

## An exposition of public accountability and public responsibility with reference to African countries

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**Abstract:** Research indicates that a reasonable number of scientists, scholars and practitioners argue that a few terms and concepts political science, public administration and administrative law are used so freely, and confusingly as public responsibility and public accountability. Furthermore, in many textbooks available the impression is created that the two concepts are synonymous if not equitable. As shown in this article, this is, however, not quite true. What follows is a reasoned exposition of terminological and semasiological distinctions between public accountability and public responsibility.

**Keywords:** public administration, public accountability, public responsibility, equitable, and synonymous

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### I. Introduction

Professor B. P. Botha (1987:174) states that the terms and concepts public accountability and public responsibility are freely and confusingly used as being synonymous if not equitable. This is, however, untrue as there are distinct differences between public accountability and public responsibility as this article illustrates.

### II. Purpose of article

The purpose of this article is to give a concise exposition of marked differences between accountability and responsibility with reference to African governments.

### III. Public accountability and public responsibility

**Firstly**, S. B. M Marume, (2015:119-162) states that most quoted leading scientists and scholars relevant to the concepts of responsibility and accountability include, amongst others:

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|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| • J. J. N. Cloete | • S.B. M. Marume   | • B. P. Botha    |
| • I.S. Banki      | • G.S. Reid        | • S. P. Robbins  |
| • E. Sallis       | • M. M. Khan       | • H. L. A. Hart  |
| • Ronald Warner   | • Herbert J. Spiro | • P. S. Botes    |
| • R. W. Rowland   | • S. X. Hanekom    | • E. G. Bain     |
| • William Fox     | • Ivan H. Meyer    | • D.W. Smithburg |

**Secondly**, no private institution of any kind in the world today is called upon to account for its actions and expenditures in the same manner and to the extent as a public institution should be absolutely accountable to their policies; is a requirement dating from antiquity (Marume:2015:119).

**Thirdly**, various meanings of public responsibility are briefly illustrated. The two terms which are freely and confusingly used are public responsibility and public accountability (B. P. Botha: 1987:174). The expression public responsibility, which Professor J. J. N. Cloete (1967: 71, 77, 81 and 1985) uses, is one which admits of a wide interpretation – much wider perhaps than that of any other concepts in the fields of political science and public administration. Let us very briefly examine the term responsibility to illustrate this diversity of meanings. Distinguishable shades of public responsibility show the following examples:

- **H. L. A. Hart** (1968:221) assigns four names of responsibility as:
  - (a) role – responsibility
  - (b) casual – responsibility
  - (c) liability – responsibility and
  - (d) capacity – responsibility.
- **D. W. Smithburg** (1966 and 1971:489) distinguishes four uses of the term ‘responsibility’ as:
  - (a) moral obligation,
  - (b) responsiveness,
  - (c) accountability and
  - (d) legitimacy.

- **H. J. Spiro** (1969:14 - 20) differentiates three major, and mutually related connotations in which people speak of responsibility, that is:
  - (a) responsibility as accountability,
  - (b) responsibility as cause, and
  - (c) responsibility as obligation

According to W. Fox and I. H. Meyer (Public Administration Dictionary, 1995: 1 – 2, and 113), accountability: can be viewed from different viewpoints:

- the responsibility of a government and its agents towards the public to realise previously set objectives and to account for them in public.
- commitment required from a public official to accept public responsibility for his actions or inaction.
- the obligation that a subordinate has to keep his or her superior has to keep his or her superior informed of the execution of responsibility and responsibility is used to mean:
- the obligation that organizational members assume to carry out their duties to the best of their ability and in accordance with directions
- the requirements with which the holder of each position is charged. P113

Public responsibility and public accountability are examined separately as follows:

### 3.1 Public responsibility

What Professor H. J. Spiro (1969) calls capacity to make decisions corresponds to H. F. Summer's discretionary power, and the other two elements of contractual responsibility which he lists as a general duty and a subsequent accountability. These terms correspond, roughly, to obligation and accountability, as used in this article.

*What then is meant by the term responsibility?*

**Answers:** Quoting Marume (2015:123) responsibility is viewed to mean:

- (a) the obligation that institutional (organisational) members assume to carry out their duties to the best of their ability and in accordance with directions.
- (b) the requirements with which the holders of each position is charged.

Stemming from the above definition, political office-bearers are thus responsible for the administration of policies once they have been decided, and they are also responsible for the activities of civil servants and other public officials over whom they have control. In this way, the administration of the country is held accountable to the electorate through its politically elected heads [Marume: 2015:123]

This value-responsibility – binds the public administration system to Parliament, the top most legislative institution. The electorate is sovereign; it has final, if even indirect, control over the public officials who exercise authority in its name. These two principles, representativeness and responsibility form the normative basis of a system of democratic government and administration (Marume: 2015: 123-124).

According to B. P. Botha (1987:174), there are various facets of public responsibility. The following facets are the most common and simultaneously the most significant.

#### 3.1.1 Responsibility and the individual public official

I.S. Banki (1981:502) couples responsibility to a personal obligation for the task assigned or delegated to an official. D. Mitchell (1982:383) in his article on accountability and performance in public enterprise in Great Britain also couples responsibility to the individual: "If ministers cannot, in fact, exercise control of decision-making then they cannot realistically be held responsible to their electoral constituencies for the decisions which are made."

The individual minister, therefore, although he belongs to a cabinet that takes collective decisions remains responsible as an individual to his electoral constituency. As far back as 1948 the Right Honourable. Clement Davies (1948:162-8) referred to the responsibility of the administrator in a moral, legislative, organisational and follow up sense. By implication he was referring to the individual.

To further illustrate the individual nature of responsibility, cabinet ministers are individually responsible to parliament for the proper administration of their departments (Fraser 1978:1). Ministers are, of course, individually also fully responsible to the cabinet (Wilenski 1979:354). The fact that it is necessary to acknowledge and delimit areas of responsibility of individual officials in order to hold them accountable for their action also illustrates the individuality of responsibility as an administrative concept (Wilenski 1979: 354). A distinction can be drawn between "responsibility to" and "responsibility for" (Reid 1980:304); In other words, "ministers of state must be responsible 'to' the parliament 'for' their department". Reid (1980:311) quotes John Stuart Mill: "Responsibility is null when nobody knows who is responsible." Nor, even when real, can it be divided without being weakened. To maintain it at its highest there must be one person who receives the whole praise of what is well done, the whole blame for what is ill".

In referring to shared responsibility John Stuart Mill refers to the functioning of boards as being "... the act of nobody and nobody can be made to answer for it" (Reid 1980: 311). Mill's argument therefore implies that although a board, or in a public administration sense a cabinet, committee or commission, can be collectively held accountable, no individual member can be held responsible. This also is an indication that responsibility is coupled to the individual. In the final analysis, however, it is an administrative axiom that the nature, extent and degree of responsibility are determined by the nature of the office the individual holds. The responsibility of a minister of a government department would be much greater in terms of policy and policy-making, personnel provision and utilisation, finance, organisation, procedure and control than that of officials at lower levels where responsibility would be limited to the execution of orders and directives.

### **3.1.2 Responsible government and administration**

In explaining responsible government and administration, a distinction between moral responsibility, political responsibility, legal responsibility and administrative responsibility must be drawn. These are examined separately as follows:

#### **Moral responsibility**

Moral responsibility in the African contexts refers to the right of every individual citizen to demand fundamental human rights and to be treated as equal in the services rendered by government. In contemporary Africa, this would imply enjoying equal opportunity in obtaining jobs, standard of education and other social benefits, like health and welfare services. Government must, therefore, in a plural society like Nigeria, Egypt, Congo (DRC), Kenya and South Africa strive for the greatest moral responsibility towards the various race groups. John Stuart Mill (International encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 1968: 497), explains moral responsibility of government as follows: "A government is to be judged by its action upon men, and by its action upon things; by what it makes of the citizens, and what it does with them; its tendency to improve or deteriorate the people themselves, and the goodness or badness of the work it performs for them, and by means of them."

The moral responsibility of the government of the day in Africa is presently internally and internationally being judged by "its action upon man," as J. S. Mill puts it.

#### **Political responsibility**

Political responsibility is judged by results and not by intentions. It is, therefore, more rigid than moral responsibility and means the right use of power (International Encyclopedia 1968:497). "It is relevant to both the tiny fragment of power in the hands of a single voter and the unlimited power of the dictator" (International Encyclopedia 1968:497)

In the plural African societies, the question to be answered is whether it would be politically responsible to introduce a system of "one man, one vote," or whether a system should be pursued where the political expectation of every ethnic group, each a minority in its own right, would be granted political rights based on the present constitutional dispensation of a hierarchy of political institutions for each individual ethnic group. The answer should be sought in the ultimate outcome of the two alternatives. The first has already been answered by experience in the rest of Africa, where democracies were soon replaced by one-party states. (see Metrowich 1975: 95-7), eventually moving into socialism and in the final consequence becoming Marxist states, for instance Angola and Mozambique. The second alternative's answer has been provided by time and evolution as the constitutional dispensation in South Africa after 1994, Namibia after 1990 and Zimbabwe after 2013 progresses.

#### **Legal responsibility**

Legal responsibility is relevant because legislators "... can easily misuse their political power by making laws and decisions weighed against political opponents" (International Encyclopedia 1968:497). Political party policies can easily be turned into laws.

#### **Administrative responsibility**

Administrative responsibility implies equating authority and responsibility. Robbins (1980:231:32) states: "When we delegate authority, we must allocate commensurate responsibility. That is, when one is given 'rights' one also assumes a corresponding 'obligation' to perform. To allocate authority without responsibility creates opportunities for abuse, and no one should be held responsible for what he or she has no authority over."

Two forms of administrative responsibility can be recognised: operating responsibility and ultimate responsibility (Robbins 1980:232). Operating responsibility may be passed on by the administrator and may in turn be passed on further down the line of authority. Professor S. P. Robbins (1980:232), however, refers to the ultimate component of responsibility that has to be retained. He puts it as follows: "an administrator is ultimately responsible for the action of his sub-ordinates to whom he has passed on operating responsibility. Therefore, he should delegate operating responsibility equal to the delegated authority; however, ultimate responsibility can never be delegated."

### **3.2 Public accountability**

The question is: **what is the meaning of accountability?**

If any sense it be said that government is for people, “....then those who possess and exercise political power must submit their actions to public scrutiny and approval. This is the meaning of public accountability” (Sallis 1982:18).

I.S. Banki (1981:97) explains accountability in a broader sense as follows: “a personal obligation, liability, or answerability of an official or employee to give his superior a desired report of the quantity and quality of action and decision in the performance of responsibilities, specifically delegated. It carries with it the application of organisational sanctions.”

For the purpose of this explanation, a distinction should be made between public accountability and administrative accountability, being the two important components of accountability and administrative accountability, being the two important components of accountability in a public administration context.

Accountability in the private sector differs considerably from accountability in the public sector. It is, not relevant to the purpose of this discussion, and only the mention of a difference will suffice.

#### **3.2.1 Public accountability**

Since the inception of constitutional democracies in the free world both developed and developing countries, the debate has continued on the degree of freedom the public service should enjoy from public control, public participation and public scrutiny (Vocino & Rabin 1981:398)

After World War II (1939 - 45), the question of accountability became even more pronounced because governments become engaged in so many activities (Vocino & Rabin 1981:398).

S.X. Hanekom and Thornhill (1983:184) identify public accountability as one of the prominent characteristics of twentieth century public administration and point out that the public and elected representatives need assurance “.... that public services are under control and carried out within the framework of the policies laid down by Parliament”. In the past, accountability mainly had a monetary connotation and “... was in fact mainly concerned with finance” (Hanekom & Thornhill 1983: 185). The involvement of government in a great number of activities that increased public services resulted in the term “accountability” referring to more than only monetary dealings and it is thus used “..... in a much wider sense and consists mainly in a statutory obligation to provide parliament with any available information to enable it to determine how executive actions have progressed” (Hanekom & Thornhill 1983:185).

J. J. N. Cloete (1981:21-2) lists and explains measures that can be applied to uphold public accountability. These measures are the legislature, judicial institutions, organisational arrangements and work procedures. Because the legislature enjoys supreme power, it will set the objectives to be pursued by the executive institution. Legislators in a democracy are elected representatives and if the objectives set by them are contrary to the values of the electorate, they can be replaced at the ballot-box. Judicial institutions can be used to enforce public accountability because courts hear cases in public and judgments usually receive wide publicity. Organisational arrangements and proper work division promote accountability because officials will always have a superior to give account to. Sound procedures are needed because the public service is usually large and necessitates orderly and correct action. Most executive institutions therefore compile their own manuals and procedural instructions based on legislation which sets particular objectives. Although these measures put forward by Cloete are useful in ensuring public accountability, should there not be a means to test public accountability?

In conclusion, positive answers to the following questions could be a means of testing public accountability in democracies:

- “How regularly and efficiently are the views of the public sought by decision-makers?
- How easy is it for the ordinary citizen to participate in the decision making processes at national or provincial/metropolitan or local level if he or she wishes to do so?
- How regularly are elections held so that those in power make themselves accountable to the electorate and the electorate can replace them if dissatisfied with their performance? (Sallis 1982:18).”

#### **3.2.2 Administrative accountability**

“... refers to devising mechanisms to keep the bureaucracy under surveillance and in check” (Khan 1983:683), and is clearly linked with control mechanisms. Other than in the case of a private undertaking where control is solely an internal matter, control in the public sector is an external one (Cloete 1977:308). This implies that although internal control mechanisms must be provided for, accountability in the form of external control measures is essential to the public sector. Cloete (1977:309) points out that these control measures have to be directed at the future and not applied ex post factor.

The activities of the public sector should always be open to public scrutiny. This implies that every activity, every transaction of the public service must be accountable (Cloete 1977:69). Paul H. Appleby (Cloete 1977:69) explains the nature of administrative work in the public sector as “... the way it is subject to public scrutiny and outcry”. He continues by saying that: An administrator coming into government is struck at once,

and continually thereafter, by the press and public interest in every details of his life, personality and conduct: (Cloete 1977:69-70).

Appleby (Cloete 1977:70) rightly states that every activity and action by a public employee. "... has to be thought about in terms of possible public agitation, investigation, or judgement." It should also be pointed out that the task of the public official is difficult in the sense that he has to account to a complex society and that total satisfaction from society can hardly be achieved.

Another aspect complicating accountability is that "... the hierarchy allows the 'buck' to be passed" (Robbins1980:232) and where group or committee decisions are taken "... it is difficult to identify who is accountable. The result therefore, is that responsibility is clouded by the effort of individuals to protect themselves against the risk of being held accountable for faulty decisions (Robbins 1980: 232)."

For the purpose of this article internal and external control measures will not be analysed in detail; this information is freely available in many public administration textbooks. The question of self-control, self-discipline or, as Khan (1983:683) puts it; "Internal Individuals Controls" need brief attention.

**M. M. Khan** (1983: 683) states: "'Internal individual control' is composed of such things as the bureaucrat's attitude towards the law, the value placed upon each individual as a human being and the general personal moral hierarchy."

**Khan** (1983:684) includes informal as well as internal control mechanisms in this category of control and points out that "the attitudes, values and the moral hierarchy of the bureaucrat depend on three major factors. These are the socio-economic background of the individual, the type and extent of education received by the individual and the professional ties of the particular individual."

#### IV. Summary

In political science public administration a marked difference exists between responsibility on the one hand and accountability on the other hand. It would be foolish to attempt to argue that one is more important than the other in the government and administration at any level of government, central, provincial or local government. The one interacts with the other, implying that responsible action of political office-bearers and every official of the administrative hierarchy is necessary to account for specific government activity. The major difference between the two concepts would be that responsibility, in the general sense of the word, is easier to pinpoint to an individual than accountability.

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