EPISODE 20

WHO OWNS PUBLIC RESOURCES?

Understanding Public Wealth, Stewardship and Accountability

Estimated Reading Time: 6–7 minutes

Introduction

Who owns a country's public resources?

Its land.

Water.

Minerals.

Forests.

Taxes.

Roads.

Railways.

Power stations.

Ports.

Public buildings.

State-owned enterprises.

Do these resources belong to politicians?

Public officials?

Government departments?

A small group of connected individuals?

Or do they ultimately belong to the people?

This episode explores a simple but important principle:

Public resources are held and administered for the benefit of the public.

Those entrusted with managing them are custodians—not personal owners.

What Are Public Resources?

Public resources include assets, revenues and natural wealth administered by the State or public institutions on behalf of society.

They may include:

- public land;
- water resources;
- minerals and other natural resources;
- taxes and public revenue;
- roads, bridges and railways;
- electricity and water infrastructure;
- hospitals and schools;
- state-owned enterprises;
- public buildings;
- government information and records.

These resources are created, funded, inherited or administered for a public purpose.

Ownership and Stewardship Are Not the Same

A public official may control a budget.

That does not mean the money belongs to that official.

A minister may exercise authority over a department.

That does not mean the department's assets are personal property.

A board may oversee a state-owned enterprise.

That does not mean the directors own the enterprise.

They exercise temporary authority subject to law, oversight and accountability.

This distinction is essential:

Control creates responsibility. It does not create personal ownership.

The Case Study

Imagine that a public entity owns valuable land.

Several possible uses are proposed:

- a hospital;
- affordable housing;
- a private commercial development;
- sale to a politically connected purchaser;
- preservation for future public use.

How should the decision be made?

The responsible questions include:

- What public purpose does the asset serve?
- Who benefits from the proposed transaction?
- Was the process transparent?
- Was fair value obtained?
- Were alternatives considered?
- Will the decision improve people's lives?
- Who is accountable if the resource is wasted?

Public resources should not quietly move from collective benefit into private hands without lawful authority, transparency and proper value.

Why This Matters

Public resources affect:

- economic opportunity;
- employment;
- infrastructure;
- healthcare;
- education;
- housing;
- environmental security;
- future generations.

When public assets are properly managed, society benefits.

When they are wasted, neglected or captured by a small group, the public carries the loss.

The consequences may appear as:

- deteriorating infrastructure;
- higher taxes;
- reduced services;
- lost investment;
- fewer jobs;
- greater inequality.

OUBAS Analysis

OUBAS believes that public resources should be managed according to three principles:

Public benefit

The resource should serve a legitimate public purpose.

Transparency

People should be able to understand how major decisions were taken.

Accountability

Those exercising control should be answerable for the outcome.

Public officials are not owners of public wealth.

They are temporary custodians.

Their authority should therefore be exercised with the care expected of someone managing property that belongs to others.

The true test is not whether a transaction was administratively processed.

The question is:

Did the public receive fair and lasting value from its resource?

OUBAS Principle

Public resources belong collectively to the people and must be administered for public benefit.

A second principle follows:

The greater the public value of a resource, the greater the obligation of transparency and accountability.

OUBAS Reform Proposal

OUBAS proposes that major public-resource decisions should include:

- public disclosure of the asset involved;
- independent valuation;
- clear reasons for the decision;
- identification of the intended public benefit;
- disclosure of beneficiaries and conflicts of interest;
- measurable performance obligations;
- post-transaction reporting;
- consequences for waste, misconduct or failure.

Public-resource registers should be accessible and understandable.

Citizens should be able to see:

- what the State owns;
- who controls it;
- how it is being used;
- what income it generates;
- whether it is improving public welfare.

Key Lessons

After reading this episode, you should understand that:

- public resources are held for society;
- authority over a public asset does not create personal ownership;
- public officials are custodians;

- major decisions require transparency and accountability;
- public resources should produce fair value and public benefit.

OUBAS Knowledge Check

1. Which of the following may be a public resource?

☐ Public land
☐ Tax revenue
☐ State infrastructure
☐ All of the above

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2. Does control over a public asset mean personal ownership?

☐ Yes
☐ No

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3. What is the role of a public official who manages public resources?

☐ Custodian
☐ Personal owner
☐ Private beneficiary
☐ Unaccountable controller

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4. Which principles should guide public-resource decisions?

☐ Public benefit
☐ Transparency
☐ Accountability
☐ All of the above

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5. What should be the ultimate test of a public-resource decision?

☐ Whether the public received fair and lasting value
☐ Whether the paperwork was lengthy
☐ Whether officials approved it
☐ Whether it benefited a small group

OUBAS Public Sentiment Survey

1. Do you believe public resources are currently managed primarily for the benefit of the public?

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

2. Which public resource requires the greatest protection?

☐ Land
☐ Water
☐ Minerals
☐ Public revenue
☐ State-owned enterprises
☐ Infrastructure

3. Should the public have access to a register of major State assets and how they are used?

○ Strongly Agree
○ Agree
○ Neutral
○ Disagree
○ Strongly Disagree

4. Should major public-asset transactions disclose their ultimate beneficiaries?

○ Yes
○ No
○ Unsure

5. Which public resource in your community appears most poorly managed?

💡 OUBAS Innovation Challenge

Imagine you have been asked to design a national **Public Resources Dashboard**.

What information should every citizen be able to see?

Consider:

- the asset;
- its value;
- who controls it;
- its purpose;
- revenue generated;
- maintenance condition;
- public benefit;
- contracts and beneficiaries.

Share your proposal with OUBAS.

Strong ideas may be developed into future **OUBAS Reform Papers** and considered by AAP working groups.

Share Your Experience

Have you seen a public asset used well?

Have you seen one neglected, wasted or transferred in a way that raised questions?

How did the decision affect your community?

Your contribution forms part of the **OUBAS People's Index on Public Resources and Accountability**.

Continue Your Learning

📚 Visit the **OUBAS Bookstore** for publications on governance, public finance, natural resources, infrastructure, accountability and institutional reform.

Join AAP

Public resources require responsible professionals from many disciplines.

Join the **Amalgamated African Professionals (AAP)** and collaborate with:

- engineers;
- economists;
- lawyers;

- accountants;
- planners;
- scientists;
- environmental specialists;
- public administrators;
- entrepreneurs.

Together, professionals can help develop better systems for protecting and using Africa's public wealth.

Join AAP Today.

Follow OUBAS

Follow OUBAS for new episodes, surveys, research findings and reform proposals.

Every response contributes to the **OUBAS People's Index**, helping measure public confidence, lived experience and ideas for protecting public resources.

Next Project

OUBAS WEBSITE IMPLEMENTATION SPECIFICATION

The next step is to define how the website should present:

- episodes;
- knowledge quizzes;
- public sentiment surveys;
- live results;
- the OUBAS People's Index;
- lived-experience submissions;
- the Bookstore;
- AAP membership and member interaction;
- research reports and reform proposals.

OUBAS exists to educate, stimulate informed discussion and inspire practical solutions.

Knowledge grows when it is shared.

Institutions improve when people participate.

The only constant in every successful institution should be innovation and continuous improvement.

Join the conversation. Join AAP. Help build a better Africa.