

Water Management and the Era of New Managerialism in Uganda: Experiences from National Water and Sewerage Corporation

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Abstract

Recently, public services have been criticized for being counterproductive, dysfunctional, composed, slothful, inefficient, wasteful, and overshadowed by a general sense that not all is alright. NWSC was no exception to such criticisms given the overwhelming outcry about the poor performance of the corporation in the 1990s. In this paper, I argue that efforts to address the managerial inefficiencies of in the last two decades are a clear justification of the role of New Managerialism approach towards improved public service sector performance. I examine attempts made in NWSC to replace the traditional systems of public administration with the New Managerialism; evaluate the key elements of the new managerial initiatives in NWSC; offer explanations for the application of the New Managerial approaches; and provide lessons and suggestions for the way forward. It is hoped that the study will encourage the process of reflection and the search for optimal managerial approaches based on best practices.

[**Key Words:** Water management, New Managerialism, NWSC, Uganda.]

Introduction

Globally, public services are characterized by day-to-day interactions, activities, and exchanges in which the roles of the employer and the employee are defined. Each public service has a number of common elements, for example, they are governed by rules and regulations, civil service employment and tenure, rules of appointment other than direct election, and each public service organization is arranged in a centralized, hierarchical fashion (Kiragu, 2002; Pollitt and Hilikka, 1997). There were a number of advantages to be derived from this kind of arrangement, including the prevention of mismanagement, the focus on controlling input, the prevention of patronage, and the concern with providing equitable services. Yet, recently, the public services have been criticized for being counterproductive; dysfunctional; composed of slothful, inefficient and wasteful paper pushers; and overshadowed by a general sense that "something is not right" (Olowu, 2002; Hood, 1995).

Because of this litany of concerns and criticisms about the structure and the performance of the systems by which public services were delivered, many countries embarked on comprehensive reform of their public services (Kayaga, 2008). Possibly dictated by economic considerations, many countries, including those in the Commonwealth and Caribbean, embraced the principles offered by New Managerialism.

However, these principles were often in opposition to the operational procedures that were in place. For instance, one of its central features was that managers should be free to manage (Olowu, 2002), which of course, would have a number of implications for the way decisions, and particularly policies, were to be formulated. As such, the introduction of this new approach also meant the demise of a monolithic public service, but more significantly it meant that the state was retreating from its former welfare position to that of a facilitator (Kiragu, 2002).

This paper thus examines the attempts made in National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) Uganda to replace the traditional systems of public administration with New Managerialism. To achieve this end, focus group discussions were conducted with academics, practitioners and administrators from Uganda. Respondents' thoughts and perceptions about what was happening to the management and running of water systems were also gathered. Views on 'New Managerialism' and changes to the Ugandan context collected, in addition to semi-structured interviews with a range of managers, senior and professional administrators and academics from water utilities in Uganda. Interviews were held with respondents from two urban utilities of NWSC including a total of seven (7). All interviews covered careers, training and mechanisms, management practices and routines, views about change and transformations, attitudes towards institutional management and organization, recent developments, and issues relating to management processes. Lastly, I collected and analyzed documentation on the management of urban water systems and utilities. Data analysis and presentation of findings aimed for maximum discussion of categorization and organization of data, as well as contrasting interpretations with prevalent literature and documentation. Sections that follow explore a number of basic underlying values and traditions of the new approach are inherent in political and administrative institutions, and offer explanations for the different applications of management systems in water systems in NWSC. In the subsequent section, the transitioning domain of NWSC management amidst New Managerialism is introduced.

The Transitioning of NWSC Amidst New Managerialism

NWSC was established in 1972 by the Uganda Government to provide water and sewerage services within Uganda's urban centers. Section 4(2) (a) of the NWSC Statute (1995) (now NWSC Act) obliges NWSC to provide water as well as sewerage services in a way most beneficial for the people of Uganda. This in essence implies the Corporation has to ensure that excreta or sewage is ultimately disposed in order to enhance hygienic conditions. NWSC is wholly owned by the Ugandan government. The corporation is mandated to operate on a commercially viable basis and to manage the water and sewerage service country wide (Muhairwe 2003).

The corporation which had numerous managerial challenges by 1998 almost run near bankruptcy. In an effort to address these inefficiencies, the government appointed a new Board of Directors that comprised representatives from local governments, the

business community, professional bodies, environment, and Ministries of Finance, Water, Health and Small Scale Industries. The new Board, in turn appointed a new Managing Director, Dr William Muhairwe, who was given the mandate to re-think strategies for performance improvement (Muhairwe 2003; Kayaga, 2008).

The change of leadership has been largely known to have brought about a significant performance turn-around through the adoption of new managerial initiatives such as the use of rewards for staff and managers, among other performance drivers. Mugisha *et al.* (2004a) outline a number of a number of reward applications that have been initiated and implemented in NWSC since 1998. These have often been in forms of performance enhancement programmes including the 100-Days program (February–May 1999) and the Service and Revenue Enhancement Programme (August 1999–August 2000). To consolidate and improve performance further, the NWSC headquarters later entered into Area Performance Contracts with its subsidiary utilities to increase managerial autonomy, introduce reward performance incentives and hold the subsidiary operators more accountable. These rewards were one-year renewable contracts and were in effect for three consecutive years (2000–2003).

In addition, NWSC promoted some private sector participation, mainly in the form of management contracts in the Kampala Water Supply Area. As the capital city of Uganda, Kampala accounts for about 70% of NWSC operations in terms of revenue, water production and infrastructure. Kampala's first management contract, called KRIP for Kampala Revenue Improvement Project, was for three years and ran from 1997 to 2001, including six months of preparatory transition, under JBG Gaulf, a German consulting firm based in Uganda. The second management contract was for two years (February 2002–February 2004) and was under Ondeo Services Uganda Limited (OSUL), a French water firm registered in Uganda (Mugisha *et al.*, 2004a). According to Mugisha *et al.* (2004a), during the implementation of the above internal reforms, a “stretch out” programme was introduced after it was realized that there were still some operational constraints that required improvements if contract objectives were to be achieved. The programme was designed to encourage simplification, motivation, participation, transformation, and prioritization.

Due to the volatile nature of targets such as response time to leaks and complaints, unaccounted for water etc; it was not possible to take into consideration these targets because such targets need time to establish authentic and transparent data capture procedures. Incorporating such targets in the incentive plans can easily lead into contentions and thus negative impacts on performance objectives (Kayaga, 2008). The reward mechanism considers a simple approach based on “SMART” collection target. It is based on a sharing plan for surplus realized above the target collection. The financial incentive mechanism is based on reward of SMART target achievement and additional reward to improvements from the SMART level towards Stretch level. This criterion is based on the successful experience with a similar programme in NWSC Uganda (Mugisha *et al.* 2007; Mugisha *et al.* 2004a; Muhairwe, 2009).

The reward framework put emphasis on group rewards, as the company strengthens its managerial systems to a level where it can graduate into individual reward plans. Consequently, the following incentive plan was designed to apply during the 100-Days Stretch-Out Programme. For instance, if the operating Division achieves SMART collection target, pay each Division staff a bonus of 10% of monthly salary. If the Division exceeds the SMART collection target pay each Division staff a bonus.

The performance improvement plans incorporated a significant inter-Area/operating entity competition to enhance performance and keep the teamwork spirit high, among staff. The operating Areas/entities compete for trophies and cash awards in key performance areas. DAWASCO, for example considered the areas of Revenue Collection, Leakage Control, Customer Care and other Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) Services. NWSC-Uganda considers quantitative IDAMC performance (nonrevenue water, working ratio, day's receivable ratio and connection efficiency); ambiance and processes; customer care and cost optimization.

There were trophies and cash awards for the Overall Winner, Runner-Up and individual performance areas. The competition took place monthly or quarterly and trophies were not won for keeps. They rotated with no restrictions on the number of times an Area could win a given trophy. An Area could win as many trophies as possible. The amount of the cash award that accompanied the trophies for the respective operational Areas was determined by respective oversight managements. The trophies were awarded in public functions where all the Areas/entities are involved to promote the comparative competition spirit and ensured that the winners felt fully recognized. The laggards were also distressed through the naming and shamming activity (Mutikanga and Mugisha, 2005).

Improving the managerial performance through the above reward applications was essential to improve the performance of the corporation (Kayaga, 2008). Also, its importance was seen in its ability to ensure *public-private partnership* contracts. These contracts clearly separated the principle's role from the agent's activities (Mugisha, et al. in press). However, even under *public-public settings* NWSC also introduced internal contracting arrangements that incorporated a well-structured incentive design and subsequently improve utility performance. In fact, contract-based competitive provision remains one of the key justifications for New Managerialism. Performance contracting and contracting out have been increasingly adopted in the delivery of water services including urban services like solid waste management (Olowu, 2002). This fact was alluded to by a number of studies addressing issues of efficiency and governance (see Mugisha 2009; 2007a; 2007b; 2006; Muhairwe 2009).

New Managerial Manifestations

The first manifestation of the new managerial approach in the water and sewerage industry, specifically NWSC, was the promotion of competition in service provision (Muhairwe 2003; Mugisha 2007a). Competition versus monopoly became the real issue

other than merely private versus public. On the advantages of competition, they found out that without competition, only about 50% of useful time is optimally exploited. Such competition responded to the needs of customers that maximized time use, reduced costs and increased public scrutiny of the quality of services offered. Competition unleashed improvement where monopolies were clogged through bureaucracy. It was further observed that the competition tended to reward innovation, in opposition to monopoly that stifles it. The morale of public employees and their pride was enhanced by competition as better working attitudes and methods are resultantly more satisfying, let alone the threats to job security due to the turmoil of change especially for non-performers (Osborne and Gaebler 2002).

Promotion of competition in service provision was envisaged in the turnaround of NWSA. Even though the notion that government should not always attempt to deliver using old style bureaucracy might be correct, it ought to be qualified. The trouble about the real world is that it involves trade-offs among desirable goals, for example, consumers want services that are cheap but with high standards; organizations that learn but are reliable; and systems that are flexible but predictable. These views are inevitably contradictory in practice, principle and theory.

Under the new management however, serious attempts were made to introduce competition in the way public goods and services in the corporation are being delivered. The varieties of competition in the corporation include: contracting-out, load shedding, procurement, contracting without recreating private monopolies, internal competition, improved accountability systems like procedures, and avoidance of inequitable outcomes (Mugisha and Berg, 2006; Muhairwe, 2003). These issues brought out a lot of management outcomes that involved promoting the good side of competition, while taking its weaknesses with regard to handling public welfare issues in a just and politically sensitive manner that safeguarded the constitutional rights of citizens (Mugisha and Berg, 2006; Muhairwe, 2003).

The second manifestation of the New Managerial approach has to do with the rationale for measuring performance which is varied and includes the principle of accountability in public institutions to ensure that money has been spent as agreed and in accordance with procedures, and efficient use of resources (Borins 1995; Peters, 1996). Here, the issue of what is being managed brings in the three “Es”, namely; Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness. Norman (1997; cf. Olum 2003), refers to economy as the cost of the inputs used economically; effectiveness as producing results, while efficiency is concerned with the cost of producing results; and equity as it imputes the quality of results in the whole scheme of performance measurement.

NWSA has been characterized by the following indicators in terms of effectiveness and efficiency; timely service delivery, for example, through prompt response to correspondence; completion of assignments in time; having desired outputs with minimum cost; minimal or no complaint from the client or public; putting in place

conducive working environment; putting in place optimal organizational structures, and staffing norms; and keeping the service well informed of any new developments in the service (Mugisha and Berg 2006). Among the various categories of performance criteria that were applied in NSWC was the measurement of high-level objectives, clarity of outputs, and the relevance of Performance Indicators (Pis) (Mugisha and Berg 2006). The performance standards were set out in various divisions countrywide using the results oriented and quality management principles (Muhairwe 2006). The time, quantity, quality, customer satisfaction, response rates, stakeholder participation, outcomes, outputs and other methods of assessment of performance are being popularized. However, many employees in NWSC resented the idea of performance measurement because sometimes they did not learn it properly or other times, lacked commitment and training (Muhairwe 2006).

The third manifestation concerns the redefinition of Internal/External Clients as Customers (Borins 1995; Olowu, 2002; Peters, 1996). According to Osborne and Gaebler (2002), the driving force behind government performance should be meeting the needs of the customer and not of the bureaucracy: the customer is identified as the only one who determines quality on the assumption that he or she is informed about the correct choices, has the purchasing power. The New Managerialism approach identifies the customer as the only one who determines quality on the assumption that he or she is informed about the correct choices, has the purchasing power, and the alternatives are on a timely basis available for decision-making. In NWSC, this was strengthened by the creation of a customer-oriented culture through choice of metrics and targets that focus and reward improved customer relations and improved service delivery (Sanford, 2006). It was also strengthened by its awareness of the right to water which entitles every human being to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and / or domestic use according to General Comment No. 15 (2002) on water by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights which explicitly asserts that Article 11 (the right to an adequate standard of living) as well as Article 12 (the right to health) of ICESCR are the basis for the right to water (NWSC; 2007).

The other adjustment that is typical of new managerialism is decentralization of authority to enhance participatory management (Olowu, 2002): For a very long time, NWSC was a highly centralized institution and it was fashionable when information and communication technologies were primitive and slow and the workforce relatively uneducated. This is contrasted with a situation today where information is virtually limitless and instantaneous and the public employees are well educated (Kiragu, 2002; Pollitt and Hilikka, 1997). Decisions that take months to be formulated only become effective when the situation has changed. In NWSC, decentralized institutions have shown to have advantages which include being more flexible than centralized institutions, and responding quickly to changing circumstances and customers' needs.

The other adjustment that deserves mention is what is popularly known as "hands on professional management" (Hood 1995; Hughes 1998): The catch phrase for this

element is 'let the managers manage'. The argument here is that accountability requires a clear assignment of responsibility for action, not diffusion of power. In this regard, the management role is paramount regardless of the specialized nature of the departments and ministries (hence, bringing an end to the specialist vs. generalist controversy in favour of the managers).

The case of NWSC provides a good example on how effective a manager can be if he or she is mandated to manage. NWSC was in a near state of bankruptcy. Apart from the weaknesses, the corporation had to contend with a number of threats, including debt servicing obligations coming due and a VAT law that compelled NWSC to pay taxes on any increases in bills. On the other hand, the government was willing to give support to professional pro-active managers and the economy was relatively stable. In this respect, the government was willing to freeze the debt (US\$100 million) for some time to give a chance to the corporation to recover, if serious managerial efforts were initiated (Mugisha and Berg, 2006; World Bank 1997). Overall, improving operational and financial performance was essential to prevent further deterioration (Mugisha and Berg, 2006).

A related point to make is the institution of explicit formal measurable standards and measures of performance and success (Kayaga, 2008). The NWSC gained commitment to sustain gains. Its performance has been tremendous. As a result, the government has agreed to and entered into a second performance contract with NWSC that continues to provide debt relief. Negotiations are underway to forgive a percentage of this debt and provide relaxed repayment terms for the remainder if performance improvements are sustained. This would complete the turnaround process, putting NWSC in a position to attract financing for necessary capital projects in the future (Sanford, 2006). The NWSC recognizes that attracting such financing under acceptable conditions requires that they continue to demonstrate operational efficiencies and sound financial management. Measures for demonstrating operational and financial performance are already enshrined in the performance contract between the Government and NWSC and in Internally Delegated Area Management Contracts (IDAMCs) (Muhairwe, 2003).

NWSC implemented a series of performance and efficiency improvements as required under the Performance Contract. These included increased water production, service coverage and connections; reduced unaccounted for water; reduced staffing, increased revenues; increased collection/billing ratio; increased metering, and improved response to customer complaints. In Kampala, this was achieved through a series of management contracts, first with JBG Gauff Engineers and then with ONDEO Services Uganda Limited (Sanford, 2006). In other service areas, this was achieved through partnerships governed by IDAMCs with semi-autonomous service operators which delegated operational control to these operators and provided performance and incentives for service improvements based on specific water balance, operational level of service and financial indicators. These IDAMCs were established for various service areas the capital city, Kampala (Muhairwe 2009).

Furthermore, designing internal incentives to reward teams for meeting the intended objectives had the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that performance improved. This, according to the Muhairwe (2006), was ensured through:

- **Pardons:** One early theme is that there should be a general amnesty for workers who have not been doing their work diligently. Rather than starting with punishments, NWSC decided to create a clean slate.
- **Prizes:** It is amazing what people will do for recognition. NWSC established awards for meeting targets. The concept of prizes is hardly new, but it tapped into the competitive mindsets of many managers: high performance became equated to “victory” over rival managers—those responsible for other towns.
- **Parties:** Early on, when areas competed with one another for prizes, part of the reward involved parties where everyone celebrated improved performance.
- **Persuasion:** When teams from different towns did not meet targets, The MD did not accept excuses. Rather, (in private) the issue became—what tools do you need to strengthen your team? Are you really the one capable of leading your group? Managers continued to be constantly reminded, through periodic score cards printed in monthly/quarterly magazines and other feedback mechanisms, that their leadership efforts had impacts on financial rewards received by staff.

Last but not least, is stress on private sector styles of management practice (Hood 1995). The idea here was to move away from military-style SOE service ethics to flexibility in hiring and rewards - e.g., lateral entry into the public service, performance evaluation and merit. Poorly performing organizations are likely to have poor information systems. Withholding information reduces the likelihood that problems will be correctly identified. Also, NPM should be seen as a ‘search process’ not a ‘declaration process’. Most importantly, the process had to include those who would be implementing the strategies—those closest to the problems. This was further strengthened by the creation of a customer-oriented culture through choice of metrics and targets that focus and reward improved customer relations and improved service delivery (Sanford 2006).

Lessons from NWSC Experiences

The successful implementation of the NPM across NWSC's operating units seems to suggest that the conventional wisdom regarding non-performance by public companies is incorrect as stress has been put on emphasis on what works (Muhairwe 2009). The NWSC experience clearly shows the benefits of focusing on what works. Conventional thinking reflects the view that several bureaucratic managerial practices under public management settings are fundamentally flawed, reflecting frustration with poor performance of public companies. Enterprises often become trapped in a ‘low level equilibrium’ involving low prices, low quality, slow network expansion, operating inefficiencies, and corruption. The situation is ‘stable’ in a sense as managers pretend to manage, their utilities pretend to deliver services, and customers pretend to pay (Muhairwe 2009; 2006; 2003). On the other

hand, when an inefficient government enterprise lacks cash flow, treasury funding dries up instantly. This can lead to desperate solutions like privatization. Indeed, the private sector participation experience at NWSC suggests that 'international operators' do not come to manage problems but to earn returns on their investments. They leave the country if their profits slacken. International operators do not have a monopoly on approaches to improving performance (Muhairwe 2009; 2006).

From NWSC's experience, excellent performance can be 'home-grown', but such an outcome requires a set of conditions (Mugisha and Berg, 2006; Muhairwe 2009). Strong leadership, the right tools (legal framework), appropriate skills, but most of all a clear set of shared objectives which are synonymous with the new managerial practice. Nevertheless, one wonders why few water systems have been reformed and transformed. Current managers have knowledge and skills, but they often lack the incentives to make the extra effort and make some difficult decisions. For many utilities, local managers, are the starting points for improvements in performance. Thus the other idea here is to move away from military-style public sector service ethics to flexibility in hiring and rewards - e.g., lateral entry into the public service, performance evaluation and merit. The successful implementation of the performance enhancement initiatives across NWSCs operating units suggests that the conventional wisdom regarding non-performance by public companies is incorrect (Muhairwe 2009). The NWSC experience clearly shows the benefits of focusing on what works. There is no single textbook solution to the myriad problems facing water utilities, especially in low income countries. Most of these problems are caused by the local managers, poor organizational cultures, citizen non-payments, and political intrusiveness (Mugisha and Berg, 2006; Muhairwe 2009).

That aside, local area managers shared information with one another (Mutikanga and Mugisha, 2005). There was also much experimentation in the early years of the reform (1998-2000). To meet targets, managers devised tactics for improving performance. Premature codification of procedures would have meant lost opportunities—as managers innovated and discovered new ways to improve performance. When NWSC's top managers viewed the internal procedures as "stabilizing," the steps were then set in documents (Muhairwe 2009). Besides, there was a certain degree of awareness with regards to developing strategies that involved borrowing ideas from many organizations and people. NWSC wanted to avoid the NIH (Not Invented Here) syndrome where ideas from outside the organization would face particularly steep hurdles (Berg and Muhairwe, 2006). The staff brought numerous excellent ideas to the table—many based on their graduate training, suggestions from customers, or contacts within other organizations. NWSC evaluated every idea that came in terms of its impact on short-term objectives and long-term goals. Giving attention to all ideas gave confidence to those who generated them. It gave a sense of ownership to strategies that were eventually considered, adopted, and implemented. This participatory approach had reinforced the new corporate culture that was emerging from the organizational reforms (Berg and Muhairwe, 2006).

At the tactical level, and management teams came up with the following series of

programs (ratified by the new board) described in greater detail by Mugisha, Berg and Muhairwe (in press).

- *100-Day Program* (February-May, 1999) was a high-impact program that focused on reversing operational and financial inefficiencies.
- *Service and Revenue Enhancement Program* (August 1999-August 2000) aimed at restoring customer confidence: establishing customer service centers, conducting customer surveys to capture customer preferences, and introducing an amnesty for illegal water use.
- *Area and Service Performance Contracts* (2000-2003) focused on making local service providers achieve commercial sustainability: managers had the authority to make important decisions and were accountable for outcomes.

There is also much to learn from diverse programs designed to improve morale, and to instill confidence in managers who were able to alter the expectations of operating staff. Four of such initiatives are noted by Mugisha, Berg and Muhairwe (in press) include:

- *Stretch-Out Program* (2002-2003) emphasized teamwork through work involvement and a reduction of the “boss-element” typical of bureaucratic organizations (especially those in Africa).
- *One-Minute Management Program* (2003) created procedures for promoting individual performance accountability, a problem identified when teams were the focus of organizational development. The achievement of goals was a subject of periodic appraisals and incentive awards.
- *Internally-Delegated Area Management Contracts* (2006) or IDAMCs are designed to give more autonomy to area managers (partners), define roles and responsibilities more clearly, and create better incentive plans that allocate more operating risks to partners. By passing more risks to partners, the head office is able to encourage more innovation and work commitment.
- *Checkers System* (2006) was introduced to rationalize monitoring and evaluation activity; the system strengthens the IDAMC implementation process, emphasizing both processes and outputs.

These programs which were responses to perceived problems with organizational performance reflected a triage approach: set aside what cannot be changed and attack the problems threatening NWSC’s financial viability. The opening up of lines of communication meant that employees were expected to contribute to their design and implementation. As such, NWSC made all staff members aware that if the company was to be an open system, honesty would be essential. The managers at headquarters had to be on the lookout for potential shirking (laziness) and unethical behavior throughout the

organization, within the head office and at local areas. NWSC dealt harshly with staff and managers who violated principles of honesty and trust. The MD was particularly in the spotlight in this regard—both as a cheerleader for the organization and as a person who set the tone for others. However, the capacity to detect malpractice depended on effective use of both formal and informal monitoring techniques (Berg and Muhairwe 2006).

Lastly, a continuing theme of the turnaround initiative of the NWSC was of reform as a process, not an end in itself. The objective was to improve sector performance. As the data indicate, the transformation was successful, but every manager knew that much more needed to be done. Satisfaction with accomplishments did not imply that new goals were unnecessary.

Conclusion

Upon examining the performance of NWSC, it could be argued that there has been tremendous progress over the last ten years. This is envisaged in the fact that NWSC today has been transformed into one of the most successful public enterprises in Uganda. The NWSC has become the model public utility in the water industry and all signs point to a management revolution, which has been carried out through the New Managerial initiatives that have been discussed in the preceding sections. From a struggling public enterprise, the corporation's organizational behavior and work environment have been transformed tremendously. The enterprise has proved that it is possible to apply private sector principles, techniques, and motives to public enterprises through delegation, decentralization, and operational autonomy. Putting emphasis on what works, designing internal incentives, and encouraging hands on professional management, and formal measurable standards and measures of performance are ideal for improving the performance of public enterprises. However, adherence to the managerial approach must not be so mechanistic so as to stifle initiation, experimentation and convention. As such, the new managerial approach is not necessarily a panacea for problems inherent in water management but a careful and selective adaptation of its elements may be beneficial as the case of NWSC has shown.

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