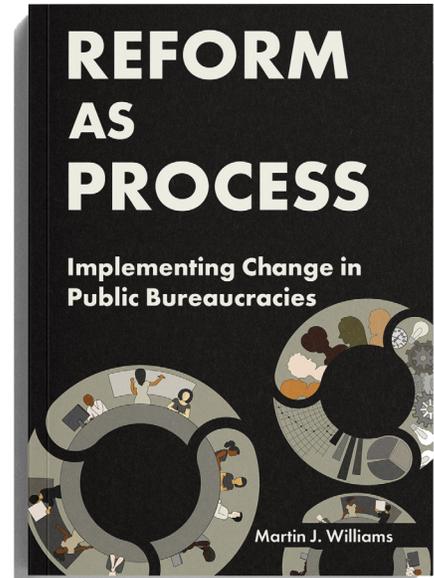# Reform as Process:
Implementing Change in Public Bureaucracies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building an effective civil service is crucial for public service delivery and good governance, but reforming bureaucratic institutions is notoriously difficult.

The new book *Reform as Process: Implementing Change in Public Bureaucracies* provides evidence on common patterns in the success and failure of reforms. It is based on the analysis of more than one hundred reforms initiated from the late 1980s to 2019 by six countries in Africa, and draws on documentary sources and existing research as well as insights from experienced policymakers.

The book finds that reforms tended to fail when they approached reform as a one-off project to install new formal rules and processes, often aimed at compelling better performance through stricter accountability mechanisms or incentives. This frequently led to reformers spending time and energy writing costly plans and policies that didn't get implemented in practice, created unintended problems, or fell away after a few years.

In contrast, reforms were more likely to succeed when they created new opportunities for ordinary civil servants to talk about performance and how to improve it, along with energy and high-level support to do so. Reforms most often led to meaningful change not by trying to force it through top-down interventions but by empowering and inspiring individuals and teams to find ways to improve it themselves.

Based on these research findings, Reform as Process recommends three practical rules of thumb for reformers:

1) Focus first on what improvements can be made within existing formal rules and processes, so that changing formal rules and processes is a last resort rather than a first step.
2) Approach change as a process of collective learning-by-doing, rather than as rolling out a pre-designed blueprint.
3) Decentralize the leadership of reform as much as possible.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Civil services around the world are constantly striving to improve their performance. But every public servant has experienced the disappointment and frustration of reforms that promised much yet failed to make a lasting impact. What can we learn from the track record of past reform efforts about the prospects for systemic reform to improve the inner workings of government?

The book Reform as Process: Implementing Change in Public Bureaucracies addresses this question by documenting and analyzing how six countries – Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Zambia – sought to reform their civil services over the past three decades, covering the period from the late 1980s through 2019. These countries have been global hotbeds of experimentation in public administration reform, and the types of problems they have sought to solve and the solutions they've attempted to adopt and implement will be familiar to policymakers everywhere. Reformers all over the world can learn much from their experience.

METHODOLOGY

Using a combination of official documents, academic studies, and interviews, the book identifies 131 past efforts to implement systemic government-wide reforms aimed at improving the performance of people and organizations. These included many common types of reforms, such as individual performance management, salary and career structures, and organizational performance reviews. However, the book does not cover other important categories of reforms such as financial management, anti-corruption, and decentralization initiatives.

For each of these reform efforts, the book seeks to understand its content (what new structures, processes, and practices the reform was trying to put in place), process (how reformers went about introducing the changes), implementation (to what extent the envisioned changes were actually put into place and carried out), outcomes (to what extent these changes actually influenced performance and day-to-day practices), and politics (the pressures, constraints, and opportunities arising from stakeholders within and outside the civil service).

KEY FINDINGS

While there were of course many differences across countries and across different reform initiatives within each country, several repeated patterns emerged in the design, implementation, and impact of reforms. These mechanisms of failure and mechanisms of

success reveal common patterns in ways which reforms often fell short – as well as ways in which they sometimes managed to create meaningful and sustained improvements. The book identifies two main mechanisms of failure that characterized many (though not all) reforms:

1. **Focusing on formal rules and policies, and neglecting implementation and un-formalizable practices and culture.** Many reforms focused the vast majority of their effort on trying to change what was written on paper about how the civil service worked – laws, salary structure, organization charts, annual performance management processes, and so on – to try to compel or incentivize civil servants to behave differently. But making changes to formal rules often took years, by which time key leaders had moved on and reform energy had dissipated, so the implementation and sustainability of these changes became almost an afterthought. When compliance was achieved, it was often perfunctory and focused on the letter rather than the spirit of the new policy.

2. **The projectization of reform**. Most reforms were conceived of as discrete projects: one-time interventions with their own acronym, budget line, implementing team, pre-determined outputs, and an envisioned end date three-to-five years in the future. But this undermined the ownership and impact of reforms, making ordinary civil servants feel like performance improvement efforts were an outside annoyance rather than part of their core job. It also meant that reforms had a built-in cliff-edge for funding, staffing, and leadership that hindered their sustainability.

The case of individual-level performance-linked incentives – annual appraisals or performance contracts that seek to link measured performance to some type of carrot or stick – exemplifies this. There were 34 efforts to introduce such systems across the six countries studied in the book. But none of these reforms succeeded in sustainably delivering differentiated rewards and punishments. Only two delivered differentiated financial rewards at all – both of which ceased doing so within a few years – but neither of these delivered sanctions for poor performance. In the majority of such reform efforts, systems quickly converged to an equilibrium where nearly every employee received the same score, and incentives (if they were given at all) were not differentiated according to performance. These systems repeatedly failed because focused solely on the parts of employees' work that could be formalized – at the expense of all the unpredictable, complex, and unmeasurable tasks that are required to respond to changing circumstances, exercise discretion effectively, and introduce innovative ideas and practices.

But there were also many reforms that did succeed in improving performance. When reforms did manage to durably change behaviors and culture, they did so through two main mechanisms of success:

1. **Creating opportunities to talk about performance and how to improve it**. These opportunities came from a mix of formal processes and informal spaces that led civil servants to have conversations about goals, roles, and performance that were not happening before. Providing these opportunities helped empower the many civil servants who already cared about performance and wanted to improve and gave them outlets through which to engage with their colleagues – they worked by enabling, not by forcing. These forums and processes could help make performance and results more salient within organizations, and they also served as opportunities for civil servants to learn about their roles and how they connected to those of their colleagues, to give and receive feedback, and to generate and share ideas for improvement.

2. **Creating energy for changing behaviors and performance**. This meant making civil servants believe that the reform effort would actually lead to something tangible and wasn't just talk that would soon dissipate. It helped reformers surmount the credibility barrier that faced reforms, in which no individual changed their behavior because they didn't expect their colleagues to change anything either. Energy came from leaders and was crucial for focusing attention on performance and building credibility and, thus, momentum for widespread changes.

For example, while annual appraisal and performance contracting systems were universally unsuccessful at delivering high-powered incentives, many civil servants reported that they benefited from these systems because they meant that they had useful conversations with the managers and subordinates about their performance, how their work connected to that of their colleagues, and how they could improve. The combination of opportunities and energy could collectively add up to meaningful performance improvement and create cultures where seeking out ways to improve began to be seen as part of everyone's core job, not as something they had to be forced to do.

LESSONS FOR UNDERTAKING REFORM

What do we learn from this about how to undertake future reforms that are more likely to be successful? How reforms combined creating opportunities and energy was different everywhere, so there is no copy-paste solution that is guaranteed to work or that can be easily imitated. But the common thread was that meaningful improvements came not from compliance with top-down blueprints, but from empowering and supporting managers and workers all over the civil service to make small but significant improvements to how they were carrying out their work.

The main takeaway from the research presented in Reform as Process is that reform should be approached not as a one-off change in formal rules, but as an effort to **catalyze an ongoing process of continuous improvement in actual work practices**. The book suggests three practical rules of thumb for how reform leaders can do this:

1.   **Focus first on what can be done within existing formal rules and processes, so that changing formal rules and processes is a last resort rather than a first step**. Prioritize improving the implementation of existing processes that are useful but under-utilized, and on getting people to undertake helpful informal practices that are possible within existing rules. Alternatively, if certain processes are being implemented too rigidly, find ways to relax or re-interpret their application. Working within existing formal structures minimizes the time delay and procedural obstacles to getting employees to change their behavior. Build up towards changing formal processes, rather than starting with it.

2.   **Approach change as a process of collective learning-by-doing, rather than as rolling out a pre-designed blueprint.** The priority should not be to make the perfect plan up front but rather to start changing actual practices – even small or apparently minor ones – as early as possible. This makes it possible to simultaneously and iteratively build up credibility around reform efforts while also defining their content in a participatory fashion. This allows work teams to take ownership of the changes, build better relationships with each other, and focus on what would be most useful in their specific contexts. Skipping the "design phase" also lowers the barriers to starting the change process, and treats reform and improvement as part of core operations rather than an add-on.

3.   **Decentralize the leadership of reform as much as possible**. The role of the leader is to catalyze dispersed improvement across the system rather than to drive it. This not only aids in broadening ownership and buy-in to changes, but also reduces the risk that leadership turnover will undo everything the reform has achieved. Decentralizing reform helps to create new tiers of future reform leaders who can sustain progress in future, and shifts the institutional culture from one of compliance to one of improvement and innovation. Leaders have a range of tools for achieving this, including creating opportunities for discussing performance and how to improve it, creating energy and momentum for change, providing information to teams, helping solve problems that are beyond each team's remit, and empowering lower- and mid-ranking workers and managers to initiate improvement efforts.

These rules of thumb are meant not as rigid rules to be followed or guarantees of success, but rather as pragmatic principles to help reformers think creatively and avoid the most common pitfalls of past reforms. Their application will be different in every context, and there are certainly some situations where they might not apply.

Reform as Process is ultimately optimistic about the potential for improving public bureaucracies. It shows that past reforms have often had positive impacts (even if these fell short of their lofty goals), and identifies lessons from this that can help future reformer leaders. Most importantly, it demonstrates that meaningful change comes not from perfect plans or compliance with a visionary leader's top-down blueprint, but by empowering and supporting people all across the civil service to find and implement better ways of working in their own teams and organizations. Successful reform is not something that is done to civil servants, but something that has to be done by them.

Want to learn more?

Reform as Process: Implementing Change in Public Bureaucracies is available for purchase or free download using the QR codes and links below.

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