“Strategies for Attracting the best talent in the Public Service in Africa”

Expert Group Meeting Organised jointly with APS-HRMnet and AAPAM during its 33rd Roundtable Conference

Lilongwe, Malawi
14 to 18 November 2011.

Aide-Memoire
A. Background and Rationale

1. The quality of human resources in the public sector is critical to the development of any country in general and to the achievement of the MDGs and other Internationally Agreed Development Agendas in particular. Global, regional and national commitments to sustainable development and poverty reduction need human capacities in the public, private, and civil society sectors as the translation of such goals into tangible results is in the hands of human resources. It is through the knowledge, know-how and skills, networks and attitudes of human resources that services are planned and delivered, critical innovations conceived and realized and needed reforms carried out. “Institutional capacity development, complemented by human resource development, has been recognized to be at the centre of the process of making States capable of meeting their citizens’ developmental aspirations.”¹ UNDESA has been collaborating with the Conference of African Ministers of Public Service (CAMPS), the Africa Public Sector Human Resource Managers’ Network (APS-HRMnet), the African Association for Public Administration and Management (AAPAM), and other global, regional and national organisations to contribute to the strengthening of the capacity to manage the human resource in Africa’s public service.

2. UNDESA and APS-HRMnet joined AAPAM during its 32nd Roundtable Conference in Durban, South Africa, in November 2010 and mounted activities including an Expert Group Meeting on Human Resource Development Policies in the Public Service in Africa. Senior government officials attending the Roundtable observed that whereas decentralization has been going on in many African countries as part of the efforts to reform public administration, strengthening public administration leadership capacities in local governments has not moved at the same pace. While local governments are increasingly expected to be responsive to the needs and problems facing their communities, more often than not, they do not possess the necessary resources, administrative and leadership capacities to effectively address such problems. Consequently, in many African countries public administration capacity in local governments is generally very weak, and that poses a threat to the achievement of the MDGs. It was also emphasized that the capacity of public administration must be strengthened both at central and local levels to improve the delivery of services to the people and achieve the MDGs and development in general.

3. This year, in November, UNDESA and the APS-HRMnet will work with AAPAM during its 33rd Roundtable Conference and organise discussion panels and an Expert Meeting on “Attracting the best talent in the Public Service in Africa”. One of the issues to be discussed during the Expert Group Meeting is how to attract the best talent in the public service in African countries to serve in local governments especially in rural areas.

B. Main Objectives of the Expert Group Meeting

4. It will basically take capable leadership and public servants to strengthen public administration capacity in local governments. The main objective is two fold: to highlight the challenges related to attracting high performing public servants to serve in local governments especially in rural Africa and to propose strategies for attracting the best talent to boost improvement in the delivery of public service at local level. The Expert Group Meeting will

¹ Quoted from the conclusions of the 7th Africa Governance Forum held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in October 2007
provide a forum for sharing information and knowledge as well as providing advice to policy formulators (especially human resource managers in the public service) and policy makers (especially Ministers responsible for public service and local government) on the elements of policies and strategies that should be instituted in the public service to attract the best human resources to serve at local level for effective implementation of government policies and programs especially those related to the achievement of the MDGs and other internationally agreed development agenda.

C. **Specific Objectives**

(i) To enhance understanding of the process through which human resource management policies and strategies in the public service in Africa are formulated, decided, implemented and evaluated and how this impacts on the willingness of the best talent to serve in local governments especially in rural areas.

(ii) To reflect on the policies and strategies that could best attract the best human resource in Africa’s public service to serve at local level

(iii) To propose recommendations to the Ministries responsible for public service and local governments in Africa and other stakeholders on how the best public servants could be attracted and retained in local governments in order to strengthen public administration and the delivery of public services at local level.

(iv) To contribute to the strengthening of the APS-HRMnet and to the professionalization of Human resource management in the public service by studying the challenges and strategies for excellent human resource in local governments

(v) To provide opportunity for interaction between Experts in Human Resource management in the Public Service and the leaders of the Public Service who will be attending the 33 Roundtable Conference of the African Association for Public Administration and management (AAPAM), to discuss the critical importance of appropriate human resource management policies to the implementation of government policies and programs at local level

D. **Thematic Content of the AEGM**

5. The transfer of authority and responsibility of public functions from central governments to local governments is a noble concept which broadens participation of citizens in decision making. Decentralization enables communities to play an active role in democracy and setting development agendas that are responsive to their needs. Where it works effectively, decentralization streamlines decision making processes which are typically characterized by bottlenecks caused by central government bureaucratic planning and implementation. In the last few decades, decentralization has especially gained prominence as an expressed goal or as an actual programmatic pursuit for improving public service delivery affecting and enhancing citizen participation in Africa. The fact that a considerable number of African governments are committed to and placed decentralization at the centre of their development strategies for addressing increasingly complex challenges and accelerating development at local levels is demonstrated in a number of policy documents for African states. The following is a quotation from the Decentralization Policy of the Government of the Republic of Namibia:
6. “The only guarantor for democracy is people making their own political, cultural, social and developmental decisions at their own level and the only safeguard of sustainable development is when people participate in setting their own priorities, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating these themselves within the overall national interests. Central to both rural and urban poverty, is the issue of access to decision making and to resources. Decentralization will enhance local people’s access to locally relevant decision making through which they will be able to control local and external resources so that they may be utilized according to their own priorities. Poverty eradication is a long-term goal which can only be achieved through well planned community initiatives, institutionalized in organs of self local government, not sporadic forays by well meaning but not sustainable initiatives.”

7. While governments in Africa have clearly demonstrated the will to decentralize through well articulated decentralization policies and in most cases, actual establishment of local governments for provision of public service delivery at local level, one cannot claim that such commitment has yielded the intended results. To a certain extent, this has caused skepticism in the likelihoods of achieving targets at the heart of decentralization programmes and some governments are stalling on decentralization as a result. On the other hand, other governments have not decentralized enough to succeed. Lack of capacity at local level is often cited as the reason for not decentralizing enough, and the question is whether Central governments should decentralize or wait for local governments’ capacity to improve before decentralizing. The hesitation on decentralization for fear of failure because of limited capacity paralyses initiatives in decentralization and puts local governance actors in a perpetual lack of capacity.

8. Lack of capacity, be it financial, administrative or human resource capacity in local governments impairs their ability to efficiently deliver on the mandates given to them. The state of affairs in local governments in Africa is attributable to a number of factors, some of which are unwillingness by central governments to provide adequate financial resources to local governments, sometimes brought on by purely selfish needs of central government officials scared of relinquishing ‘too much power’ to local levels, allocation of sufficient financial resources to local governments with little autonomy to make decisions over those resources at local level, an overestimation of the costs of decentralization to the central levels and an underestimation of the resource needs at local levels and limited focus on human resource capacities for facilitating democratic decision making mechanisms and programme implementation at local levels.

9. To exacerbate the troubles facing local governments, governments at times engage sporadic approaches to establishing local governments based on regional trends or political targets rather than basing these decisions on sound analyses of local dynamics, resulting into tension between local governments and the communities they are expected to serve, a situation which is neither desirable nor practical for long-term development aspirations. At other times, there has been ambiguity around what challenges have to be solved by central government and which ones could be solved within the local government ambit. With all
these challenges, it is evident that creating and sustaining developmental local governments is no mean feat. It requires deliberate and consistent efforts at identifying and implementing creative solutions that are cognizant of the multi-dimensional nature of the challenges at hand. The importance of channeling financial resources to local governments and capacity building at local level for deliverance of MDGs cannot be overemphasized.

10. Notwithstanding these facts, executing local governments mandates does by and large depend on the quality of personnel that they attract and retain. Attraction of, let alone retention of competent personnel at local government level where incentives are much less than at central government level is a serious challenge that inhibits local government capacities to deliver services efficiently in a consistent manner. The following questions need to be answered if Africa is to overcome these challenges and truly provide its people with decent standards of living:

- What background, outlook, knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies do local government officials have to possess to efficiently execute mandates assigned to them?
- What human resource management policies and strategies can be adopted in the public service in Africa to attract and retain such officials at local governments?
- What processes can be undertaken to develop effective human resource management policies and strategies and how do these policies impact on the willingness of the best talent to serve in local governments especially in rural areas?
- Who plays a lead role in ensuring that such measures receive the attention and resources they deserve for implementation?

E. **Expected Outcome**

11. The meeting will make proposals and recommendations on the type of cadres that are needed to realize developmental local governments and devise strategies that could attract the best human resources in Africa’s public service to strengthen public administration and the delivery of public services at local level. The meeting is expected to provide a platform for interaction between Experts in Human Resource management in the Public Service and the leaders of the Public Service who will be attending the 33 Roundtable Conference of the African Association for Public Administration and management (AAPAM), to discuss the critical importance of appropriate human resource management policies for the implementation of government policies and programs at local level. The meeting provides UNDESA with an excellent opportunity for facilitating the generation and imparting of advice to Member States in the area of building and retaining human resource capacity for local governments and will further contribute to the strengthening of UNDESA’s collaborative networks in the region.

F. **Organizers, Targeted Group and Resource Persons**

12. The Experts identified by DPADM/UNDESA will join human resource managers, cabinet ministers, heads of public/civil services and secretaries to cabinet,
permanent/principal secretaries, and other high ranking government officials from Africa, chairpersons and commissioners of public service commissions, heads of management development institutes, development partners, representatives of statutory institutions, scholars and researchers to discuss the “Strategies for attracting the best talent in the public service in Africa” during the 33rd Roundtable Conference of AAPAM. The meeting is being jointly organized with the Africa Public Sector Human Resource Managers’ Network (APS-HRMnet) and AAPAM.

G. **Languages**

The Expert Meeting will be conducted in English.

H. **Venue and Dates**

The meeting will take place in Lilongwe, Malawi from 14 to 18 November 2011.

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