MANAGING DIVERSITY IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE: ONE OF AFRICA’S LEAST TACKLED ISSUES: (Lessons from South Africa’s Experience)

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0: Introduction

Most African countries have been rather shy about addressing the issue of managing diversity in general; and ethnic diversity in the Public Service in particular. This has mostly added fuel to inter-ethnic conflict and fighting over positions and resources in the Public Service and body politic. The position this paper takes is that it is high time African countries squarely met the challenges of managing diversity, ethnic or otherwise, in their Public Services as one of the measures for minimizing violent conflict on the continent.

It has to be realised that one of the realities that are increasingly imposing themselves on socio-politico-economic management all over the world, as globalization becomes dominant, is the need to manage diversity. The world’s social composition is becoming reconfigured such that even nations that previously considered themselves homogeneous are now multi-ethnic or multi-racial. The composition of societies and organisations’ workforce is becoming more and more diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, people with disabilities, religion, knowledge, skills and attitude etc.

The history of the world has been witness to examples of efforts to manage ethnic and or racial diversity at geo-political level some of them very sad and others quite positive.

The human management of ethnic diversity has been mixed. At one extreme is genocide, dating back to the European expansion into the Americas or Asia, and seen also in the Holocaust, as well as more recently in Rwanda and Burundi. Then come models of separation and domination, the clearest example being that of apartheid regime in South Africa. Separatism and cesession form another way of handling ethnic diversity, as in the cases of Eritrea, Bangladesh and the break-up of the former Soviet Union...Another form of managing ethnic diversity is through local autonomy... and power sharing” (Advancing the Social Agenda: Two years after Copenhagen, United nations)
However, such measures, even the most positive alone, would not be very helpful at organisation level or at the level of productivity and performance improvement of Public Service. Unlike most of the African countries, South Africa has been catalysed by the historical injustices of the Apartheid system and the manner in which it was dismantled, to examine the issue of diversity in the Public Service and devise policies, strategies and practices to address it. In this paper we will discuss the management of diversity in the Public Service in Africa using the examples of the efforts South Africa has been making in this regard. The South African case highlights the issues that are pertinent in valuing, rationalising and making focused strategies, policies, programmes and practices for managing diversity in Africa’s Public Service.

1: Rationale for Managing Diversity in the Public Service:

There are several reasons why Governments of African countries should be encouraged to effectively manage diversity in the Public Service. Apart from the deeper reasons associated with the requirements of making the public Service an efficient and productivity-oriented organisation, some of the reasons are centred on the governments’ pre-occupation with their legitimacy, others are concerned with credibility of their policies, and others are about social representative bureaucracy to mirror the community the government serves. There are also reasons that are linked with the desire of countries to be competitive through understanding, using, working with, and serving other cultures all over the world. As Tony Blair puts it:

“Those countries that will prosper most in this increasingly globalized world will be those that see diversity as the normal state of affairs, that accept rather than reject other cultures, that understand them, like them, and work with them” (Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, in a Speech at the Annual general meeting of the network, 28 November 2000, see http://www.number-10.gov.uk/news.asp?)

Essentially, a Government’s reasons for emphasising management of diversity, or some of its aspects, depend largely on its awareness of the strategic importance of diversity, socio-politico-economic, cultural and demographic realities, what it wishes to construct for its future generations and how it values and wishes to promote high efficiency and productivity in its Public Service. The “White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service” of the Government of South Africa puts the case as follows:
“The Government inherited a Public Service characterized by ineffectiveness, unfair discrimination and division on the basis of race and gender, and virtually excluded people with disabilities. In the Public Service, employment mirrored the discrimination suffered by Black people, women and people with disabilities in the wider employment market with particular regard to opportunities in employment, earning levels, benefits, and conditions of service. The Public Service thus lacked legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the majority of South Africans. Restoring legitimacy and credibility through the development of a broadly representative Public Service has been seen, from the outset, as a key to the transformation process”. (White Paper on Affirmative Action in The Public Service, Department of Public Service and Administration, Government of South Africa, March 1998)

Post apartheid South Africa targeted social justice and decided that in order to correct the imbalances of its past the issue of management of diversity had to be addressed at the highest level (the National Constitution). The country’s constitution specifies that:

“Public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, with employment and personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness, and the need to redress the imbalances of the past to achieve broad representation” Section 195 (1).

In presenting the case for the diversity, however, the government White Paper strongly notes that the need to develop a culture of diversity goes well beyond simply maintaining a representative workforce and presents a number of business-related arguments in favour of diversity management including the following:

- **Contribution to improved service delivery**: developing a more responsive, customer-focused approach to the recipients of public services would require Public Servants who are; able to relate closely to every section of South Africa’s diverse society, familiar with citizens’ needs, able to communicate in their languages and respond to their concerns.

- **Fresh thinking, innovative approaches, and new ideas**: Meeting the challenges facing the Public Service for long to come would require fresh thinking and innovative approaches which are outside the traditional Public Service culture. Encouraging diversity of culture can generate new ideas and get them adopted.

- **Morale, job satisfaction and increased productivity**: A culture in which differing cultures are valued is likely to boost employee morale and contribute to increased job satisfaction and thus to increased productivity.
In these terms, which are pertinent to managing diversity in any Public Service in Africa, the Public Service of South Africa acknowledges that developing a culture of diversity is not only necessary to legitimise the Public Service and ultimately the Government, but is also an essential and powerful tool to develop an efficient, effective and stable Public Service in the country both at Central and Provincial Government levels. Legitimate governments as well as efficient, effective and stable Public Services are things most African countries badly need! Lessons from the South Africa experience could be of great value to them.

2: Analytical and Diagnostic Understanding of Diversity

In order to have clear and realistic guiding principles, policies, strategies, actions, programmes, practices, and specific responsibilities for effective management of diversity, the Public Service has got to have a thorough analysis, diagnosis and appreciation of the various constituent faces of diversity in the Service itself and in the society it services. In South Africa’s Public Service, diversity is understood in terms of Persons with disabilities, Women and men, Black and white people, the poor and the rich, as well as the rich cultural background of the different races and peoples that compose the country’s society. The Public Service is expected to be representative in the sense that:

- Its Culture is based on the principles of inclusiveness, diversity, responsiveness, and equality
- Its Composition is broadly reflective of South African demographics according to race, gender, and disability and where the beneficiaries of affirmative action are blacks, women and persons with disabilities
- Its Human resource management practices incorporate the values of inclusiveness and diversity
- Its Service provision practices are premised on responsiveness, equity, and effectiveness.
But it is equally realised that “employees differ along a host of other factors which also impact on work environment such as functional and educational background, language, experience, lifestyles, socio-economic class position, rank etc. Thus race, gender, and disability are part of a larger and even more complex picture, all of which must be taken into account in the development of effective sustainable organizations.” (Department of Public Service and Administration, Ministry for Public Service and Administration Green Paper: Notice 851 of 1997)

3: Dealing with Hidden Realities of Managing Diversity

It is possible to have a situation where on first sight the Public Service looks diversified, especially if attention is paid only to the question of numbers. This phenomenon has been noted in South Africa’s Public Service and current diversity management policies are geared towards correcting the first sight impressions by dealing with the hidden realities.

The population of South Africa in 1995 was composed of 75% African, 13% White, 9% Coloured, and 3% Indian people. Women were 51% of the population. Of them 76% were Black, 12% white, 9% Coloured, and 3% Indian women. It was believed that people with disabilities comprised 5% of the population. Bearing in mind that South Africa’s constitution requires that the Public Service be representative by reflecting this composition, it is interesting to look at the composition of the Public Service to have an idea of how it respects the Constitution on this issue.

The first impression one gets is that the Public Service of South Africa is progressing well towards being representative, especially in respect to the previously disadvantaged groups (Black People, women, Coloureds and People with disabilities). For example, in 1998, Black People were 79% of the entire Public Service force, women accounted for 49%, fifty six percent of managers at Chief Director level and above were Black People.

However, closer scrutiny revealed a different reality. Only 38% of managers at Director level and above were Black while 11% were women and there were only four women Directors-general. There were very few people with disabilities in the Public Service. The Government White Paper on Affirmative Action noted that:
“Despite the removal of the statutory and other formal barriers to entry and advancement within the Public Service since 1994, and despite the creation of an increasingly equitable employment environment through improved human resource management practices, there are groups of people whose ability to thrive continues to be hampered by the legacy of past discrimination. For these groups, additional steps that correct their disadvantaged status are required so that they too can enjoy the full benefits of employment.” (Government Gazette, 23 April 1998, page 24)

The country therefore distinguishes formal equality and substantive equality. Formal equality is the removal of past laws and putting in place new just ones. Substantive equality refers to application of formal equality for achievement of meaningful equality. The necessity to distinguish the two is born out of the realisation that formal equality ignores the entrenched structural inequalities that continue to block access, participation and enjoyment of people’s rights and that substantive equality necessitates the acknowledgement and eradication of the actual social and economic conditions that generate inequality in individuals’ and groups’ lives. In a way this would be a useful tip for re-thinking affirmative action and equal opportunity as strategies for managing diversity in the Public Service in most African countries.

Some of the factors that cause low representation of the previously disadvantaged people are not necessarily within the policy of affirmative action as it relates to the Public Service. They are both historical and cultural and have to be dealt with at those macro levels. For examples:

- Discrimination against Black people in education in the past and the blocking of opportunities for economic advancement have denied many the formal educational qualifications and necessary experience for entry into and advancement within certain types of occupations, especially highly technical and managerial posts.

- In the same way, the gender stereotyping has resulted in the majority of women being employed in areas such as education and health in which they perform relatively lower level work with very few in decision-making positions.

- Even where women are well qualified and experienced, the predominance of males at management level has resulted in a culture in which male behaviour patterns are perceived to be the norm, and in which women often find it difficult to be accepted as equals by their male colleagues.
• People with disabilities suffer the greatest exclusion from the Public Service employment and they are greatly under-serviced. Within the Public Service little is known about people with disabilities since little information is collected on them. The tendency is to ignore the diversity of disabilities and to focus on just a few with the result that some groups are neglected and the variety of needs the people with disabilities have are ignored or remain unknown.

Hidden realities such as the above, call for policies and measures that go well beyond numbers to address the whole spectrum of imbalances in the Public Service. The South Africa government White Paper on Affirmative Action makes an interesting observation in this respect:

There are distorted ways of applying affirmative action whose effect is to boost some groups of the target group at the expense of others, thereby perpetuating their disadvantaged status. For instance, within some National Departments and Provincial Administrations, there is a tendency to recruit one group of women at the expense of others as the requirement to affirm women is used to affirm White women only at the expense of African, Indian, and Coloured women. So too, a practice has evolved in some instances to promote one group amongst the broad group “Black people” while ignoring the others.

Clearly, this demonstrates the need for policy makers to be aware of distortions that may come along the way of implementing policies for diversity management. Diversity is not a term with fixed meaning. It recreates itself with new disadvantaged groups emerging as old ones become catered for. For example, in the case of South Africa, it is possible after successfully addressing the issue of low representation of Black people, women, and people with disabilities, to find that the same groups have sub-groups, which are being disadvantaged. This is why the analysis of the situation of diversity in the public Service should always be as detailed as possible and repeated at regular and relatively short intervals of, for example, every year.


In the Public Service just like in any organization, workplace discrimination may be subtle, obvious, or both taking a host of various forms. In most African countries including South Africa it has become part of the organizational culture and forms part of the hidden basic assumptions,
which invisibly drive the life of the Public Service. Such assumptions are reflected in Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and have come to be the norm. They may be practiced knowingly or unknowingly. Some of the more obvious areas of discrimination mentioned in South Africa’s Public Service that required urgent attention include:

- Criteria for defining Person Specifications for filling posts and the criteria specified in the Personnel Administration Standards.
- Prescribed training and study aid schemes in the Public Service and Career Pathing
- Advertising Practices
- Employment of Disabled Persons
- Prejudices to Women and Sexual Harassment

These practices are equally important for consideration in any African country that would seek to address the issue of managing diversity in its Public Service. However, observation has consistently demonstrated that African countries hesitate to even discuss the issue of managing Diversity in the Public Service because it always boils down to addressing the “intricate and sensitive” issue of managing ethnic diversity. Intricate and sensitive it may be, but since it is crucial to legitimacy, Public service efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness, it must be addressed. It was not any less sensitive in South Africa and yet it is being addressed. African countries could learn a lot from this experience.

**Conclusion: Some Guiding Tips from South Africa’s Policy of Affirmative Action in the Public Service**

The Affirmative Action Policy of South Africa which gives the basis for managing diversity in the Public Service in the country provides some lead to what would be starting guidelines for an African country that seeks to develop policies, strategies and programmes for managing diversity in its Public Service. Essentially one would pick out the following:

- **The goal of the policy must be clearly spelt out:** In South Africa, the goal of affirmative action in the Public Service is to speed up the creation of a representative and
equitable Public Service and to build an environment that supports and enables those who have been historically disadvantaged by unfair discrimination to fulfil their maximum potential within it so that the Public Service may derive the maximum benefit of their diverse skills and talents to improve service delivery.

- **The policy must have clear objectives:** The objectives of the affirmative action policy in South Africa are to (i) enhance the capacities of the historically disadvantaged through the development and introduction of practical measures that support their advancement within the Public Service, (ii) inculcate in the Public Service a culture which values diversity and supports the affirmation of those who have historically been unfairly disadvantaged, (iii) speed up the achievement and progressive improvement of the numeric targets set out in the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service.

- **The principles to guide the policy must be clarified to all those involved:** The following principles are spelt out to guide affirmative action in South Africa’s Public Service: (i) integration with human resource management and development, (ii) productivity and improved service delivery, (iii) cost effectiveness, (iv) communication, (v) participation, (vi) transparency, (vii) accountability, (viii) reasonable accommodation, (ix) relative disadvantage.

- **What is mandatory for managers and everyone in the Public service regarding the management of Diversity must be clarified:** The Affirmative Action policy outlines the mandatory requirements in its implementation as follows: (i) every Department has to have set **time bound numeric targets** for all the targeted groups, (ii) every department has to have comprehensive **employee profiles** and statistics on all employees broken down according to the targeted groups and updated annually, (iii) implementation programmes must include an annual in-depth **affirmative action surveys**, (iv) there must be **regular management practices reviews** to determine whether they facilitate or hinder affirmative action, (v) implementation of and demonstrable support for the organization’s affirmative action policies must be included in each employee’s **performance assessment criteria**, (vi) an affirmative **action plan** must be prepared,
adopted, and promoted throughout the organization, (vii) the **responsibility of key players** within the Department for implementing the Department’s affirmative action program must be identified, (viii) a **policy statement** setting out the Department’s commitment to affirmative action must be prepared, approved by the executing authority, marketed and communicated within the organization and visibly displayed.

- **Backing by the law**: Legislative provisions, to avoid slip-back during implementation, must back the policy. In South Africa, provisions in the Constitution back the policy of and laws on affirmative action in the public service.
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