Lessons of International and African Perspectives on Public Service Reform: Examples from Five African Countries (Abstract)

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In the late 1980s and 1990s, the objective of public administration reforms was to contain and control the costs of running government in response to citizens, concerns that government was involved in too many activities, which were both unproductive and costly. In many countries (developed and developing), these efforts paid off: in that fiscal discipline was enhanced and deficits were eliminated or contained. However in some countries, especially where government institutions were still in the process of formation and development, there was no fat to cut; so the reforms cut to the bone and in some cases deformed the public administration systems, which resulted in a serious erosion of government capacity and effectiveness.

There is now recognition (starting in the late 1990s) of the need to reform public administration by addressing systemic issues, including capacity building, planning, budgeting, performance improvement, and human resources management. In many instances these measures are pursued through the adoption of private sector management methods and approaches. As a result what was called 'public administration' is now called 'public management'.

In this paper the authors review the efforts of five African countries, which have used a combination of the above methodologies to reform their administrative systems. The authors report that almost all the countries studied found it was easier to implement the cost-reduction and stabilization related reforms, which were often driven by donor-funded consultants (Ghana and Uganda were market leaders), and ostensibly the intended results were attained, although in time these have been reversed in some of countries. As the focus of reform shifted to addressing performance improvement and removing systemic bottlenecks the reforms became more difficult to pursue. They required the involvement of a wider cross-section of the public service, commitment at the political level, and ownership by country, with donors supporting, rather than driving the process. Of the five countries studied, Tanzania has been able to sustain the reforms by galvanizing all key players including the entire public service, politicians, as well as donors in support of the reform effort. However, the price of pursuing reform though an inclusive process is that results come very slowly but when they do they tend to be sustainable.

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