

Africa Public Service Day: Reflections on the Contemporary Realities and Challenges Facing African Countries

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Africa Public Service Day (23 June) is an important date in the calendar of African public servants, public service employees and public administration throughout the continent. Yet, it would appear that the importance of this day is sometimes overlooked partly as a result of the negative image with which the public service in Africa is often associated, and partly as a consequence of the undervaluing of the important role played by public servants in Africa's development processes. This is the day that requires us to take stock of the achievements and successes of African public servants as they prepare to assume the mammoth but important task of improving service delivery and policy implementation throughout the continent in the context of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

This short conceptual paper examines the role of the African public service in development as well as the role of the state in such a process. As we reflect on the significance of this day, a number of issues should be examined by all those who are interested in the role of the state in development as well as in the effective delivery of public services by the public servants. These issues, which are discussed below, are: (a) language used by government departments and public servants; (b) issues relating to training and development; (c) role of research in informing policy; (d) and demographic representation. These are some of the issues that often affect the quality and extent of public service delivery in many parts of the continent.

Looking back at the period immediately after colonial rule, it is quite clear that much has been achieved to wean African public servants from the compulsory colonial diet and junk food that made them to act, think and dream like colonialists themselves. Among

others, such diet inevitably affected the psyche and long-term vision of many African public servants such that they yearned for a reconstruction of a ‘mini-Europe or America’ in such a vast and underdeveloped continent. Thus, they despised everything African and regarded the work of public servants as mainly to do with the maintenance of law and order as well as the uncritical application of Western derived notions of public administration. Needless to add, these usually ignored the unique conditions and socio-economic, political and other realities of the continent; they also sought to apply policies and programmes devised for Africa in the West by Western policy makers and planners. Nevertheless, it has taken many years of post-independence analysis, realisation, lessons and reawakening to show African governments that they need home-grown solutions, policies and plans to deal with their contemporary challenges — and not a foreign diet as this has not worked at all. In fact, if any, such imported solutions have worked against Africa and its people.

(a) The language used by government departments and public servants

In Africa, among the issues that often undermine or negatively affect good governance are the languages (or language) used by public servants and the government in day-to-day communication amongst themselves and with communities. Of course, the language used in government departments and by public servants themselves is a very sensitive or controversial issue in the African public administration because it is closely related to the Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone and Afro-Arabic legacies and heritage of African countries. Thus, emphasis on the formal language of communication in most Anglophone African countries is usually English which is used in official correspondence, whereas French and Portuguese are used in the Francophone and Lusophone countries, respectively. However, it is often the case that as a result of the neglect and emasculation of African cultural practices by the colonialists the indigenous languages are seen as ‘unsuitable’ and therefore not used as media for correspondence. This undermines public administration in Africa and has the added negative effect of making public servants to appear as if they look down upon indigenous languages, probably because some of them are often trained in Western countries. Clearly, language has the potential to divide or unify us and Africans have to continue searching for a common language or means of

communication that can be used in official correspondence throughout the continent — this will require going beyond the present dependence on the languages of the former colonizers such as French, Portuguese and English as a means for communicating with other Africans.

(b) Issues relating to training and development

It should be noted that the current challenges facing government departments in many African countries are quite complex and should not all be referred to training as the one-size-fits-all solution; training is not a panacea but only one option for dealing with the myriad challenges affecting human resource management in African public organisations.

However, the shortage of skilled personnel in many African countries is sometimes related to training and development matters; this habitually results in inappropriate recruitments and appointments that lead to bad governance, maladministration, and mismanagement. Frequently, this is because of a combination of several factors that ultimately undermine training and development in government departments. Among others, these include inappropriate training or training materials, lack of training, unqualified and inexperienced trainers, public service managers who undervalue or ignore the value of training, and public servants who disregard or do not understand the strategic importance of training to the advancement of the vision and mission of their departments. The key questions that must be asked (and answered) by African public servants, especially those who work in human resource management sections of their departments, are: what kind of training is appropriate for our department? Who provides training for us? What kind of courses will ensure the success of our programmes? What standards should we use to evaluate and monitor training; what kind of training institutions do we need to ensure that we deliver services efficiently and effectively? Where should such training be provided, e.g. in-house or externally? More important, public servants must examine the supply and demand issues with regard to the availability of human resources with relevant skills that they need for their departments. Needless to add, public servants have to collaborate with a variety of relevant

stakeholders from civil society and private sector to be able to provide appropriate answers to these questions.

A starting point in this regard could be that all the above factors have to be examined strategically through the establishment of well-organized and resourceful departments that have specific policies and long-term visions in relation to training.

(c) The role of research in informing policy

One other issue that could help support Africa's quest to improve the delivery of services to the populace, enhance good government and improve the role of the state in development, particularly in relation to the role of the public service is the use of research that informs public policy. Such research has to be conducted by African researchers, academics and experts who are quite conscious of their crucial role played by research in policy formulation and implementation. However, for this role to be optimised African governments must ensure that there is provision for accommodating and incorporating research into their operations. Amongst others, this includes making sure that there is an adequate budget allocation for research on the challenges facing departments, giving the necessary access to outside researchers (e.g. from universities) doing research in their departments, and training public servants to utilise the findings of research to improve service delivery. In addition, it is important for governments to invite researchers, academics and other intellectuals to regular meetings to discuss the challenges they face, so that they can maximize the interaction between policy makers and African researchers thereby enhancing the state's role in development.

(d) Demographic representation

Essentially, the issue of demographic representation in the context of the African public service refers to the need to be sensitive to the diverse ethnic, gender, age, religious, racial and other socio-cultural characteristics of societies on the continent. This means making attempts to ensure that different groups are represented in government departments without necessarily opting for quotas. In principle, the aim would be to ensure that public servants do not regard any department or government institution as a preserve of some ethnic, linguistic or other group to the exclusion of others. In other parts of the world whenever observers discuss public service reform it is not always that this issue is mentioned as part of promoting good and accountable governance. But in Africa one issue that has the potential to undermine national unity and socio-economic and

political development is failure to take cognisance of demographic representation in the structures of government. Thus, it can be argued that African countries need more representative public service and government structures which could be seen as legitimate authorities that are acceptable to all the different countries' nationals.

Conclusion

As the continent marked Africa Public Service Day on June 23rd 2005, it was quite pertinent that we examine several issues that support or enhance good governance¹ and the role of the state in development. Good governance often has various interpretations but we may agree that in the case of the public service some of its characteristics include the appointment of administrative personnel on the basis of merit and according to transparent and accountable criteria. This day also reminds us that governments should guard against the appointment of inexperienced people who are appointed purely on the basis of party political considerations because such officials might not be able to serve the government of the day without fear or favour. A major challenge in this regard has been the scarcity of suitably qualified and experienced indigenous intellectuals, experts and other professionals who are required by the newly independent African states to run their various development programmes. Such scarcity has been blamed on the 'brain drain' or the loss of highly skilled and experienced Africans to European, North American and other countries that are perceived to offer relatively better working conditions and highly competitive salaries thereby attracting these professionals.

Finally, Africa needs to concentrate on those issues that unite, not divide, the continent. Such issues are closely related to reconstruction and development and have made the continent to achieve its present successes. By focusing on such issues, Africa could be able to deal with the present crisis in its public administration (Olowu, 2004) so as to prepare the public servants to play a meaningful role in what is widely expected to be the era of Africa's development. In this context, the image and role of the continent's public service are so important such that they cannot be left to chance and African governments must immediately plan the short-, medium-, and long-term strategies of public service reform that will tackle these issues and enhance the delivery of public services.

¹ Term not used in the traditional sense of donor agencies e.g. World Bank and IMF, which usually use 'good governance' as conditionality upon which to grant or deny aid to developing countries. Here, the term also includes accountability and transparency by African governments in the recruitment and appointment of public servants.

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