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## Public Sector Reforms in Africa: What Lessons have we Learnt?

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Several public sector reforms (PSR) have taken place in Africa over the last few decades with varying degrees of success; these range from very excellent performance, to limited success and then failure. However, regardless of the evaluation results, they have without a doubt had an impact on the way we understand and shape public management on the African continent. Inevitably, a number of insights and lessons have been gained on the subject matter. In this article, I suggest that a number of lessons have been learnt which should guide reformers to improve on public sector reforms and scholars to seek further explanations for failure and success. There is also the need for students of public sector reforms to question further the prevailing assumptions and theories underpinning these reforms. The 10 lessons highlighted are: (1) there is need to acknowledge the importance of culture and context, because at times local values contradict the content of reform efforts; (2) PSR need both political support and support from the civil society; (3) PSR take time to bear fruit; (4) incremental implementation may be better; (5) not all support for PSR is altruistic; (6) corruption still hinders reform in Africa; (7) there is a need to revisit the role of donors; (8) first things first – let us create a credible public sector before we reform it; (9) ownership of reform programmes by African governments and other stakeholders is necessary; and (10) despite these reforms, Africa still remains poor.

**Keywords:** public sector reforms; Africa; new public management; civil service; donors

### Introduction

Over the last few decades the public sector in African countries has undergone reforms in an attempt to align it to global standards. Driven by donors, the reforms are aimed at correcting colonial distortions still bedevilling the sector; they are run under the dispensation of new public administration (NPM).

The public sector reforms (PSR) have had varying degrees of success. There are those with *very excellent performance* such as decentralization, significant reductions in staffing and corresponding rises in real salaries and wages (Clarke and Wood, 2001, p. 71), to *limited success*, such as results oriented management in Uganda, which is said to have yielded little beyond customer surveys and staff training

(Polidano, 2001). Then there is *failure*, as in the case of Zimbabwe which has failed to effect personnel reforms in the civil service due to political factors and lack of capacity (Makumbe, 1997, cited in Clarke and Wood, 2001).

However, regardless of the evaluation, PSR have had an impact on the way we understand public management on the African continent. And out of the reforms a number of insights and lessons have been gained. In this article, I make several suggestions drawing from lessons learnt, which should guide reformers to improve on public sector reforms and scholars to seek further explanations for failure and success. The article also analyses PSR in Africa, with special focus on the sub-Saharan region. Contrived in 5 sections, it is based on a survey and reviews of existing literature on PSR in Africa.

The first section is the introduction, whereas the second part of the article discusses the concept, public sector reform, the rationale and some of the elements of public sector reform. In this part, the conditions and causes of reforms are also highlighted. The third section highlights public sector reforms in Africa and examines selected cases. Following this discussion the fourth section clarifies the concept learning as used in this article and examines the identified lessons. The article ends with the fifth section, which is the conclusion.

## **What are public sector reforms?**

### ***Public sector reforms defined***

Reforms are based on ideas that are easy to understand since they are just principles. Beyond that, reforms are designed to bring order. They are often future oriented and are not expected to produce instant results (Brunsson and Olsen, 1997, pp.1–2, 34–35), for example the reorganization and restructuring of government ministries and departments.

Above all reforms are ‘deliberate social actions premeditated by administrative reformers and implemented through an established administrative system which is thereby transformed in some way’ (Caiden, 2007, p. 11). But some scholars contend that reforms account for a limited part of the changes in organizations; more remarkably, they many never bring about change. In this case they are seen as routine and therefore an aspect of organizations’ stability, not organizational change. Within the public service arena, reforms could be seen as processes aimed at enabling a government to manage its responsibilities (Caiden, 2007), which can be best appreciated from the prism of plan to overcome challenges and/or improve the status quo.

Like most social science concepts, there appears to be no universally accepted definition of PSR. As Dzimbiri (2006, p. 2) observes, PSR need to be understood as the modernization of what was formerly called administrative reform. Various scholars have used the term ‘administrative reform’ to mean:

- (a) all improvements in administration
- (b) general administrative overhauls in difficult circumstances

- (c) specific remedies for maladministration
- (d) any suggestions for better government
- (e) intentions of self-styled reformers.

However, most literature seems to agree with the proposition that the term ‘administrative reform’ refers to deliberate attempts by a country to improve its bureaucracy in order to deliver services to the citizens more efficiently and effectively (Caiden, 2007, p. 43).

Corkery et al. (1998, p. 83) define public sector reforms as ‘all forms of administrative changes involving processes, policies and procedures which have impacted the entire civil service and these may or may not necessarily have political connotations’. But Omoyefa (2008, pp. 17–18) emphasizes radical changes, referring to PSR as ‘the total overhauling of government administrative machinery with the aim of injecting real effectiveness, efficiency, hard-core competence and financial prudence into the running of the public sector. . . to meet the demands of a rapidly improving and changing global socio-political environment’. Both ideas (Corkery et al., 1998; Omoyefa, 2008) are incorporated in the definitions submitted by Dzimbiri (2006).

To Schacter (2000), PSR is ‘strengthening the way the public sector is managed’, and is an attempt to fix public sector problems such as poor organisation, irrational decision-making processes, mismanaged staff, weak accountability, poorly designed public programmes and poorly delivered public services. Related to this, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 8) view public management reform as the ‘deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organisations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better’. It should be observed that Schacter’s definition is more concerned with the outputs of the reform, which is fixing public sector problems. The focus of Schacter and Pollitt and Bouckaert is on structures and processes, whereas the other definitions (such as the one by Corkery et al., 1998, and Brunsson and Olsen, 1997), are more preoccupied with change and the future.

From the above definitions, we note that all the definitions have a common denominator: changing the way the public sector works, implicitly or explicitly, to make it better. It is also observed that reforms do not happen by chance; they are ‘deliberate’, ‘conscious’, and therefore planned as elaborated by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) and Caiden (2007).

However, Corkery et al. (1998) add two other dimensions to the definition. They argue that reforms involve ‘all forms of changes’. More significantly they bring in the issue of politics, saying that reforms may or may not have political connotations. This is an important issue – because in public administration, one has to be cognizant of the political connotations for almost every action. And indeed quite often we see the effect of political will, political interest and political interference as factors in reforms of this nature. Moreover, Schacter (2000) takes it a notch higher and appraises PSR as a tool to both strengthen the public sector while at the same time fixing the sector’s problems.

The other different or additional perspective to the definition is the one offered by Omoyefa (2008), who postulates that reform is equal to a total overhaul, implying that public sector reform requires major modernization and change in terms of how administrative work is done. According to others, it does not matter whether changes are minor or major in order to qualify as a reform. The other issue that distinguishes Omoyefa's definition from the rest is the reflection on the reforms meeting the demands of a rapidly improving and changing global socio-political environment.

Public sector reforms in this article are regarded as the intentional changes of how government works in order to make it more efficient, effective, transparent, responsive, accountable and ultimately able to implement the national goal. It has to be noted also that PSR is not limited to management of public expenditure, administrative and civil service reform, taxation and revenue policy, anti-corruption, decentralization, justice and law reform, and public enterprise reform.

### ***Why public sector reforms?***

PSR are usually necessitated by natural disasters, military defeats, civil disturbances, urged by revolutionaries and the great men of the time, or motivated by economic crisis (Caiden, 2007, p. 23). But increasingly, reforms are a result of change of government and are referred to as power politics in action because they contain ideological rationalizations, fights for control of areas, services and people, participants, power drives, campaign strategies, obstructive tactics, compromises and concessions (Gingell, 1991, p. 16). PSR may also result from maladministration<sup>1</sup> (Caiden, 1991, p. 488) or fashion<sup>2</sup> (Abrahamson, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998).

The argument that PSR in Africa are 'an accidental policy derived by the World Bank and UNDP to protect their loans and credit facilities granted to African countries' (Omoyefa, 2008, p. 20) is unconventional. Though several explanations may be provided for reform it is imperative to note that PSR usually takes place when 'a significant discrepancy exists between what it is doing and what it "ought" to be doing' (Downs, quoted in Caiden, 2007) exists.

### ***What are the elements of PSR?***

According to Schacter (2000), much of the PSR activity supported by donors over the past 20 years or so fits into the following areas: (i) administrative capacity building (organizational restructuring and renewal, strengthening of linkages between government agencies, improving the quality of human resources through training and recruitment, addressing management problems related to employee performance

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<sup>1</sup>According to Caiden (1991), maladministration may be based on illegality, corruption, ineptitude, neglect, perversity, turpitude, arbitrariness, undue delay, discourtesy, unfairness, bias, ignorance, incompetence, unnecessary secrecy, misconduct, and high handedness.

<sup>2</sup>Or wave, fad or fantasy.

management); (ii) strengthening policy capacity (rationalizing and standardizing the decision-making process and improving the flow of policy-relevant information); (iii) institutional reform (support for civil service codes of conduct and strengthened safeguards concerning public procurement; strengthening institutions and procedures that act as an accountability check on the executive, and rules related to public access to information); and (iv) civil service downsizing (workforce size reductions, compensation schemes, and wage policy reforms). Activities in these areas may be undertaken either as part of a comprehensive programme of PSR that covers many or all government departments and agencies, or a narrower programme that focuses on only one agency or a few. These reforms may also be implemented in one or more of the following sectors: security, education, economy, health, agriculture, public service and others.

However, those related to NPM could be classified as (a) reforms in the organizational set up and structures, including decentralization of political and administrative powers to the local government; (b) market reforms whereby the state is rapidly engaging in business with the private sector but retains the responsibility for overall provision; and (c) reforms in the management strategy that involve capacity building, contracting human resources, reducing employees numbers and decompressing wages, and performance management and measurement (Hope Sr., 2002).

## **Public sector reforms in Africa**

### *An analytical overview*

In this section, the different decades of reforms are reviewed, and some of the significant trends and reforms that marked the given period highlighted. Secondly, a judgment on the success and failure of the reforms in Africa is made to bestow light on the premise upon which the lessons are drawn. This overview is intended to provide a context for the lessons drawn, which are the main focus of this article.

A number of reforms have been formulated and implemented on the African continent. The most visible public sector reforms are those that have taken place after independence. These are looked at from various angles. Therkildsen (2001, p. 1) observes that PSR during the immediate post-independence period were designed along the colonial principles, but with the aim of strengthening public administration for national development. This point of view is shared with Ayee (2008), who agrees and notes that between independence and the late 1970s, the main focus was Africanisation of the small colonial civil services inherited at independence and their rapid expansion. The reforms that followed, Therkildsen (2001, p. 1) postulates, had different aims. These were to reduce the costs and re-focus the activities of the public sector, to change the way it worked, promote the role of the market and non-governmental actors both in service provision in the economy at large. He further states that pressures from the economic crisis and structural adjustment, donor imposition, domestic demands for change amplified by growing political pluralism, and emulation of reforms in other countries caused the need for change.

On his part, Goran Hyden views the reforms of the 1980s as purely of an economic nature and places those since the 1990s in a broader economic and political context, aimed at getting the politics right (Hyden, 2006). However, most of these reforms were sponsored by the Bretton Woods institutions. For instance the World Bank financed 245 adjustment operations between the early 1970s and early 1990s, of which half were in sub-Saharan Africa (Jayarajah and Branson, 1995).

These reforms according to Ayee (2005, p. 19) were referred to as ‘the modernization of the state in Africa’ through ‘measures to improve the capacity of the state to perform functions effectively and efficiently. The reforms, he contends, involve a reduced role of the state and facilitating an enabling environment for development’.

Ayee (2008) has divided public sector reforms in Africa into three phases: (a) reforms of the 1980s<sup>3</sup> to early 1990; (b) reforms of the mid-1990s to early 2000; and (c) the post 200 reforms. To survey PSR in Africa, this article uses some of the major reforms that have taken place during the three phases.

### ***Reforms of the 1980s to early 1990s***

The 1980s are viewed as a ‘lost decade’ for Africa, owing to the several economic crises the continent was plunged into. The crisis was a result of dependence on a limited number of primary products, growing external debt, rapid population growth, persistent drought and devastating internal conflicts. As a result, the state bureaucracies in Africa started underperforming. Besides this, they were perceived as too large, corrupt, and lacking a sense of responsibility and accountability. To compound the problem the politicization of recruitment emerged, leading to the collapse of the capacity of ministries to fulfil basic functions (Ayee, 2005; Hope Sr., 2002).

Thus the main public sector reforms during this period were aimed at maintaining macro-economic stability, lowering inflation, cutting deficit spending, and reducing the scope and cost of government. The key reforms witnessed include:

- (a) privatization of public enterprises
- (b) downsizing – retrenchments, mergers and recruitment freezes, eliminating ghost workers
- (c) decompressing wages and trying to use savings on recruitment to pay higher salaries to higher level managers with key skills (Ayee, 2008, p. 64).

### ***Reforms of the mid-1990s to 2000***

During this period, public sector reforms were both administrative and political. The focus was on management systems, performance management and budget

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<sup>3</sup>Public sector reforms before the 1980s are not the focus of this article because they were mainly designed to ‘Africanize’ the small colonial civil services inherited at independence, whereas the reforms that followed were to reduce the costs and re-focus the activities of the public sector, to change the way it works, promote the role of the market and non-governmental actors both in service provision in the economy at large.

management, especially after it was realized that the anticipated savings from downsizing were unrealistic.

It was during this period that NPM reforms were considered on the African continent. According to Christopher Hood, NPM is a loose shorthand term for a set of related ideas on how to organize public services which challenged established or traditional ideas, composed of 7 doctrines.

These doctrines are:

- (1) Hands-on professional management in the public sector. Managers are allowed to manage, so that there is clear accountability (since ‘accountability requires clear assignment of responsibility for action’).
- (2) Emphasis on explicit standards and measures of performance. Goals have to be defined and performance targets set. It is on these that performance is assessed, based on them (such as the results-oriented management in Uganda).
- (3) Stressing the importance of output controls by focusing on results rather than procedures.
- (4) Disaggregation of units in the public sector by breaking up large entities into corporate agencies to gain efficiency and advantages of franchise arrangements.
- (5) Greater competition in the public sector through contracts and public tendering.
- (6) Stress on private sector styles of management practice by applying private sector management tools to the public sector? For instance, Hope (2002) notes that in Botswana, parastatals have contracted out a number of services for the government ranging from maintenance to security. Within the health sector, we have seen some governments such as Zimbabwe and Uganda outsource items such as cleaning, laundry, catering, security, and maintenance.

Lastly, NPM stresses greater discipline and parsimony in resource use (Hood, 1991, cited by Hughes, 1998, pp. 61–62). Some of the significant reforms during this period include the reduction of civil servants by up to 10%, whereby by the mid-1990s sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest ratio of civil servants to population of any group in the world (Ayee, 2008).

### ***Reforms, 2000 to present***

These reforms are broadly within the NPM paradigm but usually linked to poverty reduction strategy plans, which have become a new conditionality for loans to highly indebted poor countries.

Examples of public service reform programmes during this period include Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania, where service delivery standards are monitored by both the citizens and public service managers. In Uganda, this period also witnessed the need to re-energize the reform process. There was also broader participation of stakeholders in the development of the 2010 National Development Plan. Fjeldstad and Therkildsen (2004) in their study of tax reforms in Uganda, Tanzania and Namibia, found out that



the establishment of semi-autonomous and well-funded revenue authorities in the 1990s resulted in short-term revenue growth. But these gains were watered down by the limits of autonomy and patterns of fiscal corruption.

### ***Overall assessment of public sector reforms in Africa: success or failure?***

There seems to be consensus from the literature reviewed that most public sector reforms in Africa have had mixed results. Some scholars reckon the public sector reforms have been largely successful, and as a result there is an improving performance of the state in Africa (Hope, 2001; 2002). On the other hand, it is claimed that there has been very limited success and at times even negative results (Ayee, 2005, p. 12; Schacter, 2000). These views are based on empirical findings, and so it is fair to accept that much has been done, and much more can be done to better the public sector in Africa, if we take stock and learn from these experiences.

### **What lessons have we learnt?**

There could be a variety of lessons learnt from the public service reforms implemented in Africa for the last two decades or so. These lessons are accentuated by an exploratory study of secondary literature, focusing on explaining sources of the success and failure of the reforms in Africa.

In this article, I have identified the following points:

- (1) There is a need to acknowledge the importance of culture and context, because at times local values contradict the content of reform efforts.
- (2) PSR need both political and civil support.
- (3) PSR take time to bear fruit.
- (4) Incremental implementation may be better.
- (5) Not all support for PSR is altruistic.
- (6) Corruption still hinders reform in Africa.
- (7) There is a need to revisit the role of donors.
- (8) First things first – a credible public sector must be created before we reform it.
- (9) Ownership of reform programmes by African governments and other stakeholders is necessary.
- (10) Despite these reforms, Africa still remains poor.

### ***What do we mean by lessons here?***

When reforms take place, new issues come up and sometimes the results depart from the expected outcome. In such a situation, reformers and those interested in studying reforms look back and learn from the experience of what worked and what did not work. They look at the effects and implications of PSR, whereby effects mean ‘the consequences’ of reforms (Christensen et al., 2007).

A distinction is usually made between a narrow concept of effects which focuses on intended or desired effects and a broad one that deals with dysfunctions, side effects and societal and political effects. These effects could either be internal or external.

The relationship between effects and learning can be understood this way; internal effects lead to administrative learning whereas external effects lead to political learning. Learning in this regard implies enlightenment, responsibility, and accountability (Christensen et al., 2007, pp. 145–149; Oslen, 1996, p. 182).

Administrative (managerial) learning concerns finding good ways and following goals. Learning implies improved knowledge<sup>4</sup> and causal understanding, which in turn leads to better results. Political learning relates to how citizens and political leaders learn to hold public organisations responsible.

However, there are several barriers to learning from PSR. They range from ‘the vagueness of reform goals and the difficulties in measuring and interpreting consequences’ (Olsen and Peters, 1996, p. vii). Other problems relate to measuring the effects; the motive (who is interested in the learning); the criteria for measuring the effects; when should the effects be studied; and how do we isolate the effects of one single reform or organisation (Christensen et al., 2007, p. 149)? Nevertheless, with or without barriers some of the lessons are difficult to comprehend. But it is worth trying to draw some lessons from PSR in Africa. This may not only aid our understanding of PSR in Africa, but also create a foundation for further inquiry into why PSR fail to meet the expectations of reformers and other interested parties.

### ***Importance of culture and context: local values not always consistent with reforms***

From the findings of my doctoral study, I came to the conclusion that culture plays a significant role in fostering performance appraisal in Ugandan bureaucracy. Performance appraisal reforms are just a sub-component of civil service reforms, which form part of the broader PSR.

The study revealed that performance measurement, particularly the NPM-based performance appraisal system, was less applicable to Uganda’s civil service because it seemed to either undermine or conflict with the host administrative culture. This culture appeared incompatible with a system that sought to appraise individual performance without considering the unequal distribution of power, strong collective norms and fear of innovation or new ways of doing things. Additionally, ‘African values’, such as gifting, reciprocity, ethnic identity and respect for those who are older or have higher status were often abused due to selfish motives, thereby undermining the effectiveness of reforms.

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<sup>4</sup>Fiol and Lyles submit that knowledge refers to ways of mapping and interpreting experiences, but it also denotes action-oriented skills and competencies (cited in Askvik and Tjomsland, 2005, p. 39).

I thus contend that in order to carry out successful public sector reforms, it may be useful to: (a) raise the recognition of culture as a critical factor when introducing reforms, (b) weed out obstructive elements in the host culture, and (c) promote and reward constructive elements in the host culture in order to increase the possibilities for successful reforms (Karyeija, 2010).

As noted by Antwil et al. (2008, p. 263), public sector reforms will ‘hardly succeed without contextualizing reform efforts within a country’s specific realities including its history, culture, politics, economy, sociology, ideology and values’. This has been summed up by Ayea (2008), who posits that public sector reform in Africa is designed in cosy offices of donor agencies far away in Europe and America. What they think to be the situation is quite different from the actual realities on the ground, and accounts for the monumental failure of PSR in Africa (Omoyefa, 2008).

Therefore, Africa should borrow from other developing countries, such Australia, New Zealand and Singapore (Omoyefa, 2008); these countries inculcated their values, and rejected some principles embedded in PSR to suit their local conditions. PSR:

... should be located in a broader framework that addresses the nexus of problems related to governance and democratization and sustainable development. The one size fits all approach recommending and adopting reforms should be tempered with by analyzing the needs of unique situations prevailing in particular countries. (Mhone, 2003, p. 19)

Therefore, future PSR will have to recognize local conditions, culture and context.

### ***PSR needs both political support and support from the public***

It is becoming increasingly evident that in order for PSR to succeed, there is a need for support from the political elite. In fact, that is why ‘when reducing the public sector and enhancing the private sector, agencies in the international development community sought to win the African political leaders on their side’, although ‘they were at best moderately successful’ (Hyden, 2006, p. 133).

A case of reference here is the strong political support from President Yoweri Museveni, which gave rise to the civil service reform in Uganda, reflected in a reduction in the number of civil servants and ministries, and the creation of an independent revenue collecting institution, the Uganda Revenue Authority.

His strong political support enabled a reduction in the number of civil servants from more than 352,000 in July 1990 to 163,274 in 1998. Pay structures were rationalized, allowances monetized and pay levels increased by around 1000%. For instance, a permanent secretary earned US\$36 per month in 1993, but this rose to US\$1550 in 2007. In addition, the payroll has been mainstreamed and decentralized, and the civil servants are now paid by the 28th day of the month (Crown Agents, 2001). Despite support like that of President Museveni, reforms require a broader political constituency to ensure sustainability. Therefore there is a need for a more active and engaging civil society (Robinson, 2004, p. 34). Schacter also has the same argument, that the:

Impetus for reform must come from local stakeholders who are outside as well as inside the public sector. Organized civil society (e.g., civic associations, users' groups, labor unions, NGOs), the private sector, political parties and other influential domestic institutions all have a critically important role to play in pressing the public sector to do a better job of serving society. (Schacter, 2000, p. 9)

Thus, reformers have to recognize that in order for PSR to succeed, there is a need to have both the support of politicians and bureaucrats on the one side, and also the support of the citizens on the other. It is this organized civil society to which the governments are ultimately accountable. Therefore, in order for the governments to gain legitimacy and popularity, it is incumbent on them to ensure they are satisfied with both reforms and the outcomes of reforms.

### ***PSR takes time to bear fruit***

In this article, we notice that reforms to change the civil service began two decades ago. This is quite a short time, and not sufficient to assess reforms and their outcome. But how can the institutionalization of reforms take place so fast? Schacter concludes that the most easily overlooked lesson about PSR is that it takes a long time to achieve fundamental reform of a public sector. He argues that it took centuries for today's industrialized countries to develop reasonably effective public institutions. Citing Great Britain, which took 30 years to eliminate patronage as the *modus operandi* of public sector, Schacter recommends that reformers in developing countries (including Africa of course) and their donor partners take a long-term perspective, because fundamental change demands sustained effort, commitment and leadership over many generations (Schacter, 2000, p. 10, cited in Omoyefa, 2008).

Therefore, the real test of the appropriateness of public sector reforms in Africa is not at the *output* stage of reform (implementation, where most reforms currently fail), but at the *outcomes* stage (end results of successfully implemented changes) (Polidano, 1999). The most important thing that we should look for in the PSR is whether these reforms in the long run have been able or are able to meet the expected results in Africa.

Mutahaba and Kiragu (2002) also suggest that PSR require the involvement of a wider cross section of the civil service, commitment at the political level, and ownership by the country with donors supporting rather than driving the reform process. They warn, however, that the price of pursuing reform this way is that results come slowly, although they are more sustainable. This view is best captured in one of the titles on PSR in Africa, 'No shortcuts to progress' (Hyden, 1983).

### ***Implementation may be better incremental***

According to the UNDP, there is a need to avoid the temptation to address too many reform objectives simultaneously. An incremental approach, if sustained for long enough, also brings about radical transformations. Some donors put much pressure

on the recipient countries and have a tendency to favour comprehensive reform programmes even where more limited incremental approaches are advisable (UNDP, nd, 25). For example it is noted that Tanzania in the 1980s had more than 2000 development projects, most of which were donor-funded (Therkildsen, 2000), and suffered from ‘projectitis’. But Mutahaba and Kiragu (2002) suggest that piecemeal and fragmented PSR projects are rarely effective. They note that, for example, in many cases downsizing was done without capacity building, capacity building without pay reform, and capacity building without service delivery focus. The key lesson here is that reforms should be well integrated, and that having many reforms at once may choke the reforming government.

### *Not all support for PSR is altruistic*

Literature indicates that rhetoric for public sector reforms is the same. Donors, local politicians, bureaucrats and other stakeholders sing the same song with regard to why they support public sector reforms – but at the end of the day, their actual motives may have little to do with positive change or public interest. It is suggested here that the real motive for public sector reforms in Africa is to serve the interests of the African political leaders, who are preoccupied with political survival; the donors and international agencies, meanwhile, are interested in neo-colonialism and the spread of neo-liberal values and marketization.

Findings by Mwenda and Tangri (2005, pp. 456–457) reveal that administrative reforms in Uganda were accepted primarily for political survival. The two argue that ‘the creation of many new specialized agencies enabled the ruling movement (in Uganda) to use these enclaves to give jobs to its supporters, and evade the ban on recruitment in the civil service’.

In essence, the presence of a strong patronage culture could not allow for the reduction of size in the civil service; above all, it shoots down the cherished goals of agencification. This permits government officials’ great discretion in the management of these reforms, culminating in the manipulation of resources and changes for personal and political advantage (Mwenda and Tangri, 2005, p. 465). Despite the rhetoric of senior government officials concerning the implementation of NPM related reforms, ‘authoritarianism, arbitrariness, corruption and other manifestations of patronage politics’ have remained a dominant feature of the Ugandan public administration management (Van de Walle, 2001).

The other aspect is what Omoyefa (2008, p. 20) refers to as ‘the furthering of the economic interests of the developed countries and the international donor agencies’. He advances four reasons explaining why the international donor agencies compelled Africa to embrace public sector reforms. The reasons are (a) PSR would enable African countries to generate enough funds to service the debts they owed the international community, to the extent that they would impose one of their own as minister of finance or chief economic adviser; (b) through privatization, PSR are meant to

empower foreign nationals and to help multinational companies control the African economy; (c) through security sector reforms, the military industrial complex establishes a market for its arms and other economic interests; and (d) through downsizing and rightsizing, brain drain is perpetuated (Omoyefa, 2008). If this is so, then it does not matter if the PSR as prophesied does not meet the expected standards for as long as the hidden intentions of the donors are met.

### ***Corruption still hinders reform in Africa***

One other observation is that, in order for policy reforms to succeed, they have to be executed in a transparent, accountable and corrupt free organisation. Corruption, defined as officials profiteering from public office (Johnson and Sharma, 2004, p. 3), may manifest itself in the form of bribery and graft, favouritism, kleptocracy, misappropriation, non-performance of duties, influence peddling, acceptance of improper gifts, protecting maladministration, abuse of power, manipulation of regulations, and rent seeking. Wherever they exist, these practices affect civil service reforms. Gerald Caiden postulates that:

Corruption virtually kills reform. While the reformers do their best to improve things, the corrupt who benefit from leaving things as they are do their best to obstruct and sabotage reform . . . Before they set out to embark on their enterprise, public service reformers should give high priority to reducing corruption if their reforms are to stand any chance of lasting impact. (Caiden, 2007, p. 584)

From the above quote we firmly conclude that corruption is harmful to reforms. We also learn from Allan Schick that informality in the public sector is very closely linked to corruption and can undermine public sector reforms. That is why he discourages countries, especially in Africa, which are informally driven, from embracing New Zealand-type reforms unless they have a formal public service sector that is loyal to the Weberian bureaucracy model.

The rules of behaviour that people follow can be different from those that are written in the standards of procedure. Goran Hyden echoes this argument, with his idea of the economy of affection – which is constituted by personal investment in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving goals that are seen as otherwise impossible to attain. These informal social formations still dominate the African continent, and have been institutionalized and tend to dominate the way the formal institutions operate (Hyden, 2006, pp. 82–83). Thus ‘Africans feel inclined to give priority to arrangements of an informal rather than a formal kind’ (Umeh and Andranovich, 2005). Given that informal norms in Africa matter, it may be helpful in explaining why civil service reforms often fall short of expectations because corruption flourishes and distorts the implementation of PSR. The prescription here is *inter alia* that African countries which have endemic corruption should emphasize accountability, before turning to the concerns of efficiency and results (Taylor, 2001). However, alternative scholarship

maintains that corruption and the informal sector are not that bad after all; this is because they help cut through red tape, unresponsive bureaucracies, and bad policies (Schick, 1998), or are even an effective way for elites in Africa to establish a middle class and consolidate themselves in power.

However, at the same time we must be careful because:

... countries with a high level of patrimonialism in government need a comprehensive institutional reform programme to correct patrimonial distortions in the institutional environment, the incentives framework and the performance of core government institutions. (Dia, 1994, p. 19)

In her study of PSR in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, Kjær observes that:

In Tanzania, a gradual institutionalization of succession appears to diminish the disruptive effects of neo-patrimonialism, and efforts at reforming the public sector was sustained throughout Mkapa's second term. (Kjær, 2004)

Thus one of the means to manage neo-patrimonialism and its antecedent factors is to institutionalize succession, and other good governance practices such as high ethical standards, rule of law, equity and the reduction of corruption.

### ***There is a need to revisit the role of donors***

Mutahaba and Kiragu (2002) suggest that donors should not push for excessive reliance on technical expertise from their own nationals while administering terms of conditional aid, because the practice denies cheaper and at times better local expertise from participating in the development of their country. In their analysis of selected case studies of educational reforms in developing countries, Askvik and Tjomsland (2005) noticed that one of the major challenges reforms encounter is the fundamental inequality that characterizes the relationship between donor agencies and recipient countries. Mhone (2003) advances the view that interaction with donor initiatives should be predicated and set on Africa's own formulation and pursuit of a strategic agenda for the promotion of sound public sector reforms.

Recommendations from Schacter are even more radical. He says projects should be locally owned and driven, otherwise 'PSR is doomed to fail if the main source of energy and leadership comes from outside. Donors cannot play a leading role, and they must not dictate the content, pace and direction of PSR' (Schacter, 2000, p. 9). Though it may be necessary for the donors to influence the reform process in order to elicit commitment and ensure that the right things are done, it is increasingly felt – especially within Africa – that the nature of donor influence is intrusive and needs to be reviewed.

### ***First things first – we need to have a credible public sector before we reform it***

Available evidence shows some of the reforms have either not been seen through, or that their intentions have been undermined in the long run. According to Clarke and Wood

(2001), civil service reforms in Tanzania and Uganda have been more successful than most, but have fallen short in terms of their impact on service delivery and poverty eradication. Nevertheless, the pace of reform has been good in the early stages of the process and there has been real progress in addressing structural problems such as over-staffing and low pay, as well as strengthening basic administrative systems including personnel and payroll controls. There is also the ‘danger of reversals and inertia’ (Kiragu, 2002), where retrenchment (staff cuts) in Ghana and Kenya was initially successful – but later the civil service became even larger, and the decentralization of health services in Zambia backfired. Therefore reformers need to remain fully committed to reforms and sustain them over time; otherwise, like the Ugandan process, many PSRs will start off with an explosive and effective beginning but then tail off (Graham Harrison, 2001). Public sector wages bills have declined, there is greater penetration of information technology, and the concentration of bureaucratic power at the expense of accountability and transparency has diminished considerably in most African countries (Hope, 2002). On the other hand, it seems that by the end of the 1990s, re-hirings and redistribution cancelled out these reductions, especially in Ghana, but that a lot of skilled manpower was also lost (Ayee, 2005, p. 21). With financial support from the Netherlands government, in Uganda for instance 722 civil servants were trained in 2000, 1772 in 2001, and 2110 in 2003 (Sahlin-Andersen, 2005). This indicates that the reform processes do not maintain the momentum. The key question is why, and what can we do about it? One of the possibilities is to first have a functional bureaucracy, based on Weberian principles. Guy Peters (2001) argues that it is more plausible to have the values of ‘probity and responsiveness’ before we move from that system to a modern one of efficiency and effectiveness. Therefore, one way in which reforms can be sustained is by having in place the basic structure and values that many pre-independence African states have never developed (Hyden, 1983).

***Ownership of reform programs by African governments and other stakeholders is necessary***

Another significant lesson that has been learnt is that when African governments and national stakeholders are unwilling, unable or denied to take ownership of the PSR, the consequences are undesirable. Some of the training the civil servants are getting is designed to professionalize the civil service, as in the case of Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Egypt, Tanzania, and Uganda. However, in spite of this training, it has been observed that there are still problems. This is because the training is not demand driven and tailored to the roles of the personnel involved (Ayee, 2005). The lessons for Africa are that for reforms to be successful, they should be home-grown and demand driven. If reforms are not owned and driven by Africans themselves, they will not be fully accepted and implemented (Ayee, 2008). But we also must appreciate the fact that developing countries are not producing PSR models, partly due to the dependence syndrome. Since independence, African countries have been dependent on foreign support and



lack think tanks at the level of the Brookings Institute of the USA. In addition, indigenous research is limited, as McCourt and McGuire (2001) observe. However, all is not lost. Africa still has vast opportunities. We could borrow the ideas of McCourt and McGuire on what can be done; depend on reforming administrations to come to power like South Africa, improve the research conditions in Africa on the continent through increased funding and have the industrialized researchers seek indigenous initiatives, which they can generalize in collaboration with African researchers (Mccourt and McGuire, 2001, pp. 224–226). In doing so, Africa might avoid the trap of a universalist one-size-fits-all PSR, and embrace home-grown thinking in designing such reforms.

### ***Despite many PSRs, Africa still remains poor***

Africa is a continent that is still described as ‘modernizing’. By September 2009, of the 40 highly indebted poor countries (HIPC), 29 were from sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>5</sup> a region which is peripheral to mainstream economic processes and, as such, less likely to be positively influenced by the factors that have promoted democracy in more developed settings (Burkhart and Lewis, 1994, cited in Hyden, 2002, p. 139). Africa still really needs to modernise and develop the state. This need has been one of the main driving forces for PSR, and many success stories abound. In South Africa, Uganda and Ethiopia, decentralization has been considered successful, and a way of uniting people. People who have been living in previously neglected rural areas now have better access to central government resources and institutions (Ayee, 2005). In Botswana, rural development activities such as drought relief and agricultural development are carried out in districts under the supervision of the central administration. There is successful agencification of independent revenue authorities in Uganda, South Africa and Zambia. It has been estimated that the total sales of privatization transactions from 1988 to 1993 amounts to approximately US \$2.7b, and various sectors have been privatized (Hope, 2002). As a whole, PSR seem to have facilitated the development of more effective and efficient public sector management. Therefore it was hoped that with the implementation of the recommended PSR, the state would become ‘effective, efficient, responsive, accountable and productive’, and these ‘are necessary conditions for the development of the continent’ (Karyeija, 2010). But this does not seem to be so, much as the continent may have made significant strides in economic growth over the years. But the bottom line is that the ultimate aim of PSR is to have governments that can deliver.

### **Conclusion**

Various public reforms have taken place in Africa, and it appears many of them have not been successful in transforming public administration to a more efficient, effective,

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<sup>5</sup><http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTDEBTDEPT/0,contentMDK:22326067~menuPK:64166739~pagePK:64166689~piPK:64166646~theSitePK:469043~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y,00.html>.

transparent, responsive and accountable public sector that is in a position to implement national goals, mainly poverty eradication. Even where they have been considered successful, there is still a great need for more or better-designed PSR for national development. Therefore, it is important to learn lessons from these experiences, and apply them for the improvement of public management in Africa.

What, then, could be some of the directions for future research based on the lessons that we have pointed out? First, we need to conduct more empirical and comparative studies examining the reasons why Africa has not been able to establish sound and efficient public sector machinery. This is because anecdotal evidence and many studies suggest that the requisite structures and systems are present, i.e., leadership, structures and designs, policies, human and financial resources. Is there something inherent that has not been understood, or is Africa simply destined to fail? Second, this article proposes more in-depth studies in the area of culture, whereby not only the local values and value systems are well documented, but researchers also examine how they contradict and possibly undermine reforms. Moreover, the isomorphic nature of African culture could also be investigated, with an eye to the impacts of the broader societal culture on administrative culture. This kind of study could be comparative, in order to see the difference between sub-Saharan Africa and other regions, and between Anglophone and Francophone Africa. Even more specifically, researchers might look at national cultures and subcultures in relation to reforms. Third, studies directed toward re-examining the role of donors are pertinent. What are the latent and apparent intentions of those who sponsor PSR in Africa? Finally, we need further studies which do not only examine intent, but also the *what* and *how* of these reforms; this way, we might gain new insight into underlying issues, and the extent to which they influence reform processes.

### Notes on contributor

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