A Holistic Model for Managing Ethnic Diversity
In the Public Service in Africa

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**Introduction**

This paper discusses the issue of managing ethnic diversity in the public service in Africa taking a holistic approach. It points out that the issue of managing ethnic diversity in the public service requires immediate attention and proposes a model that could guide strategic thinking and planning for addressing the issue.

1. **Is managing ethnic diversity in the public service in Africa an issue worth governments’ attention?**

One of the most pervasive problematic issues in Africa concerns the ethnic diversity of most of the continent’s countries and the problems related to it. Yet in most of the efforts of building or reforming the public services the problems related to management of ethnic diversity in the public service is rarely mentioned let alone being addressed. Problems related to ethnic diversity are mostly mentioned in literature about sociology and politics. So, the first question that confronts anyone dealing with the issue of ethnic diversity in Africa’s public services is the following: **Is the management of ethnic diversity in the public service an issue for Governments in Africa?** It is difficult to start treating a problem if one does not accept that it exists or does not believe that it is worth the attention. It is the view of this paper that managing ethnic diversity in the public service in most African countries is an issue and that it needs urgent attention.

Most colonial systems of public administration established in African countries had pretended to be neutral constructed along the lines of the Weber model of legal-rational bureaucracy. However, both in concept and in practice they could not be neutral since they were instruments of colonial oppression and exploitation implementing the wishes of the colonial master at the expense of the indigenous people. Most African countries boast of having inherited efficient Civil Service systems immediately after independence. This is erroneous because the same public service systems placed in a situation of democratic administration where they had to interface with and serve the interests of their compatriots could not live up to the same level of efficiency. In other words, the African public servant of the colonial times did not serve the general public interest since he had to serve the exclusive interest of the colonial master. It was not possible for such a public servant to be neutral, impartial, and objective as required by the Weberian model. Most of the expertise developed at the time was in the area of rule application and procedural administration as well as authority obedience mistaken for discipline. Such expertise was appropriate and very necessary for colonial domination. As long as the public servants were not required to engage in identification of local people’s interest, policy analysis and people-centered policy formulation and proposal, these skills were adequate and served the purpose. Indeed such a public service echoed the one idealized by Weber.

"From a purely technical point of view, a bureaucracy is capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency, and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings. It is superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability. It thus makes possible a particularly high degree of calculability of results for the heads of the organization and for those acting in relation to it. It is finally superior both in intensive efficiency and in
Clearly, such an insensitive machine would be handy for a colonial administration seeking to dominate and exploit Africa. It would not matter so much regarding its ethnic balancing or diversity so long as it remained precise, stable, stringent, obedient, (we do not equate obedience with discipline) and capable of exercising authority. Looked at in the light of the theories of Representative Bureaucracy, the African public service of the time was representative of the will and might of the colonial powers. It had to be as ruthlessly efficient as the mission and objectives of colonialism themselves demanded.

Where it was found necessary some adjustments were made to make the machine more efficient in the exercise of colonial authority and to cause as little friction as possible in its functioning. For example, in Uganda after the second world war, the colonial administration, having noted that education, and therefore administrative potential, had been more concentrated in the Southern parts of the country, decided to concentrate military recruitment in the North especially among the Acholi people so as to balance military bureaucratic power with the administrative bureaucratic skill that was developing in the South. This fitted very well in the practice of divide and rule. But one can interpret it as a deliberate act of managing ethnic diversity in the public service machinery by the colonial administration.

However, it was a miscalculation for the fathers of independence to have failed to remodel the machine to make it fit for the new circumstances ushered in by independence. One of the remarkable failures of Africa’s public service systems is in the area of managing ethnic diversity. Most African leaders have put emphasis on filling public service positions with their kith and kin rather than the balancing of ethnic composition of the public service to reflect the ethnic diversity of the countries. Often this has lead to discontent and conflict. Documented opinion points to a prominent role played by ethnicity in conflict and violence in Africa:

**Sierra Leone**: “Ethnicity has been one of the potent forces haunting post-colonial Sierra Leonean leaders. Often it is the leaders who encourage and perpetuate ethnicity for personal reasons. Resource allocation has also been a major factor in exacerbation of ethnic conflicts in the country, for it is generally believed that if a particular group or region dominates the government, that group or region is more likely to get a disproportionate or lion’s share of the national cake. Politicians often appeal to ethnic or regional sentiments in their attempt to carve out political bases for themselves.” (John Bobor Laggah et al in Adebayo Adeleji (ed.), *Comprehending and Mastering African Conflicts*, 1999, page 181)

**Nigeria**: “National integration, one of the aims of the Gowon regime after the civil war, floundered because of the inability of his successors in office to faithfully execute the programme. Ethnicity, or what some analysts call indigeneity, was a major problem because of the narrow latitude offered to Nigerians wishing to merge into a community outside their own state of origin.” (Segun Odunuga in Adebayo Adeleji (ed.), *op. cit.*, page 233)

**Rwanda**: “This stratum of seminarists, teachers, clerks, etc., was qualified as a Hutu counter-elite; it was subject to profound frustration because of a barrier in their desire for
upward movement because of the Tutsi quasi-monopoly of intermediate and senior positions in the modern sector reserved for the natives. The violent struggle at the end of the colonial period, which resulted in a revolution, did not, therefore, come as a surprise. Astridians competing against seminarists for access to promising courses of study and executive positions in administration could but be violent.” (Emanuel Gasana et al in Adebayo Adedeji (ed.), op. cit., page 151)

Almost every African country and government has lived with the problem of managing ethnic diversity in its public service. But observation shows that it has largely been either mismanaged or not managed at all. (We feel obliged though to point out the case of South Africa on its affirmative action in the public service. It would be interesting to conduct research on it and be informed on how effective it has been in practice).

2. Why do ethnic groups struggle for positions in the public service?

There are several fairly obvious reasons to explain why ethnic groups struggle for positions (the higher the better) in the public service. Every ethnic group wishes to see its sons and daughters employed so that they bring something back home. No ethnic group wishes to be absent at the national dining table where the national cake is shared. Employment in the public service is a source of pride for those to whom ethnicity is a highly sentimental affair. Positions in the public service are seen as symbols of ethnic power and superiority or at least equality to other ethnic groups. However, the reason we wish to emphasize here is that the public service is an instrument of public policy-making, public service delivery and development. Ethnic groups have a belief (it does not matter whether it is founded or not) that if they are not represented in the process of public policy-making, they will lose out in the services they receive and in development opportunities, programmes and projects coming to them. Below we discuss the role of public servants in the process of public policy-making to highlight why ethnic groups struggle for representation in the public service.

Public policy is a crucial element in managing ethnic diversity. Depending on its content, the process of making it, and the individuals involved in deciding and implementing it, it may aggravate or ameliorate conditions for inter-ethnic peace and harmony. Public servants especially those occupying managerial positions play a crucial role in the policy-making process. The different roles played by public servants in the process of public policy-making are discussed below:
Role Paradigm of Public Servants in Public Policy-Making

- **Beneficiaries of public policies**: As part of the population local communities or interest groups, public servants are beneficiaries of the public policies they make.

- **Public policy advocates**: Because some or most of public policies affect public servants, they often engage in policy advocacy. And because of their knowledge, skills, awareness and access to information and networks, their advocacy is often very strong and effective.

- **Advisers on public policy**: By virtue of their position, knowledge, skills, access to information and networks public servants have the duty to tender policy advice to policy deciders (e.g., Parliament, President, Prime Minister, Cabinet).

- **Public policy-implementers**: Public servants are at the vanguard of implementing public policies. They deploy, control and monitor the material, financial, and human resources that go into policy implementation.

- **Public policy-defenders**: Public servants are expected to defend the policy proposals they formulate in order to get them decided. During implementation, they also often have to defend the policies before the various interest groups that try to oppose or resist them.

- **Public policy-makers**: The various roles they play in the process of policy initiation, advocacy, formulation, decision, implementation, and evaluation, make public servants formidable policy-makers. They are involved in, control or at least influence, the whole process of policy-making.

It is these important roles played by public servants in policy-making for development and service delivery that make ethnic groups struggle for positions in the public service.
3. Contradictions between ethnic representation in the public service and traditional legal-rational models of public bureaucracy

If the public servant plays such a crucial role in determining the policies that guide service delivery, the quantity and quality of services delivered as well as programmes, projects, and resources for socio-economic development, it should be of no surprise that various ethnic groups within a given country struggle to be represented in such an influential organization. Our view is that this struggle should not be opposed or even suppressed but rather managed to channel its energies towards distributive efficiency and effectiveness in development and service delivery. This will be a contributive factor to peace and harmony in African countries. However, there are contradictions between such ethnic representation and the well-established models and practices of managing the public service. Below we point out some of the questions raised by such contradictions.

In traditional public administration theories, especially those related to bureaucracy as a superior mode of organizational efficiency (e.g. Max Weber’s model of ideal bureaucracy), it is assumed that the public servants (bureaucrats) always carry out their roles with expertise, legality, rationality, neutrality, impartiality, objectivity and adherence to the rules of decision making.

When such traditional public administration theories are looked at in light of the concerns of representativeness, affirmative action, equality, managing diversity (ethnic or otherwise) etc, which are practical legitimate concerns of most public administration systems in the world today, they present a number of difficult questions such as the following:

- Is there a point of compromise between democratic (or representative/distributive) legitimacy desired by management of diversity in practical public administration and bureaucratic professional / technical legitimacy as required in the models of ideal bureaucracy? If such a point of compromise exists where is it and how can it be applied to offer solutions to the problematic of managing ethnic diversity in the public service?

- Is it possible to establish a compromise between bureaucratic, neutral, objective, and impartial defence of the general interest and defending interests of ethnicity or interest groups as would be advocated by ethnic representative bureaucracy? In other words, how practical is it for a public servant or a public service system to be both representative of ethnicity and impartial at the same time?

- How can the tension between the demands of a democratic State and the need for technically effective and efficient bureaucracy be eased in the process of managing diversity in Public administration?

- In the quest for a responsive public administration and search for effective tools of managing diversity in the public service should the dangers of politicizing the Civil Service be ignored? If not, how can they be avoided?

Such contradictions mean that for African public services to be able to manage ethnic diversity, they must put a lot of effort to strategically think beyond the theoretical models of bureaucracy
developed in different contexts. Such thinking will result in hybrid pragmatic models that will guide the African public services in managing ethnic diversity with minimum levels of conflict. Such models must include contextual issues as well as Human Resource management and development practices. Below we first discuss contextual issues related to managing diversity in the public service in Africa.

4. Contextual and policy issues related to managing ethnic diversity in the public service in Africa

Balancing ethnic composition of the public services in most African countries presents problems because of the following facts:

- **The big numbers of ethnic groups.** When a country has, for example, more than 20 ethnic groups and is constrained by economic rationality to curtail recruitment in the public service, it certainly has difficulties in finding a formula that will ensure satisfactory representation of each ethnic group in its public service. This is made even more difficult by the fact that in most cases ethnic groups rarely treasure low jobs in the public service. They aim at the top jobs or the so-called “juicy ones”. For example, in Uganda, an ethnic group will see itself as being represented in the public service if a “son of the soil” (meaning one of them) is appointed Permanent Secretary. The same ethnic group will not bother to find out how many of its sons or daughters of the soil are recruited as Secretaries, Accounts clerks, Personnel officers, Teachers etc. These are jobs in their own right but rarely do they come to mind of ethnic vocal lobbyist when they are pressurizing government to consider them in appointments. The problem is that the number of Permanent Secretaries is limited.

- **Low levels and uneven distribution of educational attainments.** It is a well-documented fact that African countries have low literacy rates let alone higher education levels. Another but probably less documented fact is that, apart from being low, education is unevenly distributed among different ethnic groups in a given country. When recruitment is based on the levels of education as testified by grades and certificates automatically the ethnic groups that have low levels of education are numerically ruled out. For example, in Uganda when Parliament was debating the issue of the level of education a person should have to qualify to present oneself as candidate for Chairmanship of a local council, one of the arguments that emerged was that if such a law was made and strictly followed some districts or sub-counties would fail to raise candidates for their councils. It is not possible to catch big fish from a pond if, in the first place, there is no fish. African countries should spend bigger percentages of their budgets on education to get out of such a problem. In other words the first step towards effective management of ethnic diversity in the African public service is to introduce, free compulsory universal education and eliminate the excuse of excluding some ethnic groups because they have no qualified people to represent them.

- **The diversity of technical jobs in the public service.** Some jobs simply cannot be filled following ethnic considerations. If a job is highly technical (doctor, engineer, nurse, lawyer, computer expert, etc), then the choice of deciding to give it to a particular ethnic
group is more limited. It would be easy if the public service were only for generalists. Unfortunately it is not. Addressing such an issue would require re-thinking and re-designing strategies of national manpower development paying particular attention to address ethnic diversity.

- **The public service being the only viable employer in the country.** The pressure on government to always take ethnicity into consideration when hiring is increased by the fact that in most African countries, because of underdeveloped private and civil society sectors the public service has been almost the only employer. In addition, weaknesses in systems of transparency, accountability and control in the public service provide opportunities for individuals to benefit financially through dubious acts such as embezzlement hence causing many people to look at high public service jobs with an envious eye. For this reason, liberalization, development and strengthening the private and NGO sectors for job creation would be an external instrument in the management of ethnic diversity in the public service. A person employed by a private sector organization rarely provokes public enquiry about how he or she acquired the job or how much he was paid or from what ethnic group he / she comes. Appointing a Managing Director in Uganda Commercial Bank will send every ethnic group wondering why it was not one of their sons or daughters to be appointed. But appointing a Managing Director of, let us say, Stanbic Bank in Kampala will go unnoticed because it is private.

- **Over-centralized and concentrated government.** Over-centralization and concentration of government functions also increases the pressure of the demand for considering ethnicity during recruitment. When government is decentralized many sons and daughters of the soil will be employed in their home areas. This will relieve the pressure on central government. In this case decentralization coupled with decentralized human resource management system becomes a tool for managing diversity in the public service.

- **Globalization, brain drain vs. localization.** African public services are caught in a dilemma-like situation. On one hand they are operating in a context that is increasingly being integrated in globalization. The benefits from globalization include jobs in external markets especially for knowledge and highly skilled workers. It would relieve pressure from the African public service if some of the job seekers were absorbed by the global labour marked. However, the same knowledge and highly skilled workers are in short supply at home. When they leave the country to get jobs in the global market, the public service cries of brain drain caused by globalization. Clearly this is a sign of poverty. In a global village, the rich talk of brain trade when they export knowledge and skilled labour. But the poor talk of brain drain. Globalization would be an additional external instrument in managing the problem of ethnic diversity in the public service. Localization on the other hand concentrates the problem and transforms what would be positive economically (brain trade) into something economically negative (brain drain). A combination of Human resource development and utilization policies that would increase the number of knowledge and skilled workers to satisfy the home demand while at the same time integrating them in the global market would be the optimum solution in this case. In the event that ethnic pressure for jobs in the public service is a sign of lack of alternative
opportunities, countries should endeavour to harness their human resources for both the national and the global markets.

5. Holistic strategic model for managing ethnic diversity in the public service

The model’s core purpose is to build a representative public service that respects the core values of responsiveness to ethnic diversity, inclusiveness of all ethnic groups in the country, and high quality service delivery. Apart from the practices of human resource management, the core purpose and values are supported, driven and protected by appropriate policies in education, manpower development, decentralization including decentralized human resource management, liberalization, privatization and private sector development together with appropriate labour laws.
The popular or populist tendency in the discussion of managing ethnic diversity in the public service in African countries is to consider representative public service as if it depended only on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices especially recruitment and promotion. The model presented above departs radically from this view. Each element in the model is discussed below.

- **Representative public service**: The concept of representative public service does not refer to numerical considerations only. It refers also to interest and cultural values and aspirations of the society in question. If the society is multi-ethnic then the interests, cultural values, and aspirations of each ethnic group must be equally taken into consideration in the public service. What this means is that a formula must be worked out whereby no ethnic group has reasonable justification to feel that it is being deprived at the expense of another ethnic group. (For example Uganda has never adopted any of its indigenous local languages as the official language in the public service precisely because each ethnic group sticks to its own and would feel linguistically persecuted. As a result the country has remained with English as the language used in the public service). In addition, the representativeness must be reflected at three core value levels namely: responsiveness, inclusiveness and quality of service.

- **Responsiveness**: In the event that numerically it may not be possible or even feasible to have every ethnic group satisfactorily represented in the public service as an employing organization, the most satisfying in terms of enjoyment of public services delivered is the service’s responsiveness to the needs of the people equally. Political and rhetorical aspects put aside, the public expects the public service to be responsive to their needs in terms of the nature, quality, quantity, and timeliness of the services it delivers as well as in terms of the manner in which the public service interacts with the Public. When everything is taken into consideration it is not of very much use to have a public service that numerically represents every ethnic group but which delivers no service or which delivers services that do not respond to the needs of the public. Responsiveness is a crucial element in representativeness. With responsiveness the debate on affirmative action moves beyond the questions of access to jobs and patronage, to issues of how the public service is responsive to the entire population.

- **Quality of service delivered**: Every public, irrespective of its ethnic composition, expects high quality service from the public service. Therefore, a public service that delivers high quality service to the public is, in the highest sense of the word, representative of the highest expectation of that Public. Any concept of “representative public service” that is devoid of quality is a concept of deceit that will sooner or later lead to a disappointed public. The quality of service expected leads to demands of quality in personnel employed, methods of delivery used, systems and procedures put in place in the public service as well as in the way it interacts and communicates with the population. In other words, the considerations of quality of the public services delivered coupled with considerations of responsiveness of the public service to the needs of the entire public permit to conceive of a public service that is representative without putting emphasis on numerical ethnic representation.
• **Inclusiveness**: Inclusiveness as an aspect of ethnic representative public service is not only a matter of numerical presence of representatives of various ethnic groups of the society in question. Inclusiveness is conceived to embody, the ethnic composition of the public service in terms of numbers of public servants from the various ethnic groups, the consumption and enjoyment of public services by all the ethnic groups on equal footing, as well as participation of the public in the decision and delivery of public services. In short, it does not matter so much how many Permanent Secretaries come from one ethnic group, at the limit of things, if that ethnic group does not enjoy a certain level of services it will feel excluded and highly dissatisfied, their number of Permanent Secretaries notwithstanding. It should be born in mind that recruitment and promotion alone cannot eliminate ethnic discrimination in the workplace. They cannot create equality in the enjoyment of benefits and opportunities, job satisfaction, creativity and motivation. There must be in addition appropriate Human resource management practices.

• **Human resource management (HRM) practices**: The above core purpose and values of an ethnically representative public service can only be put in practice through well thought out appropriate practices of human resource management especially recruitment systems and procedures, training and development, performance evaluation systems and mechanisms, promotion procedures and criteria, etc. It is not possible for us to give details on each, but it must be recognized that these have to be tailored according to the particularities of the profession or segment of the public service. For example, some segments of the public service might find it easy and more feasible to use quotas to balance their ethnic composition. This is the case in the army, the police and prisons in Uganda for example. But even here, the Ugandan government has found it often difficult to make enough recruitment in the army from some tribes who take the army not to be a suitable profession for them as tribes. Another practice that may be re-thought for purposes of ethnic balancing is the selection using criteria of academic qualification as certified by school certificates only. In a situation where education is not guaranteed for every one, using this may exclude some ethnic groups for long. Yet, there are some jobs where skills and experience may testify to competence and capability better than certificates. Such jobs could be filled without over dwelling on school certificates and therefore allow people who did not have the chance of going far with school education but who possess the requisite skills and maybe experience to go into such jobs. Practices of ethnic tolerance, mutual respect, open communication, grievance handling, mediation in the work place, create an atmosphere that encourages equal enjoyment and discourages ethnic discriminative behaviour.

• **Labour laws**: Managing ethnic diversity in the public service has to be within the context of appropriate labour laws to guide hiring, disciplining, promotions, rewards, grievance handling, wage negotiation, etc. Measures such as affirmative action, equal opportunity in employment, cannot be effectively implemented if enabling labour laws do not support them. Some African countries have not reviewed their labour laws for years. These laws were not designed to support the management of ethnic diversity in the public service.
• **Liberalization, privatization and private sector development:** As long as the public service is put in a situation of being seen as the only worthwhile employer, it will bear the whole pressure of ethnic demands and this will make the job of managing ethnic diversity in the public service much more difficult. Without liberalization it is also difficult to integrate the country’s labour market in the global market. Again this does not help to reduce the pressure on the public service. It has to be born in mind also that a liberalized labour market and employment in the private sector can effectively address the issue of managing ethnic diversity only when there are appropriate labour laws. If not, then with privatization, the problems of managing ethnic diversity are transferred from the public service to the private sector. On a national scale this does not solve the problem.

• **Decentralization and decentralized human resource management:** Decentralization and decentralized human resource management allows local governments to handle functions of managing their public service and reduces the ethnic pressure on the central government. However, it must be recognized that this is a solution only in countries where ethnic groups are located in specific geographical and administrative regions.

• **Manpower development policies:** Careful manpower policies and strategies have to be conceived to incorporate issues, problems and measures of managing ethnic diversity in the country’s manpower. It is within appropriate manpower development policies that measures such as affirmative action and equal opportunity employment policies can be firmly entrenched. If an ethnic group is disadvantaged at the level of manpower development, it definitely will be disadvantaged at the level of hiring and promotions.

• **National education policies and strategies:** We have already pointed out the current dilemma caused by low levels of education and the unevenly distributed education across ethnic groups in Africa. Education is the king-spinning pin in the model we are proposing. African governments must endeavour to spend the resources it takes to educate their population evenly. It is unfair to expect the public service to be ethnically representative when the education levels are not ethnically equally spread. The unequal representation in the African public service could also be seen as representative of the unequally distributed education levels. Most African Governments have for long known the importance of education to development but they have shied away from the responsibility of dedicating the necessary resources to compulsory, universal free education. We do not wish to go into the debate of whether the resources are available for this or not. We only wish to point out that the model we are proposing rests centrally on the national education policies and strategies. These must be geared towards educating every one in the population. There cannot be equal opportunity in employment when in the first place some people do not have any opportunity in terms of education.

**Conclusion**

In most African countries managing diversity in the public service is an issue that requires immediate attention. The struggle by ethnic groups for positions in the public service is not unfounded, given the important policymaking, implementation, and resource allocation roles played by the public service. It is legitimate; and if well harnessed it can channel energies
towards positive distribution of development and service delivery. Contextual issues and problems related to managing ethnic diversity in the public service in Africa must be incorporated in the strategic thinking on managing ethnic diversity. A strategy for managing ethnic diversity in the public service in Africa must be molded with contextual issues of education, manpower development, decentralization, labour laws and appropriate human resource management practices as building blocks to support representative public service as a core purpose and responsiveness, quality and inclusiveness as pillar values.

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