COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY – THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

A. Introduction

Collective accountability is all about good governance and empowerment of the citizenry. If politics is about power and authority, governance has to do with the exercise of political and economic power and authority. Its dimensions include:

- the role of the state and policy management;
- accountability and transparency;
- the provision of public services;
- participation and empowerment; and
- the rule of law.

B. Background

In order to provide appropriate background material, we will draw from the summary of findings of a survey run by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) on The Growth of Democracy in Ghana Despite Economic Dissatisfaction: A Power Alternation Bonus? This summary of findings was published in the Daily Graphic of 16 May, 2003. We will also touch on comments made by Mr. P.V. Obeng on the role of the media and Dr. Vladimir Antwi-Danso on the role of Parliament.

Poverty

The survey found a disturbingly high incidence of genuine poverty and extreme deprivation, and a widespread sense of economic alienation and exclusion:

- about two in three described their living conditions as bad and the same proportion reported no improvement in their living standards over the preceding 12-month period;
- a similar percentage reportedly face permanent economic uncertainty in respect of regular incomes;
- many cannot afford basic necessities of life such as food, water and medical care.
Employment

The survey found support for “government protection of domestic industry against low-cost foreign competition”. About two in three favour the imposition of tariffs on imports in order to safeguard jobs even if this could mean higher prices. There is little enthusiasm for retrenchment of labour in the public sector. Nearly 80 per cent – an overwhelming majority – “oppose” further reductions of the reportedly overmanned Civil Service.

These findings are consistent with the view that unemployment is the nation’s most pressing economic problem. At the same time they bring into sharp relief some serious issues of macroeconomic management. According to the IMF Press Release of May 12, 2003: IMF Approves US$258 million PRGF Arrangement for Ghana:

On the expenditure side, the major objective will be to bring the wage bill under control.

Over the first two years of the present Administration, and very likely this year as well, the budgetary provisions for the wage bill have been exceeded by considerable margins. In 2001, the government wage bill took 8.4 per cent of national income as against a budgetary provision of 5.4 per cent of GDP. In 2002, this share of national income rose marginally to 8.5 per cent against a provision of 6.7 per cent. The difficult negotiations at the Tripartite meeting, the compromise agreement reached and the reports of continued labour dissatisfaction with it suggest that this year’s budgetary provision is most likely to be breached if not so already.

With total government revenue (both tax and non-tax) standing at 18 per cent of GDP, the wage bill accounts for almost half of total revenue. To put the issue into perspective:

- the wage bill is of the order of magnitude of the development expenditures financed with external aid (project grants and project loans combined);
- twice the capital expenditure financed from domestic resources;
- about twice the amount that by law should be transferred into the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF)
C. Governance and Democratic Institutions

The survey reported a “readily expressed enthusiasm for politics and strong preference for the essence of democracy”. The survey also found, however, that “Ghanaians are poorly informed about political (and economic) issues”.

- Ghanaians recognize their own lack of political knowledge with nearly two out of three saying “they find matters of politics and government too complicated to understand”.

- The Ghanaian population is also “overwhelmingly ignorant of the existence and functions of international organizations such as the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN) (in spite of Kofi Annan), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF). “Even in regard to the leading regional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, over half do not know enough to judge the effectiveness of the organization” again, in spite of Ibn Chambas, the Secretary-General and even more so the high profile the organization enjoys on account of President Kufour being its current Chairman.

The Economy and Economic Management

The survey revealed a deep ambivalence over market-centred economic reforms. Just over half prefer a market-run economy to a government-run economy (31 per cent).

Ghanaians nonetheless accept the principle of market pricing even for some socially sensitive goods and services. In particular, we are willing to pay for quality. In a wider sense – shown in the context of jobs – Ghanaians appear determined to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve our objectives. Nearly three in four Ghanaians feel it is better to pay school fees in order to raise educational standards than for our children to have access to low quality (even if) free education.

The Media

Ghanaians (perhaps reflecting the high rates of illiteracy) rely more on the electronic media than the print media for their political (and economic) information and opinions. The survey therefore
concludes that while the electronic media are assuming increasing importance in the lives of Ghanaians, they are not succeeding in raising the levels of public awareness and understanding of politics.

The survey also finds that the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) is trusted more than the independent broadcasting organizations and similarly the state-owned newspapers are more trusted than the independent newspapers.

Speaking on the theme “Enhancing Parliamentary Democracy through the Media”, Mr. P.V. Obeng a former Presidential Advisor reportedly charged the media to move away from creating platforms for political parties to re-read their manifestos and instead to ensure that the government of the day translate its manifesto into programmes and projects. He was quoted to have said:

If you keep quiet and allow the government to carry out programmes as it wishes and only come back in four years to discuss it, you would be failing woefully in your mandate.

He reportedly noted that it was imperative for the media to spend more time following the activities of Parliament, explaining that a lot of time is being spent publicizing the activities of the Executive with relatively little time given to the Legislature.

Democratic Institutions

Parliament, the Judiciary and the Electoral Commission enjoy high levels of trust from about half of the citizenry. The high level of trust in Parliament is noteworthy especially given its oversight responsibilities and in a wider sense the separation of powers doctrine.

The District Assemblies and Regional Co-ordinating Councils, however, fared less well in the CDD Survey ratings.

Dr. Vladimir Antwi-Danso of Legon Centre for International Affairs (LECIA), University of Ghana, Legon in a feature article: “Political Trials or Trials of Politics”, bemoaned the misuse of parliamentary majorities by the Executive with the national interest being given secondary
considerations in policymaking. Things in such a situation get done from considerations of partisan political advantage and to the benefit of the Executive and its loyalists “not with the prudence that national development needed”.

Unless the nation begins to see things in the national light, we may one day relapse into chaos and carnage that are seen in other countries around us.........the whole nation needs to reconcile with itself by correcting the ills of the past....... we need to build together, see the past as ugly and stingy, and re-contour the warped paths of our socio-political development as a nation...... A tendency towards parochialism and a “two legs bad four legs good” philosophy will not help......we are in a period of trials in politics, he concludes.

Participatory Democracy

Ghanaians are much less politically active in the periods between elections. Contacts with elected representatives and government officials are relatively infrequent. Only 15 per cent ever contact their District Chief Executive (DCE), 12 per cent ever seek out their Assemblyman while fewer still (9 per cent) ever contact a government official.

Corruption

Over a quarter of Ghanaians use unofficial means (bribery and influence) to access key public services. Ghanaians also believe that corruption among public officials is quite commonplace.

Specifically, Ghanaians are most suspicious of the Ghana Police Service – an overwhelming majority (about 80%) believe at least some police personnel are corrupt. More than half hold the view that most policemen are corrupt.

Customs officials run a close but unenviable second and nearly half believe that most border guards are corrupt.

Over 60% feel that at least some government officials are corrupt and almost a quarter believe that most or all government officials are corrupt.
More than two thirds think that at least some judges and magistrates are corrupt.

Nearly 60% believe the same of teachers and school administrators. Again more than half think there is some corruption going on among elected leaders such as Members of Parliament (MPs).

A majority think that at least some businessman – both Ghanaian and foreign - are corrupt.

Even religious and non-governmental organizations (NGO) leaders are not exempt – 41% and 29% respectively believe that these are also corrupt.

Nevertheless

- Ghanaians respect the authority of the Judiciary;
- believe that laws are important; and
- see improvements on the corruption front.

D. **Identity and Nation-Building – most disturbing**
   
   *(a fractured nation)*

First identity:

- Over a third of Ghanaians identify themselves primarily according to their ethno-linguistic background.
- Another third identify themselves according to their religious beliefs.
- One in five identify themselves according to their occupational grouping.
- Half believe that their identity group is not treated fairly.

Second, nation-building – a three way split:

- A third believe their identity group is better off than other groups.
- A third believe their economic situation is the same as other groups.
- Another third believe that their economic group is worse off compared to other groups.
The findings of the CDD Survey, the concerns expressed by P.V. Obeng and Vladimir Antwi-Danso about the roles of the Media and Parliament are all pertinent to the quest for development, vision and strategy for accelerated economic growth with poverty reduction – one that would mould the vision of a property owning democracy with an unalloyed commitment to social justice and equity.

These are issues of political economy not of economics or politics though both are intrinsically involved. Economics has been defined as the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses. This view of economics as the study of the optimal use of scarce resources contains an implicit, but crucial assumption when applied to public decision making namely that once the optimal policy is found, it will be implemented. The assumption is that policy choice is simply a technical or computational problem.

The reality is different. Actual policies are more often than not, different from optimal policies – defined in the economic-theoretic sense as subject to technical and informational, but not political constraints. Political constraints used here refer to the constraints due to conflicts of interest and the need to make collective choices in the face of these conflicts.

In the real world, policies are chosen not by an infinitely-lived social planner, but by a political mechanism that must balance conflicting interests. Consequently, the problem is to recognize the political nature of decision making. There is therefore, a need to consider carefully how politics affects the choices made in society.

Political science for its part, is defined as the study of power and authority and the exercise of power and authority. In turn, power means the ability of an individual or group to achieve outcomes which reflect his/her objectives. More generally, it is the study of the mechanisms for making collective choices. Asking how power and authority are attained and exercised can be thought of as a specific form of the general question of what mechanisms are used to make collective decisions.

The mechanisms that societies use in choosing policies in the face of conflict of interest will imply that the result will often be quite different from what a benign social planner would choose. Naturally, therefore, some minimum knowledge about the nature of the decision making mechanism is needed to understand the relation between the political mechanism and the economic outcomes.
These considerations must be borne in mind as we ponder over the findings of the Survey, the preferences over political and economic collective decision making mechanisms, the market and the command economies, the information gaps over politics, economics and institutions, the roles of the media and Parliament, the Judiciary and the rule of law.

E. **Why Governments?**

The institution of government reflects the pay-offs to co-operation. Two or more individuals find it mentally advantageous to join forces to accomplish certain common purposes. Rational self-interested individuals create the institution of government because there are situations in which the independent, self interested actions of each individual would lead to inferior economic outcomes – i.e. where co-operative agreement would do better.

At the same time, all individuals will not typically benefit equally under each possible form of co-operative agreement. The decision about the “rules of co-operation” therefore becomes crucial.

F. **Checks and Balances – The Principle of Separation of Powers**

An important aspect of rules for collective choices, often embodied in Constitutions, is joint or overlapping decision making, allowing different government authorities to be involved in, and hence potentially obstruct the workings of another: By contriving the interior structure of the government so that its severed parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places. This is known informally as “checks and balances”. Its purpose is to limit the power of any one component of government and of government as a whole.

Separation of powers attempts to limit the power of government by “dividing it against itself”. This is said to be promoted specifically by setting up procedures requiring some decisions to be approved by more than one branch of government. In the US Constitution, limitation of government power via conflict of interests between the branches, is said to have been stimulated by giving each branch a different base. This is the precept of Montesquieu’s “mixed regime” – each branch selected in a different way would represent different interest and views, leading to a welfare-maximising competition among them.
Separation of powers is also necessary for effective pre-commitment. An all-powerful dictatorship cannot credibly pre-commit: since it has all the power, it is unable to make itself unable to interfere. Understanding this problem is important to a proper appreciation of the political economy of low growth. In a predatory environment, poverty could be a rational choice option. Where the right to life and property are not guaranteed, economic success could bring with it unacceptable dangers. Perhaps, this was what inspired the late Frimpong Ansah to write about the dangers of the “Vampire State”.

One must however, hasten to add that the evidence of an empirical connection between democracy and economic growth appears rather mixed. Many researchers report no significant or robust empirical evidence either that democracy encourages or retards growth.

**G. Delays and Non-adoption of Socially Beneficial Policies**

In situations where the economic arguments favour reform for example to reduce poverty, one must look to the political constraints to understand why reforms are not enacted or sustained or are only enacted after long delays. No matter how the issue is presented for a country with widespread poverty and a clearly expressed commitment to its eradication, these are urgent matters of public concern.

If reform is taken to mean the move away from clearly inferior policy, then the continuation of inferior policies is especially puzzling.

If reform means more specifically a sweeping change in the whole set of policies which are held responsible for the country’s poor economic performance, explaining the failure to reform must be of paramount importance in terms of economic welfare.

**H. Vested Interests**

One approach and perhaps the easiest explanation for the non-adoption of a policy, otherwise beneficial to the population as a whole is that policies are chosen by a minority whose interests are different and who would be hurt by the change. If unequal distribution of power is taken as given, there ceases to be any real puzzle to non-adoption: the policies chosen are in the best interests of
those who chose. Obviously, where different groups have different interests, some policy changes that are beneficial on average, could nonetheless harm certain groups and if these latter hold the reins of power, non-adoption results. They have a vested interest in the status quo. Indeed, politically powerful groups have been known to block the adoption of socially beneficial changes because they have a vested interest in no change.

For a policy that benefits the majority not to be adopted, the power to choose must be in the hands of the minority. However, a puzzle of non-adoption is where groups who end up benefiting from superior policies do not support these policies. The conceptually simplest argument to explain such puzzles is the lack of information or awareness of or uncertainty about the benefits on the part of the public.

I. Conflict Over the Burden of Reform

Another approach to explaining the failure or delay in adopting reform is based on the observation that reform is a public good – individuals or groups can reap the benefits without bearing the full costs. Each interest group would therefore want some other group to bear the costs of adopting a socially beneficial policy change. But this could imply that the change may not be adopted even through it is known that all groups will gain.

The point is that an agreement to enact a reform carries with it a distribution of the costs of reform. Policy reform can be likened to an investment that should ultimately benefit the majority enough to make them happy they made it. In the short-run, however, like all investments, reforms involve sacrifices. Ever so often, the distribution of these sacrifices over time and across groups is at the heart of the reform agenda.

Uncertainty enters in because each interest group at best knows the net benefit it would receive from the change under a proposed allocation of costs. It would be uncertain, however, about the net benefit other groups will enjoy and hence about their willingness to bear the costs of reform – see above assessment of group benefits by Ghanaians.

Yet, another explanation of economically inefficient political decisions is that individuals’ errors in assessing the likely effects of a proposed policy tend to move together – are correlated. If that is so,
then democratic decision-making can produce inefficient outcomes even in the absence of distributional conflicts or heterogeneous preferences. These correlated errors or “misconceptions” could arise where there are small or in any case inadequate incentives for individuals to gather information. This possibility is particularly relevant in the context of widespread lack of knowledge and information.

In representative democracies, policymaking is delegated as well as shared between different policymakers. Delegation or division of authority introduces a facet of imperfect information about the optimality of different policies namely, the possibility that agents are differentially informed. Key to this is the possibility of a distinction between the proposer of policies – the policymakers, and the ultimate chooser of policies – the electorate or between two different branches of government, for example, Parliament and the Executive.

The most obvious way of modeling the role of asymmetric information is where the better-informed policymaker has private information about the social benefits of a policy change which is not known, or available to the electorate – the ultimate decisionmaker. The CDD Survey referred to earlier found serious gaps in the information about politics and economics on the part of the electorate. In such a situation, the inability of the policymakers to effectively communicate this information credibly to the voters could result in failure to adopt the needed policy reform.

The lesson is that in situations of delegation of decisions to policymakers, as in a democracy, where the policymakers are better informed than the electorate, it becomes of critical importance for the policymakers to use every possible means to convince the electorate of the benefits of the policy change in order for the change to be adopted. A policy change that is superior may not be adopted because the policymaker is unable to credibly demonstrate this fact to the electorate.

These considerations of information asymmetries and “communication failures” should serve to bring home to all stakeholders the challenges that confront us and our collective accountability for the success or failure of the poverty reduction strategy, visionary leadership, strengthened democratic institutions especially the electronic media, effective capacity in project design, policy formulation and implementation. These hold the keys to the prosperous democratic polity we hope for.