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**Street Level Bureaucracy and The Dilemmas of Private  
Entities in Public Spaces: Case of GPRTU**

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**Abstract**

Lipsky's notion of "street-level bureaucrats" refers to public sector actors who provide service and sanction the public due to their ability to wield discretionary power. Hence are autonomous from government. Discretionary power enables them to shape public policy in pursuit of private agendas by inter alia creating artificial shortages. Given that they a pose threat to government's efforts, government sometimes moves to curtail their power of discretion and autonomy. Street-level bureaucrats are rational and activate mechanisms to escape government control. This study examines the coping mechanisms of the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU) after government implementation of a petroleum price deregulation policy. This paper raises questions and sets the stage for the next part by highlighting the notions of the prisoner's dilemma, collective action, tragedy of commons and organizational choice. These are refracted through the transactional model of coping strategies of entities.

**Key Words:** Street-level bureaucrats, discretionary power, autonomy, coping strategy, GPRTU, transactional model.

### Introduction

Most front-line bureaucrats enter government out of a measure of public spiritedness. Once inside the system however, the work environment is overwhelming and “conditions the way they perceive problems and frame solutions,” where common conditions “give rise to common patterns of practice” (Lipsky, 1983). They create shortcuts as a way of nurturing extra-legal coping mechanisms in a bid to compensate for the gap between incessant political pressure to provide public services, deficient organizational resources, and the related stress that ensue. In an effort to fill the gap bureaucrats develop patterns of practice that tend to limit public demand [and] maximize the utilization of available resources” but most often with the fulfillment of private ends as the ultimate objective. This leads to institutional discord, since at the macro level private aims contradict rather than complement each other. Lipsky (1983) contends that through routinization and simplification of client processing, street-level bureaucrats with the pursuit of private goals as the main motives ration services and control clients by imposing costs and client differentiation. These adaptations manifest themselves in decisions, which limit services to those they deem favorable and/or restrict services to those they deem problematic or disruptive, thereby interfering with legislative intent. These dynamics reflect the relationship of power between street-level bureaucrats who have control over resources and citizens who seek them. Coping mechanisms, such as imposing extra-legal costs on clients, are intended to limit demand and depress client participation and increase returns. They take on several forms, such as restricting access, delaying service delivery, and withholding information. Street-level bureaucrats also cope by client discrimination which normally translates into price discrimination. In order to increase their chances of success, street bureaucrats simplify their tasks and respect for norms, reduce the pool of clients to a manageable size, and offer the illusion that the public policy in question is being effectively implemented.

The GPRTU (TUC-Ghana; Rosa Luxemburg Foundation; 2012) exhibits the traits identified by Lipsky (1983). However, being private entities embedded in the public sphere they tend to be the first victims of their own flexibility and discretionary power. Consequently, in an attempt to protect “themselves” from “themselves”, they make political and economic overtures to government and in the process make themselves susceptible to capture and manipulation by government through state policy. This in turn, being a sub-optimal option sets off another move of political manoeuvre whereby the GPRTU seeks to free itself from government control. But it is unable to do so since total divorce from the state is neither possible nor desirable. This leads to a situation of being in limbo in the bureaucratic street. How this limbo is confronted and effort made at its resolution

will be examined in part two of this paper.

### **GPRTU's Street Level Bureaucrats: The Duality of Power of Discretion and Victimhood**

As indirectly alluded to above discretion is a necessary evil for street-level bureaucrats. It gives them political leverage and room to manoeuvre and hence difficult to politically pin down by state managers. Consequently, they are hard to be held publicly accountable and difficult to manage. Without discretionary power, their unsanctioned responses and the ease with which they shape the impact of public policy will be severely restrained and corroded. Lipsky (1983) contends that in the spirit of Weberian bureaucratic principles (see Lutzker, 1982) all clients ought to receive treatment; however, the ability of street-level bureaucrats to activate discretionary power enables them to discriminate and precipitate inequitable results. Given this, the onus lies with state management and their ability to align the actions of street-level bureaucrats to intended legislative policy outcomes. A solution offered by Lipsky (1983) is to "narrow" the scope of the front-line workers' role by limiting their ability to intercede for clients, leading to greater accountability toward legislative intent by reducing their autonomy and discretionary powers. The solution as provided by the government of Ghana has been to deregulate the crude oil sector and empower the market to discipline the GPRTU and whip them in line.

With this policy objective in mind Government introduced an Automatic Tariff Adjustment Formula (ATAF) (see Coady, Granado, Eyraud, and Tuladhar, 2013) in 2015 which among others specified a fuel product price structure that is, a pricing formula. This structure establishes a clear link between retail prices and import prices based on import costs and the specification of a rule determining when retail prices are changed and by how much. For example, retail prices could be changed monthly to ensure full transmission of any changes in import or distribution costs in order to keep tax levels constant, or to reflect changes in tax policy by the government.

As noted earlier this policy is intended to align the GPRTU with public policy. However, given that the market has reduced the discretionary power of the GPRTU and the ease with which they can manoeuvre to increase or secure their returns, they sought to force a policy reversal. Part of the organization embarked on an industrial action and were joined in solidarity by labour unions as well as a political party. Government did not budge in the pressures but only temporally reviewed prices downward only to allow an automatic adjustment when crude prices on the world market changed. This political tango between public administrators and street bureaucrats raises a number of questions from the theoretical perspective of Lipsky (1983). First when street bureaucrats are checkmated and contained by government in ways that corrodes their discretionary power do they cooperate with government, horse

trade or exit the industry and if they do not how do they adjust? What happens to their discretionary abilities: is it enhanced or reduced? Or is it that they (that is the GPRTU) sifts the negative externalities to their clients? These questions when answered will sharpen the initial insights that Lipsky (1983) laid bare in his initial analysis and the larger theoretical surplus in a country with a large informal sector like Ghana will be enormous. Meanwhile it is important for any future endeavour to understand the dynamics of public administration at the level of the street to be based on prior theoretical parameters which will serve as initial probes into the empirical realities. Given this, the rest of this paper will shed light on the relevant aspects theories of dilemma and the coping strategies of actors embedded in such contexts. In order to stream line this section given the bewildering array of theories that we can choose from, we will use aspects of the experiences of the GPRTU to set the tone.

### **Theories of Social Dilemma and the Experiences of the GPRTU: Sifting through the Lot**

#### **Prisoners Dilemma and the Defection-Cooperation Nexus**

In the aftermath of the institution of the ATAF a section of the GPRTU embarked on an industrial action while others did not. This split on the front of the GPRTU indicates that behind the facade of unity of the GPRTU there are fissures of tension and contradiction that can be exposed under external pressure (that is Government policy). Given this game theory, specifically the prisoner's dilemma can yield significant theoretical insights into the empirical world of the street bureaucrat (see Kuhlman and Marshello, 1975). Given a unitary entity (the GPRTU) under what conditions do various segments cooperate or not? How do they perceive external entities? How does this affect their ability to use their power of discretion?

#### **The Collective Action Problem and Institutional Integrity** (see Ostrom, 1999)

The GPRTU is not the only transport union in Ghana, there are others such as the Progressive Transport Owners Association (PROTOA) (Tag: Progressive Transport Owners Association of Ghana, 2014). This means that in theory aggrieved sections of the GPRTU can breakaway. But they did not. Why? Were they co-opted by government? Under what condition is the institutional integrity of an organization safeguarded? When do factions that beak ranks stall their actions?

#### **The Tragedy of the Commons and the Common Good: Resolving the Public-Private Tension**

When a group decides to embark on a common course of action its ranks may be fractured without its political presence not being undermined. But at the same time there may be sections of the group that may free ride on the political/material resources of both the committed and uncommitted. These are the free riders whose actions

undermine group solidarity and hence leads to the tragedy of the commons (Gillet, Schram and Sonnemans, 2009). The GPRTU is both a private organization active in the public sphere. Do free riders consider their actions in defence of the public or private interest? Do free riders see themselves as “free riders”? How do they resolve the tension at the interface of the public and private?

### **Organizational Choice and Rational Choice: The Public and Private Choice Sets**

Following from the work of Levin and Milgrom (2004) we note that the GPRTU is a private entity active in public and potentially it can fracture. When it happens how does its members arrive at their decisions? As public entities or as private? And do they consider their options as rational? The factions on either side: how do they perceive each other?

### **Stress and Coping Contours of Entities: The Transaction Model of Tension and Coping Strategies**

Drawing from Wittrock and Myers (1998) we posit that irrespective of the theory or theories that will help us delve into the world of the street bureaucrat there will be scenarios of tension in and around the GPRTU. This means that either the organization as a whole or aspects of it has to adopt coping strategies. Tension is the demand made by an internal or external context that upset equilibrium, thus affect the makeup of entities and hence requiring action to revert to normalcy. Tension and its perception are considered to be a transactional phenomenon which is the meaning of the stimulus to the perceiver. When an entity confronts tension, it assesses the potential danger (primary appraisal). Primary appraisal is an entity’s judgment about the importance of tension: is it positive, tractable or not, simple or complex? Important or not? While confronting the tension, the second appraisal ensues. It is an evaluation of an entity’s coping strategies and options. Secondary appraisals focus on what an entity can do about a given scenario. Actual coping efforts aimed at the management of a problem sometimes leads to outcomes of the coping efforts.

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to contextualize Lipsky’s (1983) famous street bureaucrat thesis in the context of Ghana in the face of Government policy to impose market discipline on an entity (the GPRTU) that is private but very active in public. The policy of the ATAF was an external stress that undermined the discretionary power of the GPRTU. The first part of this paper is a preparation of the grounds for a second one which is a deployment of the theories briefly outlined here; Game theory (Prisoner’s Dilemma, collective action problem, tragedy of commons and rational choice). In terms of the coping strategies, the Transaction Model of Tension and Coping Strategies was adopted to probe into the tension set up in and around the GPRTU as a result of Government policy.

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