



Unveiling the impact of incentives on public sector employee performance: a comparative exploration of african and european systems¹

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Abstract: *In addressing the imperative to enhance productivity among public sector employees, the global consensus emphasizes the essentiality of this endeavour. Leaders worldwide are driven by the anticipated economic advantages and associated prestige. Despite the prevailing inclination toward privatization, widely regarded as a precarious pursuit, there exists a compelling demand for a novel and efficacious solution. Recent research endeavours turn their attention to incentives as a potential remedy, leveraging the enduring appeal of financial rewards in the pursuit of contemporary efficiency. However, a meticulous comparative analysis focusing on continents poised to benefit significantly—Europe and Africa—yields unexpected insights. While monetary incentives have demonstrated effectiveness in fostering productivity within the private sector, the altruistic motivations inherent in public service roles appear to wield greater influence, at times even countering the intended effects of incentives. Consequently, future research must direct its focus toward a formidable alternative rooted in internal motivations and unwavering commitment, acknowledging the limitations of monetary inducements in the public sector.*

Keywords: *Public Sector Employees, Productivity, Europe, Africa, Incentives, Comparative Analysis.*

JEL: H83, J18, J45, Z18

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1. Introductory Aspects

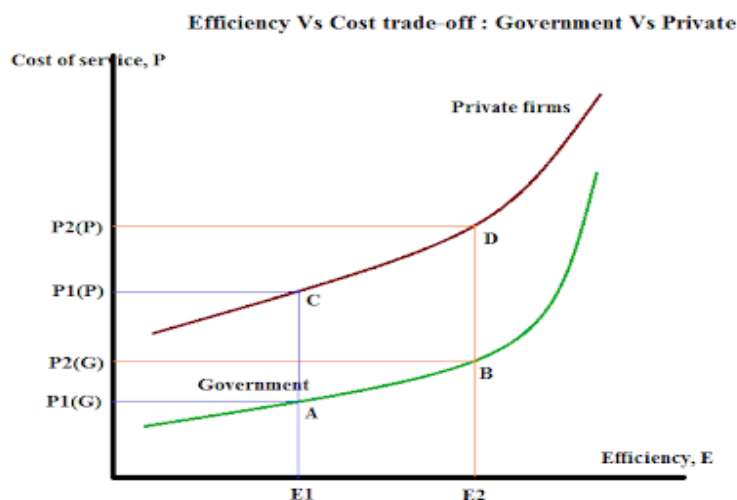
The Public Sector, often criticised for its bureaucratic tendencies, has faced persistent mockery due to perceived incompetence, indiscipline, and indifference among its workforce. Such negative perceptions have fuelled a global quest for solutions to rectify the image of an inefficient public sector. Consequently, nations and continents worldwide have turned to the private sector, seeking assistance in various forms. The surge of globalization, the expanding influence of privatization, and heightened commercialisation have rendered this approach seemingly more feasible, particularly when accounting for cost considerations. In this context, the quest for effective strategies to enhance the efficiency of the public sector has become a pivotal concern for nations grappling with public scepticism and seeking alternative governance models.

However, scores of international literature, studies and reviews encompassing a variety of industries and services refute these claims (Hall, 2014). So much so that in its conclusion of a thorough review conducted, published, and later updated by the Danish Institute AKF, it was decisively said that “there is no general evidence here to say that private actors deliver the services cheaper or with a higher quality than the public sector itself does” (Ole Helby Petersen, 2012). This finding by the Danish Institute AKF was further expanded and agreed to by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz in union with several other authors in a comprehensive cross-country empirical study titled “Ownership change, institutional development and performance” (Anzhela Knyazevaa, 2013). In this study, they similarly concluded that “...privatization did not lead to improved performance”.

Furthermore, if we were to plot a more realistic yet instinctive cost-efficiency curve for a basic market for public service delivery it would resemble what is shown below:



Fig.1: Assumed cost-efficiency curve: Government vs Private.



(Gulzar, 2011)

From Figure 0.1 above, we can easily observe that at an equal efficiency, a greater cost is incurred by the private sector than by the public sector. Thus, completely erasing the theory that the private sector and a greater hastening of privatization can help solve the problem of perceived inefficiency in the public sector. Now, how then do we revive and improve the productivity of one of the most important sectors in the world today? Well, the answer is within the sector itself, particularly with the employees.

In the public sector today, there are more than 450 million persons employed by different entities. Entities that include the national and subnational government, local government units and regulatory bodies that are tasked with performing a wide variety of activities (Accountants, 2010). Activities that range from the delivery of public services like justice to the distribution of social benefits like pensions (OECD, 2020). Due to this wide scope of functions, we see that in the public sector there is no standard format for who is public sector employee is. Nevertheless, if we look at this class of employees compared to those of the private sector, we find that public sector employees do share some unifying characteristics. These include:

⇒ They are all employed by an organization (an entity) governed by laws and directives, owned, and funded by the public (Johnson, 2020)



⇒ They all have a higher desire to serve public interests i.e., they all have strong altruistic motives (Lyons, 2006)

⇒ They all have relatively permanent job security and place an increased value on a stable work-life balance.

Based on these features, we can say that whatever measures are formulated to boost the productivity of the public sector employees in one industry or region will be able to boost the productivity of all.

Consequently, in searching for a universally applicable remedy, many researchers look towards the influence of external motivations, such as incentives. This is because they understand that as humans most of our actions are either in pursuit of or as a product of a desire to attain money. Whether or not these reasons are selfless, we find that money is often at the centre of everything in a man's life. This need and/or want of money has grown even more fervent in recent years as the world becomes more and more materialistic. Therefore, for researchers, focusing their studies on the role of financial incentives in boosting public service employees' productivity was a clear and logical choice.

Although this concept seems a lot like common sense, a wealth of literature exists on the subject. The use of incentives to improve public sector employees' productivity has been met with mixed reactions from the international community. In certain nations, this course of action is openly accepted and thrives while in others, it diminishes in preference of another. In this regard, two key industry players who are often at the forefront when it comes to this subject are Europe and Africa. This is because many constituent nations of these continents depend on the efficiency of their public sectors to drive economic development.

More than this, we find that concerning one another, the African and European Continent share several common grounds in terms of history, geopolitics, and culture. So, you wouldn't be wrong to assume that these two continents should equally have the same if not similar views on the part incentives play in the productivity of public sector employees. However, this assumption differs from reality because, on one hand, we have Europe which recognizes the importance of incentives and is willing to use them as a tool in improving public sector employees' productivity. This they do by implementing policy reforms and organizational readjustments. On



the other, you have Africa which recognizes the importance of incentives, yet chooses to mostly adopt indifference in respect to active implementation. Instead, it emphasizes a need for the reinforcement of internal motivations mainly commitment to empowering public sector employees.

In response to these differences, two main research questions were formulated:

- A. *What is the true role of incentives in the productivity of public sector employees?*
- B. *Does the European view on this matter contradict and correct the African ideology?*

Subsequently, this paper aims at dissecting and providing reasonable answers to these questions. To achieve this, it recognizes the respective economic, political, and social contexts of both opinions must be considered to properly weigh their merits and demerits. Thus, a suitable research design needed to be chosen for analysis. This paper, therefore, chose to use a mixed research design approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative content analysis was chosen to enable the gathering of all relevant numerical data whereas, the qualitative technique allowed for the appraisal of unquantifiable elements such as opinions and behaviours. All in all, these two techniques were placed within the umbrella of a comparative analysis study which is often the preferred choice for political issues with economic implications (Stafford, 2013).

In line with these questions, this paper will proceed by providing a reasonable framework and background of discussion by offering a clear description of public sector employees in these continents.

2. Public sector employees

As highlighted earlier though public sector employees share similar universal characteristics, they vary based on several factors such as their functions, the entity wherein they're employed and the services they provide. Aside from these factors, another important distinguishing element of public sector employees is their origin.



Therefore, in this chapter, we will be looking at the characteristics of public sector employees and public opinion about public sector employees in the context of the continent they originate from. After this, we will go further using the context of origin to review how the productivity of public sector employees is evaluated.

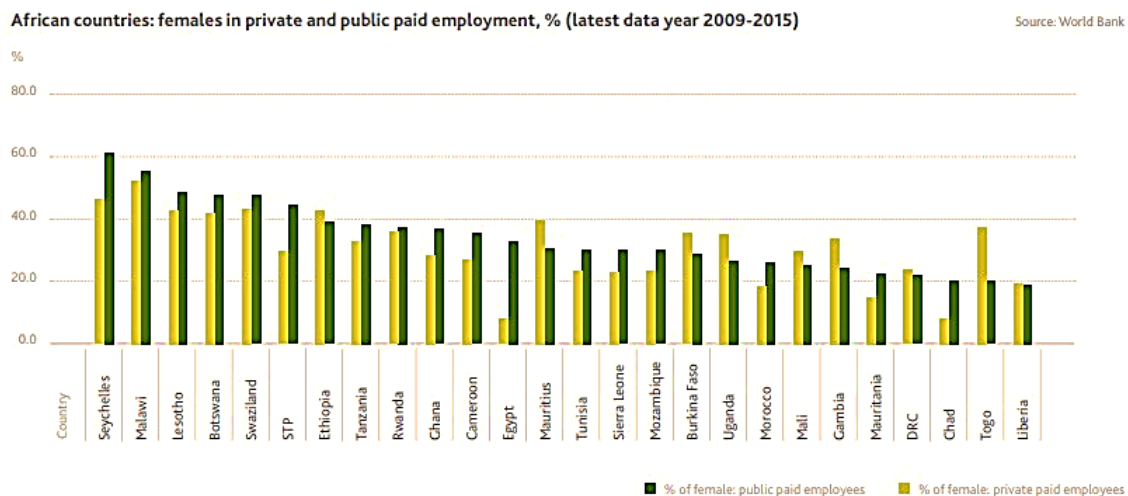
2.1. *Attributes of public sector employees in Africa.*

As it was when public sector employees were investigated globally, we can also find some similar shared characteristics amongst public sector employees in a particular region, in this case in Africa. Some of these are.

⇒ **A higher percentage of the total workforce:** In the African continent, where we have a lot of lower-middle to low-income countries, public sector employees and employment by the public sector can represent up to 50% of formal employment in the region, clearly superseding that of the private sector (Saget & Yao, 2011).

⇒ **Gender inclusion:** As gender goes, we find that this dominance of the public sector over the private sector continues as there are notably more African women in the public sector than in the private sector as shown in Figure 2 below:

Fig. 2 African women in the public sector compared to the public sector.



(Foundation, 2018)



⇒ **High levels of literacy:** Similarly, we see this continued trend showing itself once again regarding the degree of employee literacy. African public sector employees have recorded values of attaining tertiary education > 3 times than those of the private sector employees. This is even though generally speaking African public employees are older.

⇒ **Insufficient quantity in vital sectors:** Conversely, it is sad to note that although there are large numbers of public service employees in the nation, this value doesn't translate to every sector of the economy. Sadly, the two most deprived sectors of the continent when it comes to the workforce are the healthcare and the education sector, with the domestic security force not far behind. In healthcare, we observe that if the population of each country was separated into groups of 1000 people each, only 3 nations in the whole continent can say they can provide a doctor for each group of persons. Likewise in education, we see that in most primary schools for every teacher, there are more than two times as many pupils.

⇒ **Poorly managed:** Aside from these glaring statistics, when we take a close look at the human resource management of these public sector employees, we find that it is oftentimes represented by a single officer, or a small group of workforce managers tasked with recruitment, discipline, and documentation.

⇒ **Mainly centralized:** In line with this model, we can also glaringly recognize a partiality towards centralization in the public sector. This results in the arrangement of officers in the same way tasks are delegated i.e., according to rank, and hierarchy with strict directives concerning the rights and authority of each class.

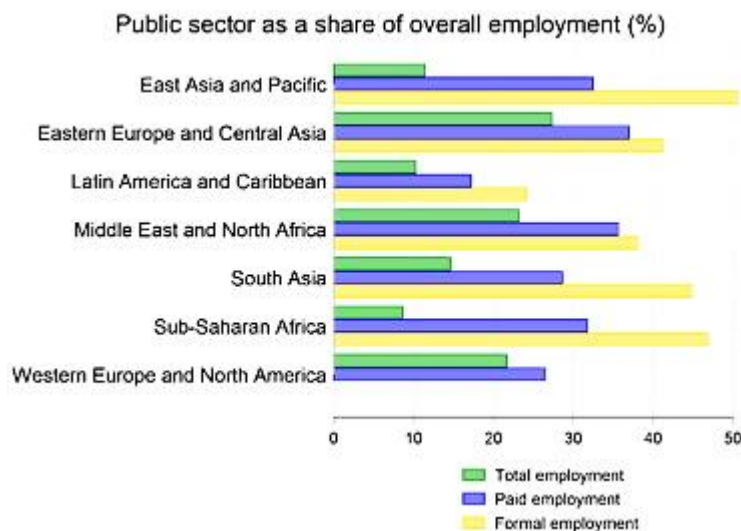
2.2. *Features of the European public sector employees*

In Europe, we find that the common features of public sector employees include:

⇒ **Lower Percentage of Workforce:** In contrast, we recognize that although the percentage of public sector employees in formal employment is marginally like those of Africa for the Eastern European region. When this value is placed in union with those of Western Europe and averaged, we find that it accounts for far less than half of formal employment as we can see in Figure 3 below:



Fig. 3: Percentage of Employment in the public sector



(Gindling, et al., 2020)

⇒ **Closely associated with private-sector employees:** More than this we find that the distinction between the public and private sector employees in Europe is not clear-cut as in other regions. This is because, in many European nations, the presence of public agents who can be defined loosely as ‘public sector contract workers’ has become more and more rampant. These agents oftentimes resemble true public sector employees known as statutory civil servants but do not enjoy the same benefits of lifelong job security (Cédric Hugrée, 2015).

⇒ **Subject to the same laws:** Another key difference between these two groups of subtypes of public service employees is that the former i.e., public agents are governed by civil law like private sector employees. The latter i.e., statutory civil servants follow the rules stipulated by public law (Thijs, et al., 2017).

⇒ **Mostly career-based system of service:** Nevertheless, we find that in many European nations despite these subtle distinctions between the types of public service employees, there is an overwhelming preference for a career-based system of civil service. Consequently, we find that many civil servants are found in the public sector due to a closed recruitment policy with



promotions often being a result of seniority. Be that as it may, this is not to say that the position-based system of civil service is not slowly increasing in relevance in this continent as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: **Career-Based vs Position-Based Civil Service in 28 EU nations.**

<i>Career Based</i>	Dual	Position Based
<i>AUSTRIA, BELGIUM, CYPRUS, GERMANY, DENMARK, GREECE, SPAIN, FRANCE, CROATIA, ITALY, LUXEMBOURG, LITHUANIA, PORTUGAL</i>	BULGARIA, CZECH REPUBLIC*, IRELAND, MALTA, POLAND, ROMANIA	ESTONIA, FINLAND, HUNGARY, LATVIA**, NETHERLANDS***, SWEDEN, SLOVAKIA, SLOVENIA, UK

*Gradually going towards position-based, ** Excluding the police, military, and judiciary, *** Excluding the police, military, judiciary, and foreign office

⇒ **Mixed systems for management and training:** More than this, we find that the human resource management for public service employees of European nations often employs a mix of a centralized organization/body and a decentralized model of regulating these principles. Not only this but certain member states like Romania also take this decentralized mode of regulation a step further by having completely distinct national institutes for the training of civil servants e.g., Institutul Național de Administrație (CHRISTIAN, 2016), which results in the formation of well-equipped & knowledgeable civil servants.

2.3. *African public sector employees in the eyes of its people.*

Now that we've understood who African public sector employees are, we need to comprehend how the people they serve view them. We do this to better understand the importance of improving their productivity before investigating ways this can be done.

In this regard, the value of African Public Sector Employees has changed over the years. We find that in early literature published around the time of independence for many African nations, an opinion and concept of superiority and affluence was often used in the description of public service employees (Development, 2020). To the extent that certain academics believed that these



elite public sector employees would cause the private sector to lag weakly behind (Diamond, 1987) and lead to a regression of the continent's economic growth (Fanon, 2007). As a result, we find that civil servants in that era were held in the highest esteem because of the weight of their income.

However, many years later, this situation and public opinion seemed to dwindle. Increased economic instability, recession and high inflation led to drastic retrenchments of > 2.5 million public service employees (Kiggundu, 1997). Those who didn't lose their jobs found themselves left with less than half of their initial salaries (Simson, 2019), and subsequently, with this massive drop in earnings capacity, the civil servant esteem also deteriorated. We find that in many African nations, this was followed by a slow yet evident shift towards the private sector especially evident in Tanzania where fewer than 50% of higher institution graduates move on to become public sector employees as shown below.

Table 2 The educational level of public service employees in Tanzania

Tanzania		Share working in the public environment			
		1980	1993	2000/1	2011/12
All educational levels			6%	3%	3%
Secondary education (Form IV or above)		~90%	46%	33%	21%
Tertiary education (university or college)		>90%		45%	46%

In present-day Africa, we meet a divided popular opinion of public service employees in line with these two historical periods. Some view public service employees with clear anger and disguise whereas, others pity them for their lack, yet neither faction aspires to be them. On the part of those who champion a rich public service, this privileged view is often reserved for higher-ranking officials who are often believed to embezzle funding. Whereas the party that views public service employees with pity often reserve this judgment for lower-ranking



employees. This party are often the family or friends of retrenched officers who understand the difficulty faced by their loved ones in adapting to a current Public Service despite the effort of redeployment orientation. They are those individuals who are equally aware of the great marginalization that exists in the sector.

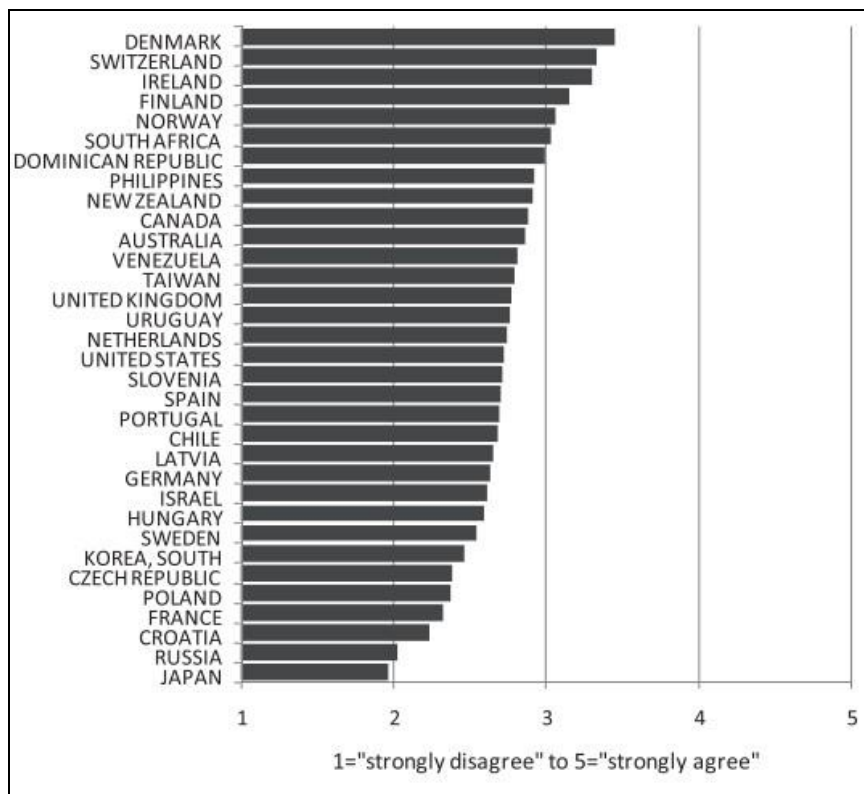
Regardless of the opinion, there is no denying that the strong presence of public service employees' ripples throughout the whole African continent. This is because higher rates of unionisation after the 2000s have caused public sector employees to have a stronger voice on the national and continental scales (Haroon Bhorat, 2016). Sadly, this newfound power often finds itself being manifested in the form of strikes. On a local, state, national, regional, and continental level, we find the strike culture being used as a tool to bring greater recognition to public service employees beyond already established opinions by the government and by the people it serves.

2.4. Europeans take on public sector employees.

In the eyes of European citizens different from their African Counterparts, civil servants have varying degrees of trust and popular esteem according to their region. In the Western parts, we observe a more positive outlook in contrast to the Eastern parts of the continent as shown in Figure 4 below:



Fig. 4 Varying responses to “Most Civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country?”



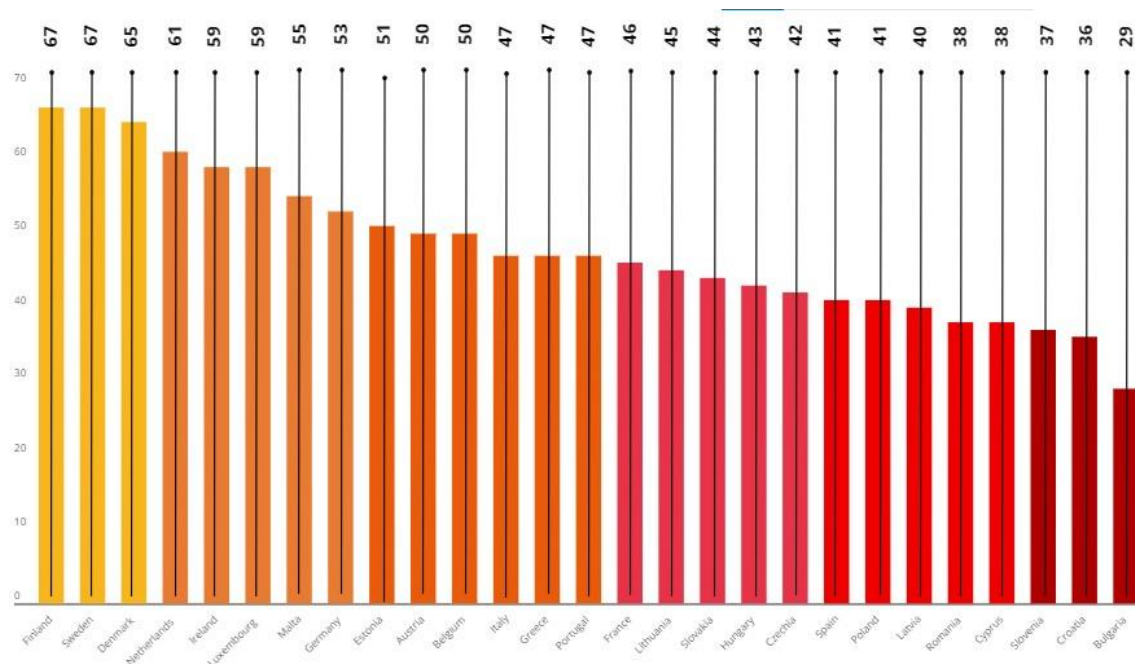
(Ryzin, 2011)

Be that as it may, when we look at a complete analysis of the situation, we find that civil servants, in general, are regarded with high levels of distrust (Van de Walle, 2008). In Europe, we see that this perception of civil servants is because of the government process itself not just on the products of the public sector.

Subsequently, it is not surprising to see that this distrust goes hand in hand with low perception scores of political integrities in the continent as shown below:



Fig.5 Popular views of political integrity, scores per country



(International, 2021)

In general, we find that “people feel more comfortable in areas where they see the entire process from the registration of needs through the preparation of regulations to experience the results” (OECD, 1998)

3. Evaluating productivity in public sector employees’

With such a weak opinion in the eyes of the people, it is committed to serving, what then is the need to evaluate the productivity of public sector employees to improve it? The answer lies in the question itself because though there is an overwhelming and universal cry for political transparency, the issue of satisfaction and experience with public services remains a point of contention.

This productivity of the public sector and its employees is commonly characterized by the rate at which inputs are processed into useful output.



3.1. Parameters for the evaluation of public sector employees' productivity: the African story.

Sadly, we find that in the African continent, there is a lack of continentally approved criteria for measuring the productivity of public sector employees. Nevertheless, when we place several African nations side by side a pattern emerges. Africa generally prefers to adopt the use of performance management systems (Dzimbiri, 2008). These systems rely heavily on performance reviews i.e., surveys. In addition to this, they view outputs in terms of $\frac{\text{received performance}}{\text{expectations}}$, which is then translated into qualifiable elements like:

- ⇒ Objectives
- ⇒ Targets
- ⇒ Standards

This does not negate the use of quantifiable parameters as well such as:

- ⇒ Performance Indicators that include service delivery rates.
- ⇒ Financial Information that includes return on investment and returns on assets.

Aside from these, it is common to see the use and implementation of international strategies like the Balanced Scorecard (Fatile, 2014).

3.2. Parameters for the evaluation of public sector employees' productivity: the European tale.

Unlike other regions, we find that in Europe despite the existence of national variances when it comes to measuring the productivity of public sector employees, there seems to be a unified approach. This approach spearheaded by the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) advocates the adjusted measurement of quantifiable outputs in terms of quality (East, n.d.). As a result, we find that many nations in the EU mandatorily take account of and detail their non-market services.



These strategies above, however, do not completely erase the use of traditional parameters of evaluation such as:

- ⇒ Survey Data.
- ⇒ Direct Output Volume Measurement etc (Schultz, 2017).

3.3. **Factors that influence productivity**

Although, Europe and Africa differ in terms of how they measure productivity. As earlier stated, public sector employees are such that in many cases a particular factor affecting one would affect all. This statement is especially true in the case of factors that influence their productivity. Furthermore, we observe that these factors can be classified as follows (Ali, et al., 2021):

- a) External Factors
 - i. Financial incentives e.g., Salary & Bonuses
 - ii. Structural incentives e.g., Promotion, leisure benefits, and training.
- b) Internal Factors
 - i. Commitment
 - ii. Job Satisfaction
- iii. Behavioural Patterns e.g., Leadership styles, Management Techniques, Human Resource Practices
- c) Cognitive Factors
 - i. Perception
 - ii. Psychological bias

Since the emphasis of this paper lies within the external factors only a rudimentary description of other factors will be provided.

Public service employees' productivity is significantly influenced by intrinsic factors, particularly internal motivations driven by their high altruistic beliefs. Successful plans to enhance productivity must consider these motivations, acknowledging their dual nature that affects employees on both a superficial and deeper innate level. The three main concepts associated with internal factors—commitment, job satisfaction, and behavioural patterns—play a crucial role in



this influence. For example, improvements in Human Resources Practices can positively impact productivity by making employees feel recognized and valuable through an effective HRM strategy.

Cognitive factors, at times mistakenly categorized beneath intrinsic factors, possess subtle distinctions. First, while the principles outlined by cognitive factors apply to public service employees, perceptual errors and psychological biases are commonly encountered by both employees and employers concurrently. Second, unlike intrinsic motivations, which manifest as personal values, cognitive factors exert a direct influence on the conduct of public service employees. To illustrate, if a public service employee harbours an unnoticed perceptual error, such as stereotyping, they might exhibit reluctance to collaborate with a colleague of a diverse ethnic background, resulting in a decline in productivity. Similarly, if a manager overseeing these employees displays bias in decision-making, particularly regarding task delegation, it could erode productivity. In such instances, employees may perceive that their efforts yield no genuine benefits.

4. Public sector employees' productivity: the role of incentives

Although there are several types of incentives, as shown in the previous chapter, this paper will primarily focus on the role of financial/monetary incentives in the productivity of public sector employees. This is because when the subject matter is narrowed and given such strict definitions it helps improve the ability of this paper to be easily actualized. In addition to this, we find that one of the closest word associations for incentives especially in the context of employee productivity is monetary gain. Therefore, moving forward, the word 'incentives' would be used interchangeably with 'financial incentives' and 'monetary incentives' to mean the same thing.

4.1. The Use of Incentives

In both continents, we find that the use of incentives is not a new initiative. In fact, since the beginning of public sector reforms in the 1970s and 1980s for Europe (Ponta, 2020) and Africa



respectively (TANZANIA, 2010), the use of incentives to boost productivity has been a topic of discussion in many national governments.

However, since the 2000s, we see that for many European countries, the use of incentives has left the realm of discussion and has moved into implementation and active use. This use can be found in many forms in Europe such as:

a) Performance Related Pay (PRP) schemes

One of the foremost means by which financial incentives are introduced in Europe is using PRP schemes. As the name indicates these schemes are built on the idea that a person or in this case a public service employee should receive additional or different wages based on the quality of his performance. They aim to discourage the laziness public servants are known for by eliminating the comfort of a fixed salary in exchange for the competitiveness of the private sector.

They also seek to push the public sector into a more open mindset when it comes to flexible pay and distinctiveness (OECD, 2002). Subsequently, this means of incentive introduction has had widespread acceptance and is commonly used in many European states. However, it is worth mentioning that the application of this system happens in varying degrees across the continent. Nevertheless, we observe as with many other concepts that are applied in Europe, there emerges a prevalent course which is:

- ⇒ PRP schemes are not only reserved for management but include all other staff.
- ⇒ PRP bonuses are generally < 10% of public service employees' base salaries for non-managerial employees and 20% of base salaries for managerial employees.
- ⇒ PRP policies are not only applied nationwide in ministers but it is used as group performance systems within an organization.

b) Pay according to workload.

One of the major reasons we find for low public sector employees' productivity and the increasing outflow of these employees to the private sector is the increasing workload. Thus, the idea of creating payment schemes that match the workload of public service employees' is



brilliant. However, this concept is still very new and is not as widespread because of the high levels of Pre-job evaluators involved.

On the other hand, in the African region, we find that the main instrument used in implementing financial incentives is the performance-related pay scheme. However, unlike in the European region where we have widespread acceptance of this initiative, there is a mixed reception amongst different parts of Africa. Mainly we see that in the sub-Saharan regions, little efforts are being made to properly include PRP policies in national guidelines. However, this does not mean we should be so quick to dismiss the efforts of a handful of nations in the Northern regions and Southern areas actively trying and, in some cases, succeeding to develop well-structured incentive and pay systems ((Editor), 2003)

4.2. **The Effect of Incentives**

The impact to which the effects of incentives are felt in a continent should be proportional to the degree to which they are being implemented. This is true for the African Region where we see that as they struggle to stabilize their payment systems, it is harder for them to fully implement PRP systems (Ayee, 2008). Thus, incentives do not reap many rewards for this region despite evidence of improved pre-natal and post-natal services for health care public sector employees in Rwanda who were given PRP policies. More than this, we see that in this region there seems to be a reversed effect of the expected use of incentives. Rather than achieving the destined outcomes, incentives can lead to the exact opposite of what it was intended to achieve. For example, we have decreased performance in the Nigerian Civil Service (Oriana Bandiera, 2017) and reduced efficiency in public sector employees in the Ghanaian Civil Service because of incentive use.

What remains strange however is that in European Nations where we expect large trade-offs and increased productivity due to more rampant use of PRP policies, we observe seemingly contradicting empirical evidence. On one hand, we find literature that corroborates what is assumed to be true and asserts that monetary incentives are indeed valid stimuli that lead to peak performances (Marsden, 2002). Then on the other, we find articles that seem to conclude on the matter by stating incentives have little effect (Burgess, et al., 2017) on the productivity of public



sector employees (Foundation, 2014). However, both camps do agree that public service employees are influenced by monetary incentives.

5. Conclusion

From our observations and findings above we can conclude that the role of incentives in public sector employee's productivity is generally one that yields positive results towards boosting productivity. However, these results are not large enough to cause a complete foundational restructuring of most civil service systems. Furthermore, we find that normally in comparative studies modelled after these two nations the idea that Europe will always correctly contradict Africa is a bias that most researchers always end up proving as a fact. However, in this case, the evidence gathered sets up an argument against Europe in favour of Africa. Utilizing the more cost-effective internal motivator, commitment is a smart move being adopted by many African states and should be emulated by Europe. Yet, as with everything in life, a balance must be found, Africa should not ignore incentives and cling to this singular motivator to reform their workforce. With other political hindrances such as corruption in the way, a combination of these two motivators must be applied to yield the best results in both continents. Subsequently, I recommend that further research be conducted.

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