, *Agenda Setting and Public Policy in Africa* categorizes Africa's problems as follows: the absence of people-driven participatory institutions that should prioritize public policy within an African context. Most authors of the various chapters agree that viable alternatives will involve sound discussions of ideas and an appreciation of issues and goals based on a vision that is informed by, and relevant to the

specific African environment. The text provides an up to date account of public policy issues through provoking chapters that are carefully edited. The book's discussion on contemporary topics of public policy presents good material on theory and current research. The case studies highlight the problems and show possible remedies. The underlying principles are well thought out and demonstrate the need for caution when formulating government development strategies and agendas in dynamic and complex settings. This reviewer would have liked the case studies to be more widely distributed in order to capture the breadth and width of the continent's diversity. Several authors tended to focus on one country, thereby failing to show the broader picture of Africa as suggested in the title. But, on the whole, the authors bring together quite interesting and insightful accounts with concise and accurate summaries. The chapters need not be read in sequence in order to be understood. This is a very important book not only for what it tells readers but because it can also be used as a relevant model for guiding the actual agenda setting and policy making by African governments. It is a careful and knowledgeable exploration of the field of public policy that can be recommended to policy-makers and scholars of public policy.

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THE SECURITY INTERSECTION

The paradox of power in the age of terror

GREG MILLS

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While it is patently clear that the September 11 terrorist attacks on targets in America – and the US-led toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq two years later – have emphatically changed the face of global security, the emerging security trends generated by these events are less clear. The spread of terrorist attacks – in Madrid, Bali, and on targets in East Africa – as well as insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq call for a fundamental rethinking of approaches to security