The weak to strong state involvement and political accountability levels schema[1]

CN Mbatha[2] and NN Mkhize

The proposition is that socio-economic development from local to national levels often straddles at least four pathways that are driven by two main variables: the relative strength or weakness of (1) **state (and government) involvement** in the management of public affairs and resources and (2) the mechanisms for ensuring **political accountability.** The four pathways, with associated attributes, have presented opportunities or challenges that have promoted or collapsed the sustainable economic development of many post-colonial countries. Using the two main variables we can locate different countries in distinct categories (quadrants) across a two-dimensional Cartesian plane, with state involvement on the Y-axis and state and government accountability to citizens on the X- axis.

Each of the four categories is characterized by a number of specific attributes to varying degrees, including standard of living, level of innovation, level of informality in business, type and level of public media operations, migration patterns, level of crime, etc. Different countries and their districts navigate these four main quadrants, moving in and out of each quadrant driven by the level of state or government involvement alongside the extent to which citizens can hold the state accountable to political promises made; for example, regarding the level of public service delivery. While some countries would be found exhibiting all the attributes of one of the main four categories in snapshot surveys, other countries would be found transitioning from one category to the other, as depicted in Figure 1.

The illustration presents a dynamic state of affairs driven by two main forces: a strong or weak state or government, and the extent to which citizens can hold politicians and state officials accountable. Many African countries that are not at war and are presented as functional prototypical cases with vibrant economies, innovative informal sectors, and double-digit levels of economic growth can be located in quadrant IV (bottom-right). A prototypical example would be Kenya, where, while there is a healthy level of public media activity, and high levels of social and technological innovation, a high proportion of the labour force still works in the informal sector and there are also reports of high state corruption levels.

Eritrea, on the other hand, while characterized by a strong state with limited media freedoms and other platforms and conditions that enable citizens to hold politicians and officials accountable, presents cases of low social innovation, generally poor living standards and high levels of outmigration and can be located in the quadrant II (top-left). African countries that are experiencing full-on civil wars can easily be located in the least preferred quadrant III (bottom-left).

Currently, South Africa is characterized by strong media freedoms and democratic political expressions, has robust constitutional platforms to hold its government and State officials accountable on varied service delivery issues. But the South African government is not as strong in formulating cohesive and long-term socio-economic policies and the State is challenged at implementing many of the existing policies. It is not a surprise that the country is experiencing an increasing level of informality, high crime levels that would locate the country somewhere between the 1st and 4th quadrants in 2020[3].

This framework is beneficial at many levels, including the location of different countries or regions in clearly defined categories for political and human development purposes. It provides a simplified view for understanding complex socio-political and economic dynamics at play in specified periods and the possible paths taken to get there where historical socio-economic data is available.
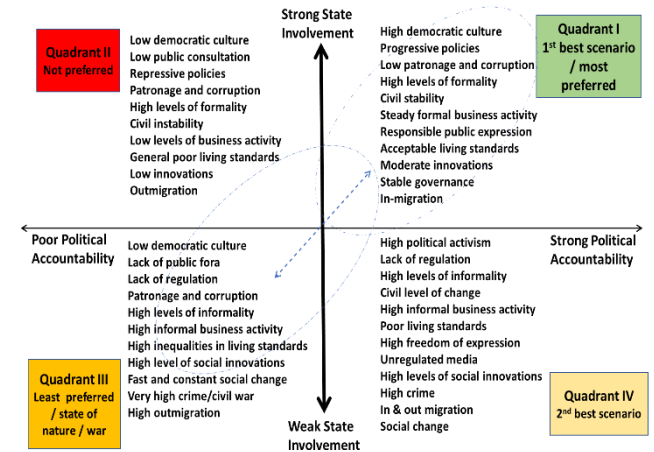

Figure 1: The strong to weak state involvement and political accountability levels illustration by Mbatha and Mkhize (2020))

This schema is useful intellectually and also provides the basis for long-term economic and social policy interventions by stakeholders that can be fit for context and begin to address the developmental challenges of African localities from where they are at politically.

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[3] Under Apartheid, before 1994, South Africa was characterized by a strong and effective State machinery but lacked many of the constitutional platforms that would ensure citizen and media freedoms for State accountability. The country was isolated by the global community and could be located not far away from where Eritrea is found in 2020.