Research justification

Getting real about public sector governance

A widespread approach to the dysfunctions of state bureaucracies in Africa limits itself to deploring the various ways in which the practices of state officials deviate from the formal norms that are supposed to govern them. We think there is a need to begin the search for new policy directions by examining closely the 'real governance' of the provision of public goods and services by African states.

A 'back office' perspective

Social science research on public services in Africa typically adopts an external perspective of one kind or another. It does not get inside the organisations responsible for the services to explore exactly why they behave the way they do. Further, when research focuses on the interface between providers and users of public services, it tends to concentrate on what might be called the 'front office'. We think there is also a need to reveal the opaque world of the 'back office', focusing on the specific universe inhabited by the officials themselves. That is what this research stream is doing.

State bureaucracies

Exploring the reality of public-sector governance

The State Bureaucracies research stream is concerned with the provision of public goods and services by the administrative services of African states.

Its starting assumption is that the 'real governance' of public services in Africa has a hybrid character, with strong elements of informality operating alongside formal bureaucratic rules and procedures. Typically, the behaviour of public servants is governed not by a single set of rules but by plurality of normative frameworks, including what we are calling respectively official norms, social norms, professional norms and 'practical' norms.

We are, however, not convinced by the conventional view in which informality is assumed automatically to imply dysfunctionality. So we are investigating the different ways 'real governance' works out in practice, paying particular attention to instances where the results are relatively positive from the perspective of economic and social development.

The research is currently focused on the forest and water services in Senegal and Niger – state bureaucracies whose responsibilities centre upon the protection of natural resources and the regulation of natural resource utilisation. The first stage of the research involves getting to know the professional cultures of the members of these long-established uniformed public services, and the different logics of accountability to which they are subject. We shall then be identifying the conditions under which it may be possible for hybrid, markedly informalised, forms of behaviour by the members of these bureaucracies to have positive effects in terms of natural-resource management, protection and access.

In 2010, the research stream will be widened to incorporate research carried out on the state livestock and irrigation services in Niger.

For further information, visit www.institutions-africa.org or contact the State bureaucracies stream leader, Dr Giorgio Blundo (giorgio.blundo@univmed.fr).