

Public Policy and Public Action in Africa, between Practical Norms, Political Dynamics and Outside Influences

Introduction

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A dynamic field of research

Public policy in Africa and, even more globally, public action¹ both present a dynamic field of research. Over the past few years three edited books or journal special issues have specifically addressed this topic and their introductory texts will serve to present their project. This issue of *Anthropologie & Développement* is thus a further contribution to a recent and rich academic production encompassing several other edited books (Ridde and Jacob, 2013; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Olivier de Sardan and Ridde, 2014; Olivier de Sardan and Piccoli, 2018) and certain journal issues devoted to related themes (Chauveau, 2017; Petiteville, 2017).

Scholars in geography, demography, economy and political science have contributed to a book entitled *L'État réhabilité en Afrique* (The African State Rehabilitated), which offers a wide panorama of sectorial policies in Africa, taking care to duly inscribe them within their social, political and historical contexts. In a comprehensive appraisal, Emmanuel Grégoire and Marie-France Lange (2018) retrace the evolution of public policies in Africa, particularly those concerning economy, since the advent of Independence. They underline the specificity of contemporary African states that have been rehabilitated in the discourse of international institutions, but whose autonomy vis-à-vis these institutions is still

¹ French-speaking scholars make a distinction between public policy (historically too often related to state policy) and public action which involves different state and non-state actors.

constrained. While taking care not to overestimate the role of aid, they feel that:

"[...] in order to understand the new context of public action it is necessary to study the impact of globalization as well as that of dependence, and the reactions that the latter entails" (Grégoire and Lange, 2018: 21).

The reconfiguration of the role of the state since the 1980's, the increasing number of actors involved in public action and references to New Public Management are indeed global trends, even if they adopt there certain specific features in "countries under an aid regime" (Fresia and Lavigne Delville, 2018). Such a historical approach is indispensable and puts contemporary dynamics into perspective: the multiplicity of international stakeholders is a result of structural adjustment and raises many questions concerning their legitimacy. However, even if the Paris Declaration (2005) clearly reasserts the necessary central position of the state and state policies, what can be said about the reality of such "rehabilitation"?

Shortly before the publication of this book, the reviews *Anthropologie & développement* and *Gouvernement et action publique* had each proposed an overview of public action and public policies in Africa, from the socio-anthropology of development and political science points of view respectively. These two disciplines ask very similar questions. Both study the way various stakeholders, whether national or international, state- or non state-organizations, define problems as public and decide to treat them. Both underline the specificities of public action in African countries, which have specific social dynamics and policies, and where development aid is – for better or worse – very present in many sectors. In fact, their final aim is to gain a better understanding of the state in action in Africa as well as the role played by the various social groups and international actors.

In both cases, it is a question of looking into the relationships between the various actors who define and implement the response to public and collective problems, by seriously taking into account the links between *policies*, *politics* and *politics* as well as the relatively low degree of institutionalization – resulting from a strong political influence on

organizations and a high personalization of their agents' practices – and extraversion strategies (Bayart, 2000). As soon as they undertake studies on public action, scholars in the domains of the socio-anthropology of development and political science pursue similar lines of investigation, each within the scope of their references, theoretical framework and field practice with too little exchange between disciplines.

Nonetheless, their questions are to a certain extent different. The socio-anthropology of development has built a large body of knowledge on development interventions, relationships between the users and public or collectivity service agents, administrative reforms and model transfers at a local level. Drawing on this knowledge, the issue is to widen its scope of research: on the one hand by looking upstream and examining where and how standards are set, models and policies created and, on the other hand, by putting more emphasis on those places and sites that are outside or marginal to interventions instigated by the state and aid (Lavigne Delville, 2016). The issue is also to encompass a wide variety of public actions and ways aid is used and, finally, to consider “development” as a specific form of public action, partly extraverted and internationalized, that has been historically implemented in those countries “under an aid regime”. From the point of view of political science, the issue is of:

“[...] participating in debates on state formation through the study of the configuration of public policies on the continent by viewing them as expressions and tools of state construction, [which implies that] the analysis of public policy sectors in Africa must be systematically linked to the sociology of public action and the historical sociology of the state” (Darbon and Provini, 2018: 11).

While “debates on the African state and power were first posed by anthropologists” studying the daily functioning of the local or decentralized state (Gazibo and Thiriot, 2009: 22), these two scientific fields converge to establish public action as an object of research able to renew the knowledge on the state in Africa. Beyond these differences of sensitivity, approach, and even relation to the field, recent studies in both disciplines have shown how necessary it is to place public action and policies within their historical, societal and political contexts.

The present issue follows n° 45 of *Anthropologie & développement* and also includes papers presented at APAD's 12th International Conference², whose theme was "The Making of Public Action in Countries 'under an Aid Regime'". While exploring the various forms of co-production in public action in Africa, this first thematic dossier proposed an analytical framework for studying it and underlined its internationalization and extraversion. The texts comprising the present dossier³ continue to investigate the various facets of public action in Africa, ranging from local initiatives to relations between donors and national governments. Certain contributions relate to particular sectors of activity: health in Benin and Ghana, with medication provided for malaria (Pourraz, Baxerres and Cassier); education in Benin, with the drawing-up of schooling statistics (Fichtner); electricity in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with its informal "privatization" (Mpiana); land issues in Mali, with a reform of land management aiming at establishing a land register (Bertrand). Others explore different possibilities of inventing public action, such as "good governance" in Burundi (Hirschy), governance of religion and secularism in Burkina Faso (Ouédraogo), and competition between technical services and NGOs (Kaboré). The papers underline the plurality of the stakeholders engaged in public action – whether national or international –, question the degree of influence of international actors, bring the social contract stakes to the forefront, and finally invite us to see how public action is embedded in society and politics and integrated into various contexts, histories and actors' networks. The following articles present three main issues.

² « *La fabrique de l'action publique dans les pays 'sous régime d'aide'* », co-organized by APAD, Abomey-Calavi University, LADyD, LASDEL and IRD, Cotonou, Benin, 17-20 November, 2015.

³ Two papers benefited from the writing workshop organized by APAD and LADyD in September 2016. The article by Issifou Abou Moumouni, published in n° 45, also resulted from this workshop.

“Grass-roots” governance: institutional deficiency, competition between stakeholders and practical norms

Three texts explore the relationship between the public and private actors involved in public action, as well as the competitive and complementary relationships they maintain – both between themselves and with public administrations –, and investigate their effective practices beyond the norms.

It is well-known that, both in the North and the South, the advent of the neo-liberal economic model has challenged the central role of the state and contributed to “a soaring demography of actors playing a role in public policies” (Massardier, 2003: 76). This multiplication of actors is sometimes seen as a sign of complementarities and effectiveness (the participation of private or association-based actors on one hand and users on the other hand is supposed to allow more pertinent public decisions and more effective implementation), and sometimes seen as a road to instability, incoherence, inefficiency, and even ungovernability (*ibid.*: 14). This tendency is even more marked in Africa, with the multiplication, since the 1990s, of NGOs, development projects, local collectivities, foundations, sponsors, religious movements, etc., whether national or international. The dynamics at play within these organizing fields, and the diverse relationships between organizations (complementarities, competition, overlapping, avoidance, neutralization, etc.), are relevant analytical keys to understanding the governance of collective and public services.

Another and complementary key concerns the analysis of the concrete practices of the actors concerned. The issue here is to highlight the regular features and routines emerging from repeated interactions between actors (both users and service providers) within this context of the multiplication of the actors dealing with public problems. Taken from the socio-anthropological angle, this is in fact the very definition of governance, seen in an empirical and non-prescriptive way (Blundo and Le Meur, 2009). Somewhere between the plurality of norms, institutional ineffectiveness, interest discrepancies and opportunistic strategies, these actors’ practices are in fact – though to a variable extent – structural misfits when compared to the official norms supposedly regulating a given sector. Analysis starting from the bottom is the only approach likely to

reveal the reality of the various practices, and thus the actual functioning of the services and administrations. The discrepancies between norms and practices provide a key to understanding the representations and practices in public action – whether by users or service providers – and to revealing the “practical norms”:

“[the] great variety of latent or tacit informal rules which underpin the actors’ practices without conforming to official or formal standards, and which explain by their very existence the relative convergence of such practices” (Olivier de Sardan, 2010: 12)⁴.

It is then possible to pinpoint the various reasons behind such discrepancies, adaptations and innovations, introduced by different actors in order to stabilize the schemes, improve their effectiveness and/or make the most of them *via* strategies which may be adaptive (and are “able to make abstract and impersonal standards compatible with particular contexts and unique situations”), transgressive (and “seriously impede the rendering of public services of quality or the efficient functioning of the authorities”) or palliative (and “facilitate a ‘crafting’ approach to ensure service delivery, while still keeping the door open for informal privatization”) (Olivier de Sardan, 2014: 10-11).

The place for international frames of reference and the modalities by which they may be imported into the national arena are particularly well illustrated by the example of schools in Benin. Is it possible to maintain the same vision of schooling or governance when guided by an international policy promoting education for all or by a national policy? By studying the production of school statistics in Benin, Sarah Fichtner shows that the framework relative to the Education for All target, centered on keywords such as education partnership, voluntary work and effectiveness, implies a change of educational policy, in particular concerning the headcount and repetition rate in schools. She also shows that the school statistics, destined to give a clear appraisal of the schooling situation and support decision-making by the school administration, are dominated by the logics of the school principals’ personal interests:

⁴ See also Olivier de Sardan (2015).

“The production of statistics is not only a tool for informing the state, NGOs and technical and financial partners on the school’s functioning or progress; it is also a tool for local governance in a globalized context. It shapes the relationship between the school principal and parents, the funding mechanisms of the school, and the provision of textbooks and food for the school canteen” (Fichtner, this issue: 46).

School principals are faced with contradictory injunctions (to limit the repetition rate but obtain a high examination pass rate), insufficient budgetary allocation, and pressure from parents’ associations. They also have their own career strategies in mind, and managing to open a new class is a strong asset for their promotion. The consequence is that:

“The fabrication of statistics therefore becomes an act of ‘juggling’ to present a realistic and harmonious image of the progressive development of the school and its ‘good governance’, as well as to achieve the different objectives (financial, careerist) of the actors involved in its production. Control by numbers of school management, its evolution and its “moral situation”, was established to address the mistrust of the government and manage its geographical distance from schools” (ibid.: 54).

For school principals, the manipulation of statistics tends to be an *adaptive* strategy when faced with contradictory injunctions. This example illustrates how the implicit requirements for satisfactory figures by international aid policies can lead to certain small “arrangements” by actors at different levels, a situation which encourages the misrepresentation of reality and the invention of a variety of “paper” realities that legitimate the different targets of stakeholders involved in the school arena.

The gaps between norms and practices are much wider in basic services confronted with extreme institutional deficiency. Jean-Pierre Mpiana Tshitenge takes a plunge into the core-reality of what goes on in the electricity service, in Kisenso on the outskirts of Kinshasa. Faced with the numerous shortcomings of the national electricity company (Société nationale d’électricité or SNEL) and its agents, the users have developed *palliative* modes of access to electricity. The agents of the SNEL accept illegal connections, some of which are later regularized, others not. Users sometimes join together to finance an electricity transformer or a line

extension. Some allow their neighbors to access to their electricity meter *via* a dense entanglement of lines criss-crossing the streets. SNEL agents draw individual profits from these arrangements and become active promoters of this informal privatization of electricity distribution, which helps to extend access to the service beyond the official offer while aggravating the company's financial crisis. The author explains that:

"Users, more accomplices than victims, seem to prefer this type of practical regulation which reduces the cost and time that formal procedures would take to gain access to electricity. In this way, alternative modes of delivery and access contribute to the emergence of areas of joint regulation combining the control of the state enterprise and the autonomous regulation of local actors" (Mpiana Tshitenge, this issue: 68).

Leaving the local actors and company agents free to operate these informal arrangements, the state is able to maintain, if only in appearance, its sovereign rights and prerogatives while deliberately choosing not to exercise them completely in order to obtain the consent of its citizens. Such palliative delivery of electricity creates an area of joint regulation in which revolve both official control and autonomous forms of regulation, through arrangements "from below" that could remind us, to a certain extent, of the public-private partnerships recommended by the neo-liberal order.

Taking the case of the Fraternal Union of Believers (Union fraternelle des croyants or UFC) in Dori (Burkina Faso), Koudbi Kaboré studies institutional competition between actors *via* an analysis of the evolution of the relationship between the agricultural technical services, the NGOs and the local state authorities in the field of rural development. He shows that latent rivalry has developed between actors working on food safety who compete for the supervision and control of the farmer-led organizations. Founded in 1969, the UFC is a particular case in that it is faith-based, and promotes inter-religion dialogue between Catholics and Muslims as well as agricultural development, its governance being shared between representatives of the two religions. With the benefit of support from the Church networks it rapidly became the main actor in the area for food aid and subsequently for local agricultural development, providing technical and financial support to farmer groups producing vegetables or cultivating

on hydro-agricultural schemes. This NGO became progressively organized, following the evolution of national policy intending to make NGOs auxiliaries of the state; it then faced a governance crisis and the organization was put to sleep. Thanks to the renewal of international funding, UFC was able to start up again in 1999, along with a restructuration and professionalization of its organization. At the same time the state was reorganizing its rural development policy and reinforcing its control of farmer-led organizations. Such groups were to join the Chamber of Agriculture, and the technical services were to be self-financed by providing the former with paid services. While the UFC was still presented as a model by territorial administration, its relations with the technical services have become strained: they accused it of maintaining its supervision and monopoly over the groups it had created, and of using its own technical agents instead of hiring those belonging to the state. Public service agents for agriculture contest the goodwill of the state authority towards the UFC, a wariness reinforced by the fear of religious radicalization, which has allowed it to develop unorthodox practices and escape their control. The tensions between UFC and state structures thus appear above all as a consequence of the changes affecting relations between NGOs and those structures since the return of the state to the forefront of the development scene in the early 2000s:

“Due to lack of public structural funding [the state technical services] have been obliged to sell their services. Since they have become local brokers, they necessarily enter into competition with private actors in the development domain” (Kaboré, this issue: 116).

And it is creating rivalry and jealousy.

Politics, societal projects and the assessment of public problems

Tensions between the various stakeholders in public action do not only reflect issues of institutional competition or struggle for financial rents. They may also reveal divergences between different societal projects and struggles to put specific problems on the agenda or impose ways of constructing them. Public action is also a question of “polity”, a way of constructing the idea of society and the social contract (Leca, 2012). Two texts usefully illustrate this dimension.

The issue of inter-religious balance in Burkina Faso is a sensitive one. Yacouba Ouédraogo's contribution analyzes the process that led the governance of secularity and religion to emerge at the agenda in a context of re-Islamization in sub-Saharan Africa.

"In Burkina Faso, francophone Muslim associations, dissatisfied with state management of religion and secularity, have engaged a struggle which dates from the beginning of the 1990s, not in order to question the constitutional religious neutrality of the state, but rather to reclaim more equity concerning the treatment of religious faiths" (Ouédraogo, this issue: 119).

As in other countries, the return of democracy in the 1990s has opened up claims pertaining to religion. The recent organizations of young educated francophone Muslims are now contesting the historical role of the Catholic Church in the state and the imbalances between religions regarding public holidays, representation in political dialogue forums and their presence on television. They also criticize the state's policy towards the Islamic veil. These challenges were brought to the public arena at a conference initiated by a Muslim association in 2007. In 2011, the socio-political crisis experienced by the Blaise Compaoré regime led him to create a Consultative Council on Political Reforms, which includes religious organizations. Muslim associations are calling for the creation of an observatory on secularity. The state refused, but in 2012 organized a national Forum on this question, which was to provoke heated debates on the meaning of secularity and religious neutrality in Burkina Faso, falling between a positive vision of religions and a fear of their too strong presence in state affairs, as well as compromises on questions of representation and presence in the media.

This specific fringe of Muslim organizations thus illustrates "the emergence of a Muslim civil society which, without overt contestation, defiance or rebellion, forms part of a current that criticizes the relationship between the state and its religious confessions" (Ouédraogo, this issue: 137-138). It refers to religious neutrality in order to raise the problem of interfaith relations in their treatment by the state and in the public sphere, and to attempt to renegotiate them. Faced with the Islamic threat, which is developing worldwide as well as in the sub-region, such a debate on secularity is also an opportunity for the various protagonists, the state in

the first place: beyond the demand for equal treatment by Muslim associations, the issue for the state is also to counter the risks of the rise of Jihadism and for Catholics and Protestants to put forward their fear of a challenge to their religious freedom. This example shows how a claim by one group of actors was considered in a specific political context, and how the way of expressing the problem was reformulated according to local and global issues.

The paper by Monique Bertrand treats another kind of public problem: land and property. Following the double approach of *politics* and *policies* to examine a core social-contract issue, the author pays particular attention to how the urgent need for land reform has once again been put on the agenda by the Mali government. Following the legislative elections of 2014, supposed to put an end to the political crisis of 2012 (military coup and Jihad occupation), this land administration reform is part of “a context presented as one of ‘crisis exit’: not in a routine framework of institutional capacity building [...], but in an operation to rescue social cohesion and the territorial credibility of the state” (Bertrand, this issue: 143-144). The multiple conflicts over land and cases of people’s dispossession are by no means new, but they were particularly fully publicized at the time. They were underlined by the government in an operation of criticism of the previous régime and the staging of a desire to clean up the sector, proof of its own voluntarism. The author follows this new attempt at reform step by step, starting with its introduction on the agenda and examining the contradictions inherent to its scope, as well as the action strategies proposed. Subsequently, she examines the stakes of the political recuperation and instrumentalization of land-related rents, the arbitration between competing entities in the administrative sector and the social groups that use them. In the beginning, the political discourse vigorously denounced fraudulent practice against ordinary citizens and enacted emergency measures. But it quickly backed down from this political denunciation to fall back – once more – on an ill-defined miracle solution – land registry and cadastre – whose links with the identified political problem are not evident.

The framing of the land conflicts as a governance problem, which raises the question of the relationship between the state and its citizens, is being transformed into a technical and bureaucratic issue. The apparent desire

for reform is very quickly confronted with corporatism and institutional rivalry between ministries. Land resources are a huge rent issue and give rise to constant tensions between the various bureaucratic instances, each one jealous of its information, little inclined to dialogue and quick to declare others incompetent to justify their own procedural shortcuts. Three ministers succeeded one another, each with very different personal style. The estimated budget to implement the cadastre was way above the means available to the state, which thus reduced its commitments, and international donors did not follow. In the field, “the suspension [of the delivery of property titles] decreed from above can only have a perverse effect, and goes to show the frequency of local bureaucratic arrangements” (Bertrand, this issue: 160). Crucial, but blocked by an entanglement of institutions, interests and administrative routines, the will to treat the land question comes up against the difficulty of political action coupled with a dependence on external means.

Internationalized co-production in public action: imposed models and resistance in aid relationships

The two last texts in this dossier squarely face the question of the complex relationship between national and international institutions, as well as the one between the will and the capacity of national and international institutions to defend their priorities and strategies in a context of dependence on external funding and the prevalence of imposed models.

Jessica Pourraz, Carine Baxerres and Maurice Cassier discuss the relations between transnational and national actors in the specific case of the malaria medication supply system in Benin and Ghana, taken in charge by an oligopole of centralized transnational organizations. As in several other African countries, Ghana and Benin depend on the “Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria” and on the “President’s Malaria Initiative” to provide anti-malaria medication in public and even private health sectors. Since the middle of the 2000s, for reasons of economy of scale, these organizations have progressively taken charge of order placement, thus entering into competition with existing national circuits.

“The multiplication of purchasing networks and circuits generates a fragmentation of the medicine provisioning system in these

countries, which leads to management dysfunctions such as surpluses or ruptures of stock" (Pourraz, Baxerres and Cassier, this issue: 180).

These transnational stakeholders subsequently sought to encourage certain forms of appropriation at a state level so as to counteract the inefficiency of the provisioning systems that they themselves had generated. The case of anti-malaria medication in these two countries illustrates the fact that public action frameworks and processes result from multi-stakeholder negotiation processes (the state, funding bodies, local institutions and operators), and that these negotiations also tend to continue during implementation, largely due to the reaction of local populations and institutions.

The situation differs between the two countries, especially owing to the presence of pharmaceutical firms in Ghana. By conditioning their financial aid to the purchase of medication pre-qualified by WHO, international actors exclude the Ghanaian companies from responding to tenders, and this to the advantage of American companies. Such practice is contested by other development actors, which, on the contrary, want to support the quality upgrading of national firms. Owing to the past history in this sector, the national distribution networks remain very specific to each of these countries, but their current organization owes as much, if not more, to the way transnational actors adapt their strategies to a given context, rather than to real national policy formulation.

"This paradox, as true in Benin as in Ghana, results from a structural contradiction in international aid for development, which oscillates between the principle of greater autonomy for the national institutions, with the aim of appropriation, and that of greater implementation effectiveness in response to the rationale of international institutions. These elements indicate the fundamental limits of the concept of appropriation and its strategic use by different actors" (Pourraz, Baxerres and Cassier, this issue: 187-188).

In this case, control of the financial resources brings centralized power to transnational organizations over the whole sector. But this is not always sufficient, as Justine Hirschy demonstrates in her article questioning "good governance" policies in Burundi. She examines the relationship

between the Burundi state (political elites in power and state agents in administrations) and the donors (mostly Belgium and the World Bank) concerning the national “good governance” strategy.

Elected in 2000, in the wake of a civil war transition, the President Pierre Nkurunziza had made “good governance” his main slogan, creating a dedicated ministry and confiding it to the opposition, as well as launching a national strategic plan on this issue. International funds flowed in. Nevertheless, the elite of the leading party never ceased drawing up measures to neutralize any potential change. Defined at a late date, the plan strictly follows the priorities defined by the funding bodies but lacks content, despite pressure from the latter.

“Although the government maintained a discourse on the lines of international norms concerning ‘good governance’, the practices seemed to recede little by little. With the approaching 2015 elections, the elite from the CNDD-FDD party in power was not only to reinterpret the international norms but also distort and block them so as to ensure the political survival of its regime” (Hirschy, this issue: 195).

Restriction of the freedom of expression and arbitrary arrests started again. The power stakes were such that the regime preferred to lose part of its international financial support. The influence of donors was mainly exercised at a bureaucratic level, *via* interactions between the public service executives of the Burundi and the international authorities, as well as at the level of political discourse. However, the notion of “good governance” is eminently political, and any attempts by the donors to influence practices in this area fail when they come up against the stakes of maintaining power.

“A central element of the 2000 peace process, ‘good governance’ policies did not achieve the expected targets, and President Nkurunziza’s third mandate began as a regime of violence and fear. In parallel, the recent cuts in international funding, by reducing the redistribution capacity of the regime, have not only led to the narrowing of its circle of beneficiaries, but have also increased the need for the CNDD-FDD to reassert its power by constraint” (Hirschy, this issue: 212).

These two texts underline the ambivalence of the relations between national and international stakeholders when public action is dependent on international aid, as well as the equivocal nature of the processes by which such action may be negotiated, contested, adapted, and even misappropriated. Far from the Manichean mindset opposing national and international actors, they both bring to light how the diverse actors are inextricably linked, albeit in very different configurations, where the power and capacity of the national actors vary considerably.

Covering a wide range of configurations, from the emergence of public problems to the contradictions of policy implementation, the different texts in this dossier help to refine our understanding of the dilemmas and stakes of public action in Africa, without forgetting how they are embedded socially and politically, or their role in the process of globalization.

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