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Enhancing Public Accountability committees (PACs): lessons from across Africa

EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Accountability Committees (PACs) play a crucial role in Africa's governance but face significant challenges such as limited independence and insufficient resources. To enhance their effectiveness, it is recommended that governments strengthen legal frameworks, boost resource allocations, integrate advanced technology, and improve public engagement. Implementing these evidence-informed recommendations can significantly improve transparency, accountability, and public trust across African governance systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Public Accountability Committees in many countries have been effective in their work for a long time. The general understanding of these committees can be based on their key terms; 'public' and 'accountability'. Public Accountability Committees enhance high levels of competence, reliability, and honesty in public sectors (O'Regan et.al., 2022). Africa is one of the continents that has profoundly utilized Public Accountability Committees, especially in the financial management and regulation of service delivery. Historically, the modern Public Accountability Committee can be traced back to 1861 in the United Kingdom when its government raised concerns about examining its expenditures in all departments associated with the management of public funds. Indeed, the committee was to scrutinize corruption-related issues (O'Regan et.al., 2022).

Since the Public Accountability Committees were established, many successful initiatives have been made to cope with fraudulent issues on public funds. In the case of Africa, improving Public Accountability Committees entails adopting approaches that address the existing challenges. Considering the socioeconomic and political issues across many African countries, effective Public Accountability Committees should; be independent, foster capacity building, enhance transparency, strengthen legal frameworks, interact with civil society, utilize modern technology and enhance cross-border cooperation (Schoeberlein, 2022). Most of these strategies have served as the important models for combating corruption in government institutions across many African countries.

Many African countries have strengthened their legal frameworks to fight corruption. For instance, various laws have been enacted to empower Public Accountability Committees to function independently and establish penalties for non-compliance. Some of the African countries now use modern technology and have digital platforms for financial reporting, data collection, and recording and analyses for making informed decisions and thus have increased transparency and accountability of the Public Accountability Committees' work. Further, involvement of citizens in the work of the Public Accountability Committees have boosted accountability in the use of government resources.
For instance, the civil societies in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria participate in monitoring the work of Public Accountability Committees in relation to addressing key issues such as corruption (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2023). Regional cooperation is another model used by some of the African countries that are members of organizations such as African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African (ECOWAS). These regional organizations have interests in promoting cooperation and fighting corruption-related cases across borders. Other models used for improving Public Accountability Committees in Africa are; Ethics and integrity training, whistleblower protection and peer review mechanisms

KEY MESSAGES

1. Public Accountability Committees in Africa oversee government operations, ensuring fiscal responsibility and combating corruption, which are vital for transparent and accountable governance.
2. PACs face numerous impediments such as limited legal powers, resource deficiencies, inadequate technology, and low public engagement, hindering their effectiveness.
3. There is a pressing need to investigate which reforms can most effectively strengthen the governance mechanisms of PACs to enhance their operational capacity.
4. Understanding how to effectively empower PACs can guide policymakers in implementing necessary legal and structural reforms, leading to improved governance outcomes.
5. Strengthening PACs contribute to reduced corruption, increased public trust, and stronger governance frameworks, aligning with global standards and development objectives of African nations.

JUASTIFICATION

Limited Operational Independence and Political Interference: PACs are susceptible to undue influence from the executive branch or powerful individuals, hindering accountability (Aluko, 2006).

Resource Constraints and Expertise Gaps: Limited budgets and a lack of specialized personnel can restrict PACs' ability to analyze complex financial information (Besley & Matoo, 2005).

Public Awareness and Participation Deficit: Low public awareness of PAC mandates and limited citizen engagement weaken their legitimacy and impact (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2008).

Constrained Investigative Powers: Insufficient legal authority to compel witness testimony or access documents can impede thorough investigations (Svåsland, 2004 [6]).

Enforcing Recommendations and Follow-through Mechanisms: Even when PACs identify wrongdoing,

their recommendations may be disregarded due to weak enforcement mechanisms (Trench, 2017).

Excessive corruption in State and non-State institutions: Corruption degrades whatever system aimed at ensuring effective accountability and investigations in the PACs (Ibietan,2013, Phiri et al., 2019).

LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:

By learning from best practices across Africa, PACs can be strengthened through the following:

Strengthen Legislative Frameworks: Develop clear mandates, enhance investigative powers with witness protection, and ensure financial autonomy for PACs.

Invest in Capacity Building: Provide training programs for committee members and staff on investigative techniques, financial analysis, and public engagement.

Enhance Public Outreach and Citizen Engagement: Utilize media platforms, community forums, and educational campaigns to raise awareness.
Collaborate with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Partner with NGOs and anti-corruption organizations to gain expertise, resources, and public pressure.

Prioritize Transparency and Follow-up: Ensure transparency throughout proceedings, publish reports widely, and advocate for implementing recommendations.

Institutions of Governance once Created take a Life of their Own: Attempts should be made to ensure that these institutions are built on sound ethical values and orientations.

METHODOLOGY

To tackle the question of enhancing Public Accountability Committees (PACs) across Africa, a systematic review of academic literature were done and stakeholder inputs. Here's a brief rundown:

LITERATURE REVIEW:
Scope: A focused search was conducted on Google Scholar for literature pertaining to Public Accountability Committees (PACs), governance, and anti-corruption initiatives within Africa. Keywords such as "public accountability" and "corruption prevention" were used to refine the search.
Time Frame: The review targeted studies published from the early 2000s to the present, to capture both the historical context and recent developments in the governance and accountability fields.
Geographical Focus: The search included studies specifically within African contexts, embracing both high-income and low-middle-income countries to ensure a broad and diverse understanding of the challenges and strategies at different economic levels.

EVIDENCE ANALYSIS:
Quantity and Quality: The review process analyzed 30 articles, comprising both peer-reviewed journals and gray literature. Each article was assessed for methodological rigor and relevance based on the CASP Systematic Review Checklist. This ensured that the studies included were both credible and directly pertinent to the issues at hand.
Synthesis and Recommendations: Findings from the diverse sources were synthesized to distill effective practices and key lessons. This synthesis formed the basis for developing targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening PACs across Africa, ensuring that they are grounded in empirical evidence and reflective of the complexities observed in the studies.

EVALUATION AND STAKEHOLDER INPUTS:
Comparative Analysis: The outcomes of various regional implementations of governance strategies were evaluated. This helped in identifying the most effective practices and approaches that could be adapted and applied across different African countries.
Stakeholder Engagement: Insights from a range of stakeholders, including government officials, members of PACs, and civil society experts, were integrated into the final recommendations. This step was crucial to ensure that the proposed strategies are not only theoretically sound but also practically feasible and tailored to the specific needs and conditions of the target environments.

CRITICAL APPRAISAL USING CASP:
The methodology employed in this review adheres to the CASP guidelines, ensuring a systematic, thorough, and unbiased analysis of the literature. By addressing each point on the CASP checklist, from the focus of the question to the appropriateness of the methodological approach and the rigor of the evidence, the review provides a solid foundation for the development of effective policy recommendations. These recommendations are intended to enhance the functionality and impact of Public Accountability Committees in fostering transparency and accountability within governance systems across Africa.

FINIDINGS TABLE

RECOMMENDATION	ACTION	SOURCE	
Strengthen Legal Frameworks	Develop and enforce comprehensive legal frameworks that enhance PAC independence and authority.	Literature Review	Besley, Timothy, and Torsten Persson. (2011). Pillars of Prosperity: The Political Economics of Development Clusters.
Increase Resource Allocations	Allocate sufficient financial and human resources to enable PACs to perform their duties effectively.	Literature Review	Dimant, E., & Tosato, G. (2018). Causes and Effects of Corruption: What has Past Decade's Empirical Research Taught us? A Survey. Journal of Economic Surveys, 32(2), 335-356.
Integrate Advanced Technology	Implement technological solutions to improve transparency, data management, and efficiency of PAC operations.	Stakeholder Engagement	
Enhance Public Engagement	Increase public awareness and involvement in PAC activities to strengthen accountability.	Literature Review & Stakeholder Engagement	Fjeldstad, Odd-Helge, and Jan Isaksen. (2008). Anti-Corruption Reforms: Challenges, Effects and Limits of World Bank Support - Background Paper to Public Sector Reform: What Works and Why? An IEG Evaluation of World Bank Support.
Establish International Collaborations	Foster partnerships with international anti-corruption bodies to leverage global best practices.	Stakeholder Engagement	
Regular Legislative Review	Periodically update the legal and regulatory frameworks governing PACs to address emerging challenges.	Literature Review	Klitgaard, Robert. (1998). Controlling Corruption.
Strengthen Whistleblower Protections	Enact and enforce robust whistleblower protection laws to encourage reporting of corruption.	Literature Review & Stakeholder Engagement	Calland, Richard, and Guy Dehn. (2004). Whistleblowing Around the World: Law, Culture and Practice.
Enhance Training Programs	Provide continuous professional development for PAC members on latest audit techniques and anti-corruption strategies.	Literature Review & Stakeholder Engagement	Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. (2015). The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption.
Audit Oversight Enforcement	Ensure that PACs actively investigate discrepancies in audit reports to uphold financial integrity.	Literature Review	Fjeldstad, O. H., Katera, L., & Ngalewa, E. (2004). Combating Corruption in Revenue Administration: The Case of the Tanzania Revenue Authority.

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SUMMARY

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Oversight:
Develop and enforce comprehensive legal frameworks and establish independent oversight bodies to address political interference and enhance investigative powers. This approach is supported by Besley and Persson (2011), who emphasize the importance of robust legal structures in ensuring accountability and reducing corruption.

Enhanced Scrutiny by Anti-Corruption Agencies:
Nigerian anti-corruption agencies should increase their capacity and staff to tackle sophisticated white-collar crimes effectively. Research by Dimant and Tosato (2018) supports that increasing resources and specialized training improves outcomes in combating such corruption.

Public Engagement and International Collaboration:
Increase public involvement and foster international anti-corruption partnerships to mitigate public awareness deficits and enhance civic participation. Fjeldstad and Isaksen (2008) note the significant role of public engagement in monitoring public resources and combating corruption.

Regular Legislative Review: Periodically update legislative tools to adapt to new corruption challenges, ensuring the legislative framework remains effective. Klitgaard (1998) discusses the necessity of continuous reform in legislation to combat evolving forms of corruption.

Whistleblower Protection and Financial Autonomy:
Enact strong whistleblower protection laws and ensure PACs have independent funding to support enforcement and follow-through mechanisms. Calland and Dehn (2004) explore the effectiveness of whistleblower protections in promoting transparency and accountability.

Technology Integration and Capacity Building:
Implement digital tools to increase transparency and provide ongoing training for PAC members. Mungiu-Pippidi (2015) highlights how technology facilitates greater transparency and oversight, effectively reducing corruption opportunities.

Audit Oversight by PACs: PACs should actively probe any anomalies found in audit reports to ensure accountability and transparency in public expenditure. Fjeldstad et al. (2004) provide evidence that effective legislative oversight, particularly based on audit findings, leads to better governance outcomes.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Based on the comprehensive review and analysis conducted, several policy priorities emerge to enhance the effectiveness of Public Accountability Committees (PACs) across Africa. These priorities are crucial for ensuring that the proposed reforms yield tangible improvements in governance and accountability :

1. Legal Reform and Enforcement: Prioritize the development and enforcement of robust legal frameworks that grant PACs greater autonomy and stronger investigative powers. This is essential for reducing political interference and enabling PACs to perform their duties without external pressure. Besley's and Persson's (2021) ideas on PACs have been put into work through ; oversight and accountability on government expenditure and activities, information disclosure that strengthens trasparency, fostering trust by scrutinizing government activities, and supporting the legal frameworks for developing better policies in their organizations.

2.Resource Allocation: Allocate sufficient financial and human resources to PACs to ensure they have the necessary tools and personnel to conduct thorough investigations and audits. This includes funding for advanced technology that can streamline processes and enhance transparency. According to Dimant and Tosata (2018), increased resource alloaction has enabled PACs to; improve on their oversight capabilities, access adequate funding through increased independency, strengthen technical expertise, enhance capacity building and foster outreach and communication in their organizations.

3.Public Engagement Enhancement: Increase efforts to raise public awareness about the roles, responsibilities, and importance of PACs. This should include initiatives to actively involve citizens and civil society in the monitoring and accountability processes, thereby fostering a culture of transparency. The policy has been effective to many PACs in accordance to Fjeldstad and Isaksen (2008), as evidenced through ; improved oversight and accountability, information access, development of civic culture that strengthens democratic institutions and promotion of transparency.

4.Technology Integration: Integrate cutting-edge technology into the operations of PACs to improve data management, financial tracking, and overall transparency. This should also include training for PAC members to effectively utilize these technologies. According to Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), use of the modern technology has enhanced PACs to; operate in a transparency and accountability eneviroment, improve efficiency and effectiveness, foster capacity building, citizen engagement, and new innovations and adaptation.

5.Regional and International Collaboration: Strengthen regional cooperation among African countries and leverage international partnerships to adopt best practices in anti-corruption and governance. This collaboration has enabled PACs to provide mutual support, share successful strategies, and coordinate efforts against cross-border corruption and other challenges in their organizations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This evidence review on enhancing Public Accountability Committees (PACs) in Africa highlights their crucial role in governance and the challenges they face, such as political interference and resource limitations. Key findings include the need for legal reforms to boost PAC independence, enhanced resource allocation, increased public engagement for greater accountability, and regional cooperation to share best practices. Continuous adaptation of strategies is essential due to the evolving nature of corruption. These insights provide a basis for implementing reforms to strengthen PAC effectiveness across African nations.

To inform the overview of the policy question concerning public accountability frameworks in Africa, a methodical search was conducted on Google Scholar. The search utilized specific keywords to ensure relevance and depth in the retrieved academic literature. These terms included "public accountability," "corruption prevention," and "governance" for topic-specific relevance; "public sector" and "Africa" for contextual focus; "case study" for methodological approach; and "effectiveness," "solutions," "recommendations," and "actions" for outcome-focused insights. This strategic search yielded several pertinent academic sources, providing evidence-based recommendations that are essential for formulating robust policy guidelines. The insights gathered from these sources have been instrumental in shaping our understanding and recommendations regarding public accountability measures in the African public sector.

Here are the summarized versions of the seven policy recommendations to enhance Public Accountability Committees (PACs):

1. **Expand Anti-corruption Agencies:** Enhance the capacity and resources of anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria to address complex white-collar crimes effectively. This includes hiring more specialized staff. (Dimant & Tosato, 2018)

2. **udit Oversight Enforcement:** Public account committees should actively investigate discrepancies in audit reports to enhance transparency and accountability in public spending. (Fjeldstad et al., 2004)

3. **Legal Frameworks and Oversight:** Develop and enforce robust legal frameworks and create independent oversight bodies to minimize political interference and bolster investigative powers. (Besley & Persson, 2011)

4. **Technology and Training:** Implement digital tools to improve transparency and provide ongoing training for PAC members to build capacity and manage resources efficiently. (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015)

5. **Public Engagement and Collaboration:** Involve civil society and the public in oversight activities and establish international anti-corruption partnerships to increase public participation and trust. (Fjeldstad & Isaksen, 2008)

6. **Whistleblower Protection and Autonomy:** Strengthen whistleblower protection laws and ensure financial autonomy for PACs to support effective enforcement and safeguard transparency. (Calland & Dehn, 2004)

7. **Legislative Review and Adaptation:** Regularly update legislative tools to respond to new corruption challenges, maintaining the effectiveness of anti-corruption frameworks. (Klitgaard, 1998).

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