

EPISODE 19

WHAT MUST THE STATE DELIVER TO THE PEOPLE?

Understanding Public Goods, Service Delivery and the Purpose of Government

Estimated Reading Time: 6–7 minutes

Introduction

Why does government exist?

Why do citizens pay taxes?

Why does the State own institutions, employ public officials and control substantial public resources?

The answer cannot simply be:

To govern.

Government exists to serve the people.

It must create the conditions in which people can live safely, work productively, raise families, build businesses and participate meaningfully in society.

That requires the delivery of public goods and essential services.

Electricity.

Water.

Roads.

Wastewater systems.

Public transport.

Healthcare.

Education.

Security.

Justice.

When these systems fail, the consequences are not administrative.

They are human.

What Are Public Goods?

Public goods are services, systems and resources that support society as a whole.

Some are provided directly by the State.

Others may be delivered through municipalities, public entities, regulated private operators or partnerships.

Examples include:

- reliable electricity;
- clean water;
- sanitation;
- roads and bridges;
- public transport;
- schools;
- hospitals and clinics;
- policing and emergency services;
- courts;
- environmental protection;
- communications infrastructure.

These goods form the foundation upon which households, communities and economies operate.

Service Delivery Is Not an Abstract Concept

A failed water system means a family cannot cook, wash or maintain basic hygiene.

A failed electricity system means businesses cannot operate, students cannot study and hospitals face greater risks.

A collapsed road network raises transport costs and isolates communities.

Poor wastewater management threatens public health and the environment.

Service delivery must therefore be measured through the lived experiences of people—not only through budgets, plans and reports.

A department may produce an impressive annual report.

A municipality may balance its books.

But if communities remain without water, functioning roads or safe sanitation, the public service has not achieved its true purpose.

The Case Study

Imagine two municipalities.

Municipality A receives a favourable financial audit.

Its reports are filed on time.

Its accounting records appear orderly.

But many residents experience:

- frequent water interruptions;
- broken roads;
- sewage overflows;
- unreliable refuse removal.

Municipality B has weaker administrative reporting but delivers more reliable daily services.

Which municipality is performing better?

The answer is not necessarily simple.

Financial controls matter.

Compliance matters.

But the ultimate purpose of public administration is not merely to produce clean paperwork.

It is to improve people's lives.

Why This Matters

Public services shape:

- public health;
- education;
- employment;
- investment;

- social stability;
- dignity;
- national competitiveness.

A country cannot build a productive economy on failing infrastructure.

Businesses cannot grow without dependable electricity, transport, water and communications.

People cannot exercise many constitutional rights meaningfully if the basic systems supporting everyday life do not function.

OUBAS Analysis

OUBAS believes that the State must be judged by outcomes experienced by the people.

Financial compliance is important.

Administrative order is important.

Lawful governance is important.

But none of these should become substitutes for delivery.

The real test is whether people receive:

- clean water;
- reliable power;
- safe roads;
- effective schools;
- accessible healthcare;
- protection from crime;
- functioning public institutions.

Public officials should not be rewarded merely for completing processes.

They should be held accountable for results.

OUBAS therefore supports a people-centred approach to public performance.

The central question should always be:

Did the institution materially improve the lives of the people it exists to serve?

OUBAS Principle

The legitimacy of public power is demonstrated through service to the people.

A second principle follows:

Public institutions must be measured by both financial integrity and human impact.

One without the other is incomplete.

OUBAS Reform Proposal

OUBAS proposes that public-sector performance systems should measure:

- reliability of services;
- number of people actually served;
- service interruptions;
- response times;
- infrastructure condition;
- public satisfaction;
- health, safety and economic outcomes;
- whether service quality improves year after year.

Audit and performance reports should be understandable to ordinary citizens.

Every community should be able to see:

- what was promised;
- what was delivered;
- what failed;
- who was responsible;
- what will be corrected;
- by when.

Continuous improvement should be built into every public institution.

Key Lessons

After reading this episode, you should understand that:

- government exists to serve the public;
 - public goods support society and the economy;
 - service delivery must be measured through real outcomes;
 - financial compliance alone does not prove institutional success;
 - public institutions should continuously improve the lives of the people they serve.
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OUBAS Knowledge Check

1. What is the central purpose of public institutions?

- ☐ To serve the people.
 - ☐ To produce reports only.
 - ☐ To protect officials.
 - ☐ To increase bureaucracy.
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2. Which of the following is a public good or essential public service?

- ☐ Water.
 - ☐ Roads.
 - ☐ Healthcare.
 - ☐ All of the above.
-

3. Is a clean financial audit alone enough to prove excellent service delivery?

- ☐ Yes.
 - ☐ No.
-

4. What should public-sector performance include?

- ☐ Financial integrity.
- ☐ Human impact.

- ☐ Service reliability.
 - ☐ All of the above.
-

5. According to OUBAS, what is the proper measure of public institutions?

- ☐ Whether they materially improve people's lives.
 - ☐ The length of their reports.
 - ☐ The number of meetings held.
 - ☐ The size of their administration.
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OUBAS Public Sentiment Survey

1. Which public service most directly affects your daily life?

- ☐ Electricity
- ☐ Water and sanitation
- ☐ Roads and transport
- ☐ Healthcare
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Safety and policing
- ☐ Other

2. Do you believe public institutions are currently measured by the correct performance indicators?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. Should citizen experience form part of every public-sector performance assessment?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. Which should carry greater weight when evaluating a municipality?

- ☐ Financial compliance
- ☐ Quality of service delivery
- ☐ Both equally
- ☐ Unsure

5. What is the single public service that most urgently requires improvement in your community?

OUBAS Innovation Challenge

You have been appointed to redesign how government performance is measured.

Create one indicator that would reveal whether a public institution has genuinely improved people's lives.

It might measure:

- hours of reliable electricity;
- days without water interruptions;
- road condition;
- wastewater failures;
- clinic waiting times;
- school outcomes;
- police response times.

Share your proposal with OUBAS.

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

Share Your Experience

Which public service works well in your community?

Which one fails most often?

How do these successes or failures affect your family, work or business?

Your lived experience contributes to the **OUBAS People's Index on Public Service Delivery**.

Continue Your Learning

 Visit the **OUBAS Bookstore** for publications on governance, public administration, infrastructure, accountability, service delivery and institutional reform.

Join AAP

The delivery of public goods requires professionals from many disciplines.

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

- engineers;
- planners;
- doctors;
- teachers;
- economists;
- accountants;
- lawyers;
- scientists;
- public administrators;
- entrepreneurs.

Together, professionals can develop practical solutions for stronger public institutions and better services.

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Follow OUBAS

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

Every response contributes to the **OUBAS People's Index**, helping measure service delivery, institutional confidence and citizens' lived experiences.

Next Episode

Episode 20

Who Owns Public Resources?

Public land.

Minerals.

Water.

Taxes.

State-owned enterprises.

Public infrastructure.

Do these resources belong to government officials—or to the people?

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.