



Economic Forum Seminar Report

The Role of the Public Service in an Economy: Lessons and Opportunities for Malawi

The 4th economic forum seminar was held on Friday, 4th March 2011 at Crossroads Hotel Auditorium in Lilongwe. The seminar was held in response to suggestions raised at the 3rd seminar held in Blantyre on 11th November, 2010 that the discussion on ‘*The Role of the Public Service for the Malawian Economy*’ be continued in Lilongwe, where the headquarters of the public service is. A total of 88 participants attended the Lilongwe seminar. In attendance were media, civil society and private sector representatives, academia, representatives of international development agencies, individual citizens and civil servants. As with the previous seminars, this event was co-organized by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) and the Economics Association of Malawi (ECAMA).

The Presentation

The main presentation, titled “*The Role of the Public Service in an Economy: Lessons and Opportunities for Malawi*,” was made by Associate Professor Blessings Chinsinga. Chinsinga emphasized that a vibrant public service strengthens the economy and bolsters opportunities for economic growth and investment, consequently reducing poverty and improving human development. For this reason, government as ‘serious business’ must therefore be efficient, well coordinated and staffed with the best and brightest people. He added that the public sector is important for driving the long-term development plan which defines priorities of a nation both to government and the private sector. To enhance public sector effectiveness, he proposed that government should adopt a *democratic developmental state* model, in which both the political and bureaucratic elites are autonomous and accountable, citizen participation is promoted, civil society is vibrant and strengthens the strategic capacity of the state where ethics form the basis for public administration. This can only be achieved if political leadership shares the primacy of the development agenda over political ambitions.

The Discussant:

The discussant was Dr. Naomi Ngwira- who until 2010 was the Director of Aid and Debt Management in the Ministry of Finance. Her discussion reflected her experiences on performance of the public sector with regular reference to a couple of previous assessment reports on public sector management. Naomi highlighted three major problems facing the public sector as the main causes of underperformance in the civil service namely: (a) strong influence of external actors on policies, and high over dependence on external consultants defining the government agenda, (b) slow progress in implementing decentralization which is necessary to make the civil service more responsive to needs of people, and (c) lack of leadership for public sector reform agenda.

On high reliance on external influence, she cited aid conditionalities and extensive use of foreign consultants to assess government performance. She argued that when reports of performance assessments are published, no action is taken on the recommendations made therein. Further, while she emphasized that decentralization is key to public service effectiveness, she observed that

progress made in its implementation is very slow. She added of the existence of leadership gap to lead and manage public sector reforms. These factors, she said, are what generally retards the public sector effectiveness. On the other hand, the underperformance of the public sector was attributed to the (a) misuse of resources partly because civil servants are not rightly incentivized, (b) lack of performance appraisals for the civil servants, hence they neither know what is expected of them nor are they aware of how they could improve their capacity, and (c) high rate of vacancies, staff redeployment, recruitment bottlenecks, communication problems between central and line ministries, lack of clear guidelines for staff and a common service structure which make accountability and career paths vague.

Naomi went on to suggest aspects that would enhance public service effectiveness. First, there is need to raise a kind of leadership which will create a policy environment in which citizens are well informed, rights are institutionalized and politicians are held accountable so that in turn they can hold public servants to account. Second, civil service reforms need to be implemented systematically with strategic action plans to enforce the said policy environment. Lastly, public servants should be seen to be progressive so that there is systematic replacement of the old folk with youths who are more likely to come with novel ideas.

The Plenary Discussion and Suggestion

The plenary discussions raised a lot of critical issues, question and suggestions from the participants. One participant wondered how external influence could be done away with considering that Malawi's budget is heavily funded by donor aid. He then suggested that while doing away with aid gradually is one option, another option would be to make the best use of the aid that is received as did the *'Asian Tigers.'* It was emphasized that the primary responsibility of making policy lies with government and not to rely on the external consultants to think for them. Similarly, there was a common question as to how reforms such pay reforms or filling in of vacancies would be implemented considering the inadequacy of resources to fund the public sector. In response however, it was pointed out that in order to promote the welfare of public servants or to fill in vacancies, there has to be redirection of the available resources to this cause. Thus, unnecessary expenses on motor vehicle purchases or maintenance and external travel can be cut, for example.

On the question of why the process of decentralization was taking too long, it was noted that the concept is rather being poorly implemented whereby the central government is still the key player in local policy formulation. Further, the recent amendment of the Local Government Act has shifted the focus from decentralization to de-concentration to achieve strategic goals, an action that will further curtail public service effectiveness. It was also suggested that government should consider allowing the private sector to run certain aspects of the civil service. This entails that government departments can sub-contract certain services to private companies to improve competitiveness, efficiency and quality of goods and services delivery. Lessons on this could be drawn from the government of New Zealand.

Conclusion

Ultimately, both the main presenter and the discussant agreed that the role of politics cannot be overemphasized in attaining effectiveness in the public service, therefore stressing the importance of political leadership to attaining an effective public service. Leaders in the public service should decide to make a difference, thereby creating 'islands of excellence' within the civil service. Such kind of leaders can be raised if recruitment is based on merit and not mere redeployment which promotes political royalty at the expense of technical competence. Important lessons can be gathered from the Rwandan public service that have clearly defined what they aim for, and have introduced reforms that will strategically meet the country's present and future needs.