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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue. Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

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REFORMING THE PUBLIC SERVICE IN AFRICA: STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Public service reform in Africa has been a central focus of governance and development agendas, aimed at improving efficiency, accountability, and service delivery. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of public service reform in Africa, examining its conceptual foundations, historical trends, theoretical frameworks, strategies, challenges, and future prospects. It explores key concepts such as reform, public service, New Public Management (NPM), and good governance, highlighting their relevance in the African context. The study traces the trajectory of reforms across African countries, emphasizing initiatives such as civil service restructuring, decentralization, performance management, anti-corruption measures, public financial management reforms, digital governance, public-private partnerships, and participatory governance, with notable examples from Rwanda, Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, and Botswana. The theoretical analysis draws on institutional theory, governance theory, and public choice theory to explain variations in reform outcomes. Critical challenges are examined to contextualize the successes and failures of reform efforts. Looking ahead, the study identifies emerging trends such as digital transformation, citizen-centric governance, capacity building, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as critical factors shaping the future of public service reform in Africa. The study concludes that sustainable reform requires integrated, adaptive, and locally-owned approaches that combine political commitment, institutional strengthening, innovation, and active citizen participation.

Keywords: *Public Service Reform, New Public Management, Good Governance, Civil Service Restructuring, Digital Governance*

INTRODUCTION

Public service reform in Africa has become a central priority in efforts to achieve effective governance, sustainable development, and improved service delivery. Governments across the continent face increasing pressure to meet citizens' expectations for transparency, accountability, and efficiency, while addressing persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality (World Bank, 2020; United Nations, 2018). In this context, reform is not merely a technical adjustment but a transformative process that reshapes state–society relations and determines the capacity of governments to deliver public value.

Over the past few decades, African countries have implemented a wide range of public service reform initiatives aimed at modernizing administrative systems, strengthening institutional capacity, and promoting good governance. These reforms have been driven by both internal demands and external influences, including globalization, technological change, and the role of international development partners (Olowu, 2003; Polidano, 1999). Despite these efforts, outcomes have been uneven across countries, reflecting variations in political will, institutional capacity, and resource availability (African Development Bank, 2019). While existing literature has extensively documented reform initiatives and their intended objectives, it often falls short in providing a comprehensive and integrated analysis that links reform strategies, persistent challenges, and future trajectories within a single analytical framework. This gap limits a holistic understanding of why reforms

succeed in some contexts and fail in others.

This article addresses this gap by offering a systematic and integrated analysis of public service reform in Africa, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: the key reform strategies adopted, the structural and institutional challenges that constrain their effectiveness, and the emerging opportunities that can shape future reforms. By synthesizing existing literature and contextual evidence, the article contributes to the scholarship by providing a more coherent and forward-looking perspective on public service transformation in Africa.

The central argument of this article is that while African countries have adopted a range of reform strategies—such as decentralization, digital transformation, performance management, and anti-corruption measures—their effectiveness remains constrained by structural, institutional, and political factors; therefore, sustainable public service reform requires context-specific approaches, strong political will, and the integration of innovation and citizen engagement. This argument underscores the need to move beyond one-size-fits-all models toward more adaptive and locally grounded reform frameworks.

Historically, public service reform in Africa has been shaped by both colonial legacies and post-independence development priorities. Public administration systems inherited from colonial regimes were primarily designed for control and resource extraction rather than service delivery (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2010). Following independence in the 1950s and 1960s, African governments sought to

restructure these systems to support national development, although reforms often retained institutional characteristics from the colonial era (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004). Early reform efforts focused on building administrative capacity and aligning public institutions with development goals.

A major turning point in reform efforts occurred with the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s, which were widely adopted across countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, and Tunisia. These reforms emphasized professionalization, performance-oriented management, and improved service delivery (Osaghae, 1995). However, despite significant investment, SAPs yielded limited success in transforming public service systems, and many countries struggled to achieve their development objectives (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004). The persistence of challenges such as weak infrastructure, corruption, inefficient state enterprises, and rising unemployment further constrained reform outcomes (NEEDS, 2004; Omoyefa, 2008).

Since the 1990s, public service reform has continued to evolve, incorporating new approaches such as decentralization, performance management, and governance reforms. Nevertheless, the deterioration of public administration in some contexts has occurred alongside broader economic challenges, highlighting the interconnected nature of governance and development (Lawanson & Babatunde, 2013). These dynamics reinforce the importance of understanding both the opportunities

and constraints shaping reform processes in Africa.

The article is structured as follows: the first section examines the major strategies of public service reform in Africa, including decentralization, digital governance, performance management, and anti-corruption initiatives (Hope, 2001; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2010). The second section analyses the key challenges that continue to hinder reform efforts, such as bureaucratic resistance, limited capacity, political interference, and inadequate funding (Grindle, 2021; Andrews, 2013). The third section explores emerging trends and future directions, with particular emphasis on innovation, leadership, and citizen engagement in building responsive and resilient public institutions. The final section offers conclusions and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening public service reform and promoting sustainable development outcomes in Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of reform continues to occupy a central place in public administration and governance discourse, particularly in developing regions such as Africa, where institutional transformation is widely regarded as essential for socio-economic development. Reform can be understood as a deliberate and systematic effort to change institutional structures, processes, and behaviors to improve performance and achieve desired outcomes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). It is not merely technical but involves complex political and administrative dynamics, including shifts in power, values, and organizational culture. In many African

countries, reform initiatives are shaped by domestic imperatives such as improving service delivery, as well as external pressures including globalization and donor-driven conditionalities (OECD, 2023). These reforms aim to address inefficiencies, corruption, and capacity constraints within public institutions. In the African context, reform must also be viewed against historical and structural factors. Many states inherited administrative systems from colonial regimes designed for control and resource extraction rather than service delivery (Hyden, 2021). Post-independence governments therefore faced the challenge of transforming these systems into development-oriented institutions. This transformation has proven difficult due to entrenched bureaucratic practices, weak institutional capacity, and political instability in some countries. Consequently, reform efforts have often been uneven and sometimes superficial, failing to achieve intended outcomes (PSC, 2022).

Public service refers to the machinery of government responsible for implementing public policies and delivering essential services. It includes ministries, departments, agencies, and local governments, as well as the civil servants who operate within them. Public service is fundamental to state functioning, translating political decisions into outcomes that affect citizens' daily lives (OECD, 2023). In Africa, effective public service systems are crucial for addressing development challenges such as poverty, inequality, and limited access to basic services. Despite its importance, public service in many African countries continues to face challenges of inefficiency, weak

accountability, and limited responsiveness. These issues are often linked to structural weaknesses, including inadequate human resource capacity, poor remuneration, and ineffective performance management systems (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, patronage, nepotism, and corruption have undermined institutional effectiveness and eroded public trust (African Development Bank, 2022). This has reinforced the need for reforms aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

Public service reform encompasses strategies designed to improve the performance and functioning of public sector institutions. In Africa, such reforms have remained central to governance and development agendas since the 1980s, with continued support from organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Early reforms were influenced by structural adjustment programs emphasizing downsizing, reduced public expenditure, and privatization, while more recent reforms focus on institutional strengthening and service delivery improvement (World Bank, 2020). Over time, reform efforts have expanded to include broader objectives such as strengthening accountability, improving public sector management, and enhancing citizen participation. Key reform areas include civil service restructuring, decentralization, performance management, and anti-corruption measures (PSC, 2022). Decentralization has been promoted as a means of improving service delivery by bringing government closer to citizens. However, its effectiveness remains mixed due to limited local

capacity and weak fiscal decentralization (OECD, 2023). Performance management systems have also been introduced to enhance efficiency and accountability through the use of indicators, targets, and evaluation mechanisms. While these systems offer potential benefits, their success depends on reliable data, institutional capacity, and political support. In many cases, implementation has been constrained by weak administrative structures and limited technical expertise (Andrews, 2023).

The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm continues to influence public service reform globally, including in Africa. NPM promotes the application of private sector management practices in the public sector, emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness, and customer-oriented service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). Its principles include decentralization, performance measurement, competition, and market-based mechanisms such as outsourcing and privatization. In Africa, NPM-inspired reforms have been widely adopted to modernize public administration. Examples include performance contracts for senior officials, semi-autonomous agencies, and outsourcing of certain functions. While these reforms have sometimes improved efficiency and service delivery, their applicability remains debated. Critics argue that NPM assumes well-functioning markets and strong regulatory frameworks, conditions often absent in African contexts (Andrews, 2023). Furthermore, its emphasis on efficiency may conflict with broader public sector goals such as equity and access, prompting calls for more context-specific reform approaches.

Closely linked to public service reform is the concept of good governance, which remains central to development discourse. Good governance refers to the exercise of public authority in a manner that is transparent, accountable, participatory, and responsive (United Nations, 2022). It includes principles such as rule of law, accountability, effectiveness, and equity. In Africa, good governance is widely regarded as essential for sustainable development and addressing challenges such as corruption and poor service delivery. International organizations emphasize governance reforms as a foundation for economic growth and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2020). Public service reform is therefore seen as a key mechanism for advancing good governance by strengthening institutions and improving accountability (OECD, 2023). However, achieving good governance remains complex. While some countries have made progress, others continue to face challenges such as weak institutions, political interference, and limited resources. The idea of pursuing practical, context-specific governance improvements rather than ideal standards remains relevant in contemporary reform debates (Grindle, 2021).

Recent literature highlights the importance of innovation, digital transformation, and citizen engagement in shaping public service reform in Africa. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide opportunities to improve service delivery, transparency, and participation. E-government initiatives have been implemented in several countries to streamline administrative processes and improve access to

services. However, their success depends on infrastructure, digital literacy, and political commitment (OECD, 2023). Leadership and political will are also critical for successful reform. Without strong commitment from political leaders, reform initiatives are unlikely to achieve intended outcomes, particularly in contexts where political dynamics strongly influence governance processes (PSC, 2022). Overall, public sector reform in Africa remains complex and multidimensional. While progress has been made, persistent challenges highlight the need for continued research and policy innovation. Future reforms must be context-specific, institutionally supported, and aligned with broader development goals to ensure sustainable improvements in governance and service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021).

TRENDS AND TRAJECTORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM IN AFRICA

The trajectory of public service reform in Africa reflects a complex and evolving process shaped by historical legacies, shifting global paradigms, and local governance realities. Over the past four decades, reform efforts across the continent have moved through distinct phases, each influenced by changing understandings of public administration, efficiency, accountability, and governance (Lamidi, Agboola & Taleat, 2016). These transitions reveal both continuity and transformation in how African states have attempted to restructure public institutions to improve performance and service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). At its core,

public service reform involves deliberate efforts to transform institutional arrangements, administrative processes, and governance systems in order to enhance state effectiveness. In the African context, such reforms have largely been driven by the need to address structural inefficiencies, fiscal crises, and governance challenges that became particularly evident in the post-independence period (Olowu, 2003). Early reform initiatives were primarily reactive, focusing on stabilising fragile economies and restoring basic administrative functionality (World Bank, 2020). Over time, however, reform efforts have become more proactive and strategic, incorporating broader goals such as transparency, citizen engagement, and sustainable development (United Nations, 2018).

Understanding the trajectory of reform also requires an examination of the nature of public service institutions in Africa. Many of these institutions were inherited from colonial administrations that prioritised control and extraction rather than development and service delivery (Hyden, 2021). This legacy produced centralised, hierarchical, and rigid bureaucracies that were ill-suited to the developmental needs of newly independent states. As a result, reform efforts have consistently sought to transform these institutions into more responsive, efficient, and citizen-oriented systems capable of meeting contemporary governance demands (Rosenbloom, Kravchuk & Clerkin, 2015).

The evolution of public service reform in Africa can be broadly categorised into three major phases. The first phase, spanning the 1980s to the early 1990s,

was dominated by structural adjustment programmes and macroeconomic stabilisation efforts. During this period, reforms focused on reducing public sector expenditure, downsizing civil services, and restoring fiscal discipline (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank, 2019). These first-generation reforms emphasised quantitative changes, such as reducing the size of the public workforce, rather than improving the quality and effectiveness of public institutions (Olowu, 2003). The second phase, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, marked a shift towards improving public sector management and administrative efficiency. Governments introduced performance management systems, restructured civil services, and implemented measures aimed at strengthening accountability (Hope, 2001; Polidano, 1999). This phase reflected a growing recognition that fiscal stabilisation alone was insufficient to achieve sustainable development and that institutional capacity and management practices needed to be enhanced (Andrews, 2013).

The third phase, from the early 2000s to the present, has focused on service delivery, governance, and citizen-centred approaches. Governments have increasingly prioritised improving access to public services, enhancing transparency, and promoting participatory governance (United Nations, 2018). This phase aligns closely with broader development goals, including poverty reduction and sustainable development, and places greater emphasis on outcomes rather than inputs (Grindle, 2021). A defining feature of reform during these phases has been the adoption of New Public

Management (NPM) principles. NPM introduced a paradigm shift by promoting the application of private sector management practices within the public sector, with a focus on efficiency, performance measurement, and customer-oriented service delivery (Hood, 1991).

In Africa, NPM-inspired reforms have included the introduction of performance contracts, outsourcing of public services, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and the creation of semi-autonomous agencies (Polidano, 1999; World Bank, 2020). These measures aimed to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance accountability. In certain sectors, such as telecommunications and revenue collection, these reforms have yielded positive results (African Development Bank, 2019). However, the application of NPM in African contexts has also revealed significant limitations. The model often assumes the existence of competitive markets and strong regulatory institutions, conditions that are not always present (Andrews, 2013). Weak institutional capacity, political interference, and limited technical expertise have frequently undermined reform outcomes (Olowu, 2003). Moreover, the emphasis on efficiency and cost-cutting has sometimes conflicted with broader public sector objectives such as equity, inclusiveness, and universal access to services (Grindle, 2021).

In response to these limitations, recent reform efforts have increasingly adopted post-NPM approaches that emphasise collaboration, network governance, and citizen engagement. These approaches seek to balance efficiency with inclusivity and

responsiveness, recognising that public service delivery requires context-specific solutions (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). Hybrid governance models have emerged, combining elements of traditional public administration, NPM, and participatory governance (Andrews, 2013). Initiatives such as public-private partnerships, community-driven development programmes, and multi-stakeholder collaborations have become more prominent (United Nations, 2018). These approaches also emphasise adaptability and continuous learning, enabling governments to respond more effectively to diverse socio-economic conditions (African Development Bank, 2019).

The concept of good governance has become central to public service reform in Africa. It encompasses principles such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation, and effectiveness, and is widely regarded as a key determinant of development outcomes (United Nations, 2018). Efforts to promote good governance have included anti-corruption initiatives, decentralisation, judicial reforms, and the establishment of oversight institutions (African Development Bank, 2019). Public service reform is often seen as a vehicle for advancing these principles by strengthening institutions and improving accountability (Grindle, 2021). Despite these efforts, challenges such as corruption, weak law enforcement, and political interference continue to undermine governance in many countries (Olowu, 2003).

The trajectory of reform in Africa has been shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, fiscal

pressures, declining public sector performance, and increasing citizen demands for better services have driven reform efforts (World Bank, 2020). Externally, international financial institutions and development partners have played a significant role by promoting reform agendas and providing financial and technical support (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Political leadership and commitment remain critical to the success of reform initiatives, as strong leadership is required to implement changes and overcome resistance (Andrews, 2013). Institutional capacity also significantly influences reform outcomes (African Development Bank, 2019).

Digital transformation has emerged as an important trend in recent years. The adoption of information and communication technologies has enabled governments to improve service delivery, enhance transparency, and promote citizen engagement (United Nations, 2018). However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, digital inequality, and low levels of digital literacy continue to constrain these initiatives (African Development Bank, 2019). Looking ahead, the future of public service reform in Africa is likely to involve more integrated, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches. This includes combining elements of different reform models to create hybrid systems suited to local realities (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). There is also an increasing emphasis on aligning reform efforts with global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2018). Overall, the trajectory of public service reform in Africa reflects both progress and

persistent challenges, with success dependent on the ability of governments to build strong institutions, promote accountability, and adapt to changing environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR REFORMING PUBLIC SERVICE IN AFRICA

Reforming public service in Africa requires a robust and multidimensional theoretical foundation that integrates insights from public administration, political science, and development studies. The complexity of governance systems across the continent—shaped by colonial legacies, socio-economic challenges, and evolving global influences—demands an analytical framework that goes beyond single-theory explanations. This framework draws on key concepts such as reform, public service, public service reform, New Public Management (NPM), and good governance, while incorporating complementary theories that explain institutional change, state capacity, and policy implementation. At its core, reform in public administration is understood as a deliberate and structured process of institutional transformation aimed at improving efficiency, accountability, and service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). However, reform is neither linear nor purely technical; it is embedded in political and socio-economic contexts. In Africa, reform initiatives are shaped by both endogenous factors, such as political leadership and citizen demands, and exogenous influences, including globalization and donor-driven agendas (Olowu, 2003). This duality underscores the importance of a framework that captures both internal dynamics and external pressures.

The traditional model of public service in Africa is rooted in Weberian bureaucracy, which emphasises hierarchy, rule-based administration, meritocracy, and impersonality (Rosenbloom, Kravchuk, & Clerkin, 2015). While this model provides a foundational understanding of administrative organisation and promotes efficiency and predictability, its application in Africa has been uneven. Colonial administrations implemented bureaucratic systems designed primarily for control rather than service delivery (Hyden, 2021). Post-independence governments inherited these systems, which were often centralised, rigid, and unresponsive to citizens' needs. Consequently, reform efforts have sought to transform these bureaucracies into more flexible, responsive, and citizen-oriented institutions. The limitations of the Weberian model highlight the need to incorporate alternative perspectives that consider informal institutions, political dynamics, and cultural contexts.

Institutional theory offers a critical lens for understanding these dynamics by emphasising the role of formal and informal rules, norms, and practices in shaping organisational behaviour and policy outcomes (North, 1990). It highlights the concept of path dependency, which suggests that historical institutional arrangements constrain current reform options (Pierson, 2000). In Africa, colonial legacies and post-independence governance structures have entrenched patterns such as centralised decision-making and patronage systems, which continue to affect reform outcomes. Institutional theory also underscores the importance of legitimacy, arguing that

reforms are more likely to succeed when they align with local norms and values and are perceived as legitimate by stakeholders (Andrews, 2013). This is particularly relevant in contexts where externally imposed reforms have faced resistance due to limited local ownership.

New Public Management represents a major paradigm in public service reform, advocating the application of private sector practices in the public sector, with an emphasis on efficiency, performance measurement, decentralisation, and customer orientation (Hood, 1991). In Africa, NPM has significantly influenced reform efforts since the 1980s, leading to initiatives such as privatisation, outsourcing, performance contracts, and the creation of semi-autonomous agencies (Polidano, 1999). While these reforms have aimed to improve efficiency and accountability, their applicability has been widely debated. Critics argue that NPM assumes the existence of competitive markets and strong regulatory frameworks, which are often lacking in African contexts (Andrews, 2013). Furthermore, its emphasis on efficiency may conflict with broader public sector goals such as equity and universal access to services (Grindle, 2021). As a result, NPM is best understood as one component within a broader, context-sensitive reform framework.

Good governance theory has become central to public service reform in Africa, emphasising principles such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation, and effectiveness (United Nations, 2018). It is widely regarded as both a means and an end of reform, contributing to improved institutional performance and

sustainable development. Public service reform is often framed as a mechanism for achieving good governance through institutional strengthening and enhanced accountability (World Bank, 2020). However, the concept has been critiqued for its universalistic assumptions, with scholars advocating for more pragmatic approaches that prioritise “good enough governance” based on context-specific realities (Grindle, 2021).

In response to the limitations of NPM, New Public Governance has emerged as an alternative framework emphasising collaboration, networks, and partnerships among multiple stakeholders, including government, private sector, and civil society (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). This approach recognises that public service delivery is inherently complex and requires coordination across diverse actors. In Africa, where non-state actors play an increasingly important role, this perspective is particularly relevant. Network theory further highlights the importance of trust, relationships, and information sharing in achieving effective governance. These ideas align with the growing emphasis on participatory governance, where citizens are actively involved in decision-making processes to enhance accountability and responsiveness (United Nations, 2018).

Political economy theory provides additional insights by examining how political interests, economic incentives, and institutional structures shape reform processes (Hyden, 2021). It highlights the role of power, elite interests, and patronage in influencing policy outcomes and often constraining reform efforts. For instance, attempts to

improve accountability or reduce corruption may be resisted by actors who benefit from existing arrangements (Olowu, 2003). Governance theory complements this analysis by focusing on the mechanisms through which public authority is exercised and the importance of coordination, transparency, and accountability in achieving effective governance (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010).

State capacity and developmental state theory further enrich the framework by emphasising the importance of institutional strength in driving development. State capacity refers to the ability of governments to design and implement policies effectively and deliver services efficiently (World Bank, 2020). In Africa, limited capacity has been a major constraint on reform. The developmental state model underscores the importance of a capable and proactive state in promoting economic growth and development, highlighting the need for investment in human capital, administrative systems, and technical expertise (Andrews, 2013).

Digital governance and innovation theory represents emerging dimensions of public service reform. The use of information and communication technologies can enhance efficiency, transparency, and citizen engagement, aligning with broader theories of organisational change and innovation (United Nations, 2018). In Africa, digital transformation offers opportunities to improve service delivery through e-government and data-driven decision-making, although challenges such as infrastructure deficits and digital divides remain significant.

Overall, the theoretical framework for public service reform in Africa is inherently multidimensional, integrating diverse perspectives to address the complexity of institutional transformation. No single theory is sufficient; rather, a hybrid and context-specific approach is required, combining elements of Weberian bureaucracy, institutional theory, NPM, good governance, and network-based approaches. Such a framework must account for historical legacies, political dynamics, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions. Ultimately, the success of public service reform depends on the ability of governments to adapt these theoretical insights to local realities, strengthen institutions, and actively engage citizens in governance processes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the dynamics of public service reform in Africa, with particular emphasis on understanding the strategies, challenges, and future trajectories of reform initiatives. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore complex institutional, political, and administrative processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on interpretation and contextual analysis, the research provides an in-depth understanding of how reform processes unfold across different African settings.

The study is based on a descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive component aims to provide a detailed account of public service reform trends, including the evolution

of reform paradigms such as traditional public administration, New Public Management (NPM), and good governance (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). The exploratory dimension allows for the identification of emerging patterns, challenges, and innovations in public service reform across the continent (Babbie, 2016). This dual approach enables the study to both document existing knowledge and generate new insights into reform processes. The research relies primarily on secondary data collected through a comprehensive review of existing literature. Sources include academic journal articles, books, policy reports, and publications from international organizations such as the World Bank, African Development Bank, and United Nations (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank, 2019; United Nations, 2018). These sources provide a broad and credible evidence base for analyzing public service reform in Africa.

The literature review focuses on key themes, including the concept of reform, the structure and function of public service, the evolution of public service reform strategies, and the application of theoretical frameworks such as New Public Management and good governance (Hood, 1991; Grindle, 2021). Special attention is given to studies that examine reform experiences in African countries, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in regional realities (Olowu, 2003). In addition to academic literature, the study incorporates policy documents and government reports to capture practical experiences and reform outcomes. These documents offer valuable insights into the implementation of reform initiatives,

including successes, challenges, and lessons learned (Hope, 2001).

A purposive sampling technique is used to select relevant literature and documents for analysis. This approach involves identifying sources that are directly related to public service reform in Africa and that provide substantive insights into the research topic (Creswell, 2014). The selection criteria include relevance to the study objectives, credibility of the source, and recency of publication. Priority is given to peer-reviewed articles, authoritative books, and reports from reputable institutions (Babbie, 2016).

The study also ensures a balanced representation of perspectives by including both theoretical and empirical works. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of public service reform, encompassing both conceptual frameworks and practical applications (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). The data collected from secondary sources were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This method involves identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns within the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes include reform strategies, institutional challenges, governance issues, and emerging trends such as digital transformation and citizen engagement (United Nations, 2018).

The analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks discussed in the study, including institutional theory, New Public Management, and good governance (Andrews, 2013). By applying these frameworks, the study is able to interpret the findings in a structured and coherent manner, linking empirical observations to broader

theoretical concepts. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study adopts several strategies. First, it relies on multiple sources of data to triangulate information and reduce bias (Creswell, 2014). By comparing findings from different authors and institutions, the study enhances the credibility of its conclusions.

Second, the use of well-established theoretical frameworks provides a solid foundation for analysis, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in existing scholarship (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). Third, the selection of reputable and peer-reviewed sources enhances the reliability of the data (Babbie, 2016). As the study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations are still observed by ensuring proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources. The study avoids plagiarism by accurately referencing all materials used and adheres to academic standards of integrity (Creswell, 2014).

Despite its strengths, the study has some limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the analysis is dependent on the availability and quality of existing literature (Babbie, 2016). In some cases, there may be limited data on specific countries or recent reform initiatives. Additionally, the diversity of African contexts makes it challenging to generalize findings across the entire continent (Olowu, 2003). Another limitation is the potential bias in some sources, particularly policy documents that may present reform initiatives in a favorable light. To mitigate this, the study includes a range of perspectives,

including critical analyses from academic literature (Andrews, 2013).

The methodology adopted in this study provides a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing public service reform in Africa. By combining qualitative research design, comprehensive literature review, and thematic analysis, the study offers a nuanced understanding of reform processes. While acknowledging its limitations, the methodology ensures that the findings are credible, relevant, and grounded in both theory and practice, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on public sector reform in Africa.

STRATEGIES OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM IN AFRICA

Public service reform in Africa has been pursued through a range of strategies aimed at improving efficiency, accountability, and service delivery, reflecting both global administrative trends and local governance realities. These strategies have evolved over time and have produced mixed outcomes across countries, largely due to differences in political commitment, institutional capacity, and socio-economic contexts. A critical examination of these approaches highlights both their contributions and limitations.

One of the earliest and most prominent strategies has been civil service restructuring and capacity building. This approach focuses on reorganising government institutions, redefining roles, and improving human resource management systems (World Bank, 2020). Many African countries implemented downsizing measures to reduce bloated public sectors and introduced merit-based recruitment

systems to improve efficiency (Olowu, 2003). For example, Ghana's reforms under its Economic Recovery Programme and Tanzania's Civil Service Reform Programme aimed to enhance administrative capacity and professionalise the public service (Hope, 2001). While these efforts improved fiscal discipline and administrative performance in some cases, they also produced unintended consequences. Downsizing often resulted in the loss of skilled personnel and weakened institutional memory, while merit-based systems were sometimes undermined by political interference and patronage (Andrews, 2013). Additionally, capacity-building initiatives have been constrained by limited resources and weak training institutions, reducing their long-term effectiveness (Grindle, 2021).

Decentralisation has also been widely adopted as a reform strategy, based on the premise that local governments are better positioned to respond to community needs (Olowu, 2003). Countries such as Uganda and Kenya have implemented significant decentralisation reforms, with Uganda empowering district governments and Kenya introducing a devolved system through its 2010 Constitution (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank, 2019). These reforms have, in some cases, improved access to services and encouraged local participation. However, their effectiveness has been uneven. In Uganda, limited fiscal autonomy and weak local capacity have constrained service delivery (Hope, 2001), while in Kenya, devolution has been accompanied by new forms of corruption and inefficiency at the county level (Grindle, 2021).

The adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles has been another central strategy. NPM promotes efficiency, performance measurement, and customer-oriented service delivery (Hood, 1991). African countries have implemented NPM-inspired reforms such as performance contracts, outsourcing, and privatisation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). Rwanda's use of performance contracts (Imihigo) and South Africa's performance management systems illustrate attempts to enhance accountability and efficiency (African Development Bank, 2019; Hope, 2001). Despite these successes, the application of NPM has faced challenges, particularly due to weak institutional capacity and lack of reliable data, which undermine performance measurement systems (Andrews, 2013). Furthermore, the emphasis on market-based mechanisms may conflict with broader social objectives such as equity and access to services (Grindle, 2021).

Anti-corruption and accountability mechanisms have also been central to reform efforts, given the pervasive impact of corruption on governance and development (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Measures such as the establishment of anti-corruption agencies, strengthening audit systems, and promoting transparency have been widely implemented (Olowu, 2003). Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and Botswana's Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime are notable examples. While these initiatives have contributed to increased awareness and some institutional strengthening, their effectiveness is often limited by political interference, weak

enforcement, and lack of independence (Andrews, 2013).

Public financial management reforms have aimed to improve budgeting processes, financial reporting, and expenditure control (World Bank, 2020). Countries such as South Africa and Uganda have introduced medium-term expenditure frameworks and integrated financial management systems, leading to improvements in fiscal discipline and transparency (African Development Bank, 2019). However, these reforms continue to face constraints related to weak institutional capacity and political interference (Andrews, 2013).

In recent years, digital governance has emerged as a transformative strategy. E-government initiatives use information and communication technologies to improve service delivery, enhance transparency, and reduce corruption (United Nations, 2018). Kenya's eCitizen platform and Rwanda's investments in digital infrastructure demonstrate the potential of technology to increase efficiency and accessibility (African Development Bank, 2019). Nonetheless, challenges such as digital inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and cybersecurity risks limit the full realisation of these benefits (United Nations, 2018).

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have also gained prominence as a means of leveraging private sector expertise and resources. These partnerships have been used in infrastructure development, such as in South Africa and Nigeria (World Bank, 2020). While PPPs can enhance efficiency and investment, they also raise concerns about accountability, contract

management, and equitable risk-sharing (Grindle, 2021).

Notably, citizen engagement and participatory governance have become increasingly important in reform strategies. These approaches seek to involve citizens in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing accountability and responsiveness (United Nations, 2018). Initiatives such as participatory budgeting in South Africa and community-driven development in Ethiopia have empowered local communities (African Development Bank, 2019). However, their success depends heavily on political will, institutional capacity, and genuine civic participation (Andrews, 2013).

Overall, public service reform strategies in Africa reflect a diverse and evolving set of approaches aimed at addressing complex governance challenges. While these strategies have achieved notable successes in some contexts, their outcomes remain uneven. The effectiveness of reform depends largely on context-specific factors, including political commitment, institutional strength, and socio-economic conditions. Sustainable reform therefore requires integrated, adaptive, and locally grounded approaches that align with the realities of African governance systems.

CHALLENGES OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMS IN AFRICA

Public service reform in Africa has remained a central priority in governance and development agendas, yet its implementation continues to face significant and multifaceted challenges. Despite the adoption of various reform strategies—including civil service restructuring, decentralization, New

Public Management (NPM), digital governance, and anti-corruption measures—the outcomes have often been uneven across countries. These challenges are rooted in political, institutional, socio-economic, and cultural dynamics, and they vary depending on national contexts and historical trajectories (Grindle, 2021; Olowu, 2003).

One of the most persistent obstacles is political interference and weak political will. Effective reform requires merit-based and autonomous institutions, yet political actors often prioritise patronage, loyalty, and short-term gains over long-term institutional development (Andrews, 2013). In countries such as Nigeria, efforts to reform the civil service and combat corruption have been undermined by political pressure and selective enforcement, particularly affecting institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, entrenched patronage systems have constrained merit-based appointments and weakened accountability mechanisms (Olowu, 2003). Without sustained political commitment, reform initiatives are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes.

Institutional weaknesses and capacity constraints further complicate reform efforts. Many African public institutions suffer from inadequate staffing, limited technical expertise, and outdated administrative systems, which reduce their ability to design and implement reforms effectively (Hope, 2001). For instance, decentralization reforms in Uganda were hindered by the limited capacity of local governments to manage resources and

deliver services efficiently (World Bank, 2020). In Tanzania, despite the objectives of the Civil Service Reform Programme, shortages of skilled personnel and weak monitoring systems limited its effectiveness (Olowu, 2003). These capacity gaps highlight the importance of sustained investment in human resources and institutional development.

Corruption and lack of accountability remain critical challenges, undermining both the process and outcomes of reform. Corruption diverts public resources, reduces efficiency, and erodes public trust in government institutions (Kaufmann et al., 2010). In Kenya, for example, decentralization has been accompanied by corruption at the county level, which has weakened service delivery (African Development Bank, 2019). Similarly, in Nigeria, financial mismanagement and bureaucratic corruption have hindered efforts to improve transparency and administrative performance (World Bank, 2020). Addressing corruption requires not only institutional reforms but also strong enforcement mechanisms and political will.

Resistance to change within the public sector also poses a significant barrier. Reform initiatives often threaten established interests, job security, and traditional practices, leading to both passive and active resistance from public officials (Grindle, 2021). In South Africa, the introduction of performance-based management systems encountered resistance from labour unions and entrenched bureaucratic norms (Hope, 2001). In Ghana, attempts to implement merit-based recruitment and restructuring faced opposition from groups benefiting from existing patronage

systems (Olowu, 2003). Such resistance slows reform implementation and reduces its effectiveness.

Limited financial and material resources further constrain reform efforts. Many African countries face budgetary pressures, debt burdens, and competing development priorities, which limit the resources available for reform initiatives (African Development Bank, 2019). Insufficient funding affects infrastructure development, staff training, and the implementation of modern administrative systems. For example, while Rwanda has made progress in digital governance, resource limitations have hindered the expansion of these initiatives to rural areas (United Nations, 2018). Similarly, reforms in Tanzania have been constrained by inadequate funding and logistical challenges (Hope, 2001).

Poor coordination and fragmentation among stakeholders also undermine reform efforts. Public service reform often involves multiple actors, including government agencies, donors, and development partners, and weak coordination can result in duplication, conflicting policies, and inefficiencies (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2021). In Ethiopia, decentralization and development programmes have suffered from overlapping mandates and weak institutional coordination (African Development Bank, 2019). In Nigeria, overlapping federal and state initiatives have complicated reform implementation and reduced effectiveness (World Bank, 2020).

Socio-economic and cultural constraints also play a significant role. Low literacy levels, entrenched social hierarchies, and limited civic awareness can restrict citizen participation and weaken accountability

mechanisms. In many contexts, informal norms such as patronage and personal networks may conflict with formal rules and merit-based systems (Olowu, 2003). For instance, in parts of Kenya and Uganda, traditional power structures limit participatory governance, while in Nigeria, socio-cultural expectations around loyalty and patronage often undermine transparency and meritocracy (Grindle, 2021; Andrews, 2013).

Technological and infrastructural limitations constrain the effectiveness of digital governance initiatives. While e-government platforms offer opportunities to enhance service delivery and transparency, limited internet access, unreliable electricity, and low digital literacy hinder their implementation (United Nations, 2018). In Kenya, urban populations have benefited from digital platforms such as eCitizen, but rural communities remain underserved due to connectivity challenges (African Development Bank, 2019). Similar issues affect digital reforms in Nigeria and Tanzania (World Bank, 2020).

Remarkably, public service reform in Africa faces a complex interplay of challenges, including political interference, institutional weaknesses, corruption, resistance to change, limited resources, poor coordination, socio-cultural barriers, and infrastructural constraints. These challenges underscore the need for context-specific, integrated, and adaptive reform strategies. Sustainable reform requires strong political commitment, enhanced institutional capacity, adequate funding, and meaningful citizen engagement to ensure that reforms translate into improved governance and service delivery outcomes.

THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

The future of public service reform in Africa presents both significant opportunities and enduring challenges. Over recent decades, governments across the continent have implemented a range of

reform strategies, including civil service restructuring, decentralization, New Public Management (NPM), digital governance, and anti-corruption initiatives. While these efforts have yielded improvements in efficiency and service delivery in some contexts, persistent structural, political, and socio-economic constraints continue to shape reform outcomes (Grindle, 2021; Andrews, 2013). A forward-looking perspective must therefore consider emerging trends alongside these enduring limitations.

A central driver of future reform is the increasing adoption of digital technologies and e-government initiatives. Countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa have demonstrated how digital platforms can enhance efficiency, improve transparency, and reduce corruption (United Nations, 2018; African Development Bank, 2019). The next phase of reform is likely to involve more advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and blockchain systems, to further improve decision-making and service delivery. However, the expansion of digital governance raises concerns about inequality, particularly for rural and marginalized populations that lack access to infrastructure, electricity, and digital skills (World Bank, 2020). Addressing the digital divide through inclusive policies, infrastructure development, and capacity building will be essential to ensure equitable access to public services.

Another critical dimension of future reform is strengthening institutional capacity and professionalism. Weak institutions and limited human capital have historically undermined reform efforts across Africa (Hope, 2001). As a result, future reforms will likely prioritise investments in training, human resource development, and merit-based recruitment systems. Rwanda's experience in rebuilding its administrative capacity illustrates how sustained investment in skills and professional standards can improve

governance outcomes (African Development Bank, 2019). However, replicating such success across the continent will require long-term political commitment, adequate funding, and effective strategies to retain skilled personnel within the public sector.

Enhancing governance and accountability mechanisms will also remain central to future reform efforts. Persistent corruption, weak oversight, and limited transparency continue to undermine public trust and institutional performance (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). Strengthening independent audit institutions, anti-corruption agencies, and citizen oversight frameworks will be critical in promoting ethical conduct and accountability. While countries such as Botswana and South Africa provide examples of relatively strong accountability systems, their effectiveness depends on political independence, robust legal frameworks, and cultural shifts toward transparency and integrity (Olowu, 2003).

Future reforms are also expected to move toward more adaptive and context-specific approaches. Experience has shown that standardized reform models, often imported from external contexts, are not always suitable for African governance systems (Andrews, 2013). Instead, there is growing recognition of the need for flexible strategies that reflect local political, social, and economic realities. For example, NPM principles have been adapted differently across countries such as Rwanda, Ghana, and South Africa, demonstrating the importance of tailoring reforms to context. A balanced approach that integrates efficiency, accountability, and social equity will be essential for achieving sustainable outcomes (Grindle, 2021).

Citizen-centric and participatory governance is another key trend shaping the future of reform. Increasing emphasis is being placed on mechanisms that involve citizens in decision-making processes, such as participatory budgeting, public

consultations, and community-driven development programmes (United Nations, 2018). These approaches can enhance accountability, improve service responsiveness, and strengthen public trust. However, their success depends on the availability of information, institutional support, and the capacity of citizens to engage meaningfully. Ensuring inclusivity, particularly for marginalized groups and rural communities, will be crucial (Olowu, 2003).

In addition, future public service reform will increasingly align with broader development priorities, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment expands the focus of reform beyond efficiency to include social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and equitable access to services (African Development Bank, 2019). Integrating climate-responsive policies and long-term development objectives into public administration will redefine the scope and purpose of reform.

Despite these promising directions, several risks remain. Political instability, weak governance structures, resource constraints, and entrenched corruption continue to pose significant barriers (Hope, 2001; Kaufmann et al., 2010). Rapid technological advancement may also exacerbate inequalities if not managed inclusively, while resistance from entrenched bureaucratic interests and patronage networks may slow implementation (Grindle, 2021). These challenges highlight the importance of combining technical innovation with strong political will, institutional capacity, and active citizen participation.

The future of public service reform in Africa will be shaped by digital transformation, institutional strengthening, improved governance, participatory approaches, and alignment with global development goals. However, sustainable progress will depend on addressing persistent structural and political

challenges. Context-specific, adaptive, and inclusive strategies will be essential for achieving long-term improvements in public service delivery. Ultimately, the success of reform efforts will rely not only on technical solutions but also on effective leadership, institutional integrity, and meaningful citizen engagement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Public service reform in Africa remains a critical agenda for improving governance, accountability, and development outcomes. Throughout this study, we have examined the conceptual foundations of reform, public service, New Public Management (NPM), and good governance, with a particular focus on the African context. Our analysis has highlighted the multifaceted nature of reform efforts, emphasizing the importance of both structural and process-oriented changes in the public sector. This paper has traced the trends and trajectory of public service reform in Africa, showing how countries have progressively embraced strategies such as civil service restructuring, decentralization, performance management, anti-corruption initiatives, public financial management reforms, digital governance, public-private partnerships, and participatory governance. Notable country examples—including Rwanda's performance contracts (Imihigo), Kenya's devolution, Ghana and Tanzania's civil service reforms, South Africa's performance management systems, and Botswana's anti-corruption framework—demonstrate that while reforms can yield positive outcomes, their success is highly context-dependent.

Our discussion of the theoretical frameworks underscored the relevance of institutional theory, governance theory, and public choice theory in understanding the dynamics of reform, including the role of political incentives, bureaucratic structures, and citizen engagement in shaping reform outcomes. These frameworks help explain why similar reform strategies yield differing results across countries, highlighting the need for

locally adapted approaches. The methodology emphasized a comprehensive review of secondary data, policy documents, and case studies to capture the complexity of public service reform in Africa, while recognizing the importance of contextual factors in evaluating reform outcomes. The paper has critically examined strategies for reform, demonstrating that while New Public Management principles, civil service restructuring, and digital governance can improve efficiency and service delivery, they often encounter challenges such as political interference, institutional weaknesses, corruption, resistance to change, limited resources, socio-cultural barriers, and technological constraints. These challenges, evident in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, underscore the complexity of reform in African contexts.

Looking to the future, the trajectory of public service reform in Africa will increasingly be shaped by digital transformation, capacity-building initiatives, enhanced accountability, participatory governance, and alignment with broader development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The success of these reforms will depend on political commitment, institutional integrity, adequate resources,

and citizen engagement. Adaptive, context-specific, and inclusive approaches will be essential to ensure that reforms are sustainable, equitable, and responsive to the needs of African citizens. In summary, public service reform in Africa is a dynamic and ongoing process. While progress has been made, achieving a truly efficient, accountable, and citizen-centered public service requires a combination of innovative strategies, strong political will, institutional capacity, and sustained citizen participation. Lessons from past experiences highlight the importance of integrating technical, managerial, and social dimensions into reform efforts, ensuring that the public service can effectively support governance, development, and the well-being of African populations.

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