Aide-Memoire

Enhancing the Performance of the Public Service in a Development State with a Focus on Human Resource Capacity Building
6-10 October 2008 - Accra, Ghana

A. Background

Twenty years ago, Africa experienced a major economic crisis arising from a world-wide economic recession. At the time, there was some thinking that the Public Services in Africa were too strong and overbearing, resulting in the suffocation of other societal players, like the private sector and civil society. Calls were made to contain and check the scope of the state, including the public service by reducing their size and costs.

Today, it is realized that the diagnosis was mistaken; on the contrary, African states as well as their public services were weak. As is the case in all parts of the world, a strong state has to provide security, build infrastructure, staff public schools, control traffic and punish wrong doers. It is a common fact that most African countries are characterized by their inability to undertake such mundane functions effectively. That is not a good indicator of a strong state/public service but rather of a week one. The weaknesses are reflected in the size and composition of the public service in relation to the tasks at hand; their capabilities, capacities and competences; the manner in which they are managed and supervised; levels of motivation as well as their levels of performance. In addition, the level of their autonomy in relation to the political class has been declining. Unless these conditions are improved, African public services will be ill prepared to effectively contribute to the realization of a developmental state.

It is evident that the development of the human capital is crucial to improve the performance level of countries in order to achieve national as well as international development agendas. Global, regional and national commitments to sustainable development and poverty reduction require highly developed human capacities in the public sector to transform these commitments into results. The knowledge, know-how and skills, networks and attitudes of personnel in the public sector are at the heart of the performance of countries because it is through them and by them that services are planned and delivered, critical innovations conceived and realized and needed reforms carried out.

Recognizing the short-comings of development plans in strengthening human resources capacity in developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan African countries, and cognizant of the effectiveness of the sharing of experiences and best practices among developing countries when it comes to finding a viable solution to common problems, UNDESA collaborated with the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) to organize the first ever meeting of the IPMA-HR in Africa. The meeting which was held in Cape Town (South Africa) in April 2007 was attended by several African countries as well as international members of IPMA-HR. During this meeting the human resource managers sponsored by UNDESA, having noted their capacity limitations in effective planning, managing and evaluating the performance of human resources, proposed the establishment of a network of African human resources managers as one of the measures to spearhead effort for capacity building in human resource management in the Public Sector in Africa.
With the financial support of UNDESA, the public sector officials met again in Mbabane, Swaziland in September 2007 during a Roundtable Conference of the African Association for Public Administration and Management (AAPAM) and presented their proposal to a wider group of senior public sector officials from Africa. On the basis of this proposal, participants of the AAPAM Roundtable Conference discussed issues related to the undeveloped professional status of human resource managers in the public sector in Africa and agreed that there is a need to rectify this situation through, among other things, the creation of a strong professional network to champion the cause of capacity building of human resource managers, professional development and strategic positioning of human resources management in Africa. In addition, an initiative to form an Association of Public Service Commissions in Africa was discussed and agreed upon by the participants.

B. Activity

Following the presentation the Working Group on Professionalizing Human Resource Management in the Public Service in Africa made to the AAPAM Roundtable conference in Mbabane, Swaziland, highlighting the challenges facing the public sector human resource managers in Africa, the Public service managers who constitute the Africa Association for Public Administration and Management (AAPAM) decided to dedicate effort to addressing human resource management and public service capacity building in Africa. The expected outputs as well as the thematic content of the Roundtable are driven by concerns and recommendations made by the Working Group for improving the human resource capacities in the Public Service in Africa. Just to quote a few of the contents to illustrate this:

Addressing the Role, Scope and Size of the Public Service in Africa: Are the Methodologies and Approaches Appropriate? As mentioned in the Introduction there is a tendency to generalize that African states are undertaking too many roles, their scope of functions is too large and that as a consequence, the size of their public service is also too big. On the same hand, other analysts contend that given the nature of Africa’s political economy, such assertions are simplistic and indeed the reverse may be true. The papers and discussions on this topic are expected to examine the validity of these contentions by looking at comparative experiences across the continent. The discussions may also address recent emerging consensus among the antagonists on this issue and how the consensus is affecting the resolutions of the issues on the ground.

Strengthening Human Resource Management: Challenges and Improvement Measures: Ordinarily, the concept of public service includes structures, institutions, processes and people. Of all these elements, the people are the life blood of the public service. Thus the performance of the public service depends significantly on how the public servants are managed i.e. how they are recruited, deployed, trained and developed as well as rewarded. This area has tended to be neglected by most African governments except for a short spell after independence which mainly focused on addressing the issue of not having requisite numbers of personnel with right skills and competences. The issue was initially addressed through crash training programmes undertaken locally and abroad and the recruitment of foreign experts. The training element entailed setting up training institutions at tertiary levels. While these efforts ameliorated the problems, the expansion of the role and scope of public service demanded an increase in numbers, skill types and levels as well as competences which proved difficult to fulfill. The issues related to recruitment and motivation has, until recently, remained neglected by many countries. The authors and discussions will be expected to address the extent to which past and current measures in this area are effectively addressing the problems and what needs to be done in
the future. Some of the papers could focus specifically on the role of Training and Research Institutions in this endeavor.

Pay Incentives and Rewards. While pay incentives and rewards is part of human resource management issues, it seems to be the most neglected issue despite the fact that it has the greatest impact on the performance of the public servants and, in turn, the public services. For that reason the Roundtable will address this issue intensively. Authors and discussions will focus on the issue by presenting information on the nature of the problem, approaches used by African countries to handle it, problems encountered and the way forward. Writers with practical experiences in handling pay reforms are encouraged to prepare presentations”.

Because of the focus on the human resource capacity challenges, AAPAM has requested UNDESA to sponsor the Members of the Working Group on Professionalizing Human Resource Management in Africa to actively participate in the workshop for their capacity building, report on the progress they have made in the establishment of the Africa Public Sector Human Resource Managers Network (APS-HRMnet) and finalize what ever is remaining to be done before the network is launched to sustain human resource capacity building activities in the Public Sector in Africa.

C. Objectives

The main objective is the strengthening of the capacity of the Working Group on Professionalizing Human Resource management in The Public Sector in Africa in terms of knowledge, networking skills and advocacy for human resource management in Africa. The second objective is to provide opportunity for the Group to present its work on professionalizing Human Resource Management in the Public Sector in Africa to the Public Service Managers so that the momentum gained is sustained for HRM capacity building in Africa. The issues and challenges related to HRM capacity building in Africa having been presented and accepted by the Public Service Managers, need to be sustained on the agenda. The Working Group will also use the opportunity to plan together with UNDESA the future of this initiative, which is the ultimate launch of the Network of Human Resources Managers in Africa which is expected to take place in early 2009 at the Workshop on Capacity Building for Human Resource Development Policy and Strategy in the Public Service in Africa, tentatively scheduled to take place in February 2009 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. UNDESA has also received a request from the Government of Tanzania to provide both financial and technical assistance in the organization of this workshop.

D. Inputs

AAPAM will cover conference facilities and interpretation expenses. Members of AAPAM will finance their own participants and senior public sector officials will be financed by their own governments. Substantive preparation and reporting of the activity will be the responsibility of UNDESA which will also sponsor the participation of 9 participants from Africa countries that are Members of the Working Group on professionalizing Human Resource management in the Public Service in Africa and one staff member as resource person. A staff member of UNDESA will prepare and deliver a paper on “Strategies for Attracting and Retaining High Quality Staff in the Public Service in Africa”.


E. Outputs and expected accomplishments

The outputs include: (i) A paper on “Strategies for attracting and retaining the best talent in the public service in Africa” by UNDESA; and (ii) The agreed upon document establishing the Network will be published as the founding documents of the APS-HRMnet.

The major accomplishments of this initiative are: (i) the agreement of public service managers on the importance of the Network and the consensus to launch the Africa Public Sector Human Resource Managers Network (APS-HRMnet) which will take place in early 2009 in Tanzania. This workshop will deal with the final preparation and consensus building of the Network. (ii) UNDESA will be instrumental in setting up a permanent forum through which capacity building and professionalizing Human Resource Management in the Public Service in Africa will be institutionalized and promoted in a sustained way and where human resources managers of African countries meet and exchange ideas, information and best practices on a regular basis. (ii) Policy advice and advocacy for sustained human resource development and capacity building will be achieved especially with the participation of Ministers responsible for Public Service in Africa.

F. Dates and Venue:

6-10 October 2008, Accra Ghana

G. Language:

The AAPAM Roundtable in Accra Ghana will be conducted in English with simultaneous interpretation in French. The AAPAM will finance the simultaneous interpretation.

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