The implementation process

Deconstructing policy implementation

In 1996, the government of Malawi adopted a Civil Service Action Plan (GoM 1996b), following the World Bank’s advice. This plan, primarily drafted by consultants of the British ODA at the World Bank’s behest, listed eight “strategic” objectives:

(i) To confirm the role and core functions of government, taking account of the government’s policy priorities, plans for decentralisation and the scope for outsourcing and privatisation.

(ii) To secure performance improvements through the reduction of overlap and duplication in the machinery of government.

(iii) To design and implement organisation and staffing structures and management systems which enable ministries and departments to achieve their objectives efficiently.

(iv) To design and implement a retrenchment programme which will assist in the move to an affordable and sustainable civil service.

(v) To improve the recruitment, retention, motivation and work ethos of civil servants through the implementation of revised remuneration and grading systems.

(vi) To develop the capacity of civil servants to undertake the core functions of government and deliver higher quality services to the public.

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1 See previous chapter.
(vii) To improve planning, resourcing, monitoring, management and accounting systems so that resources are more sharply focused on priorities and public expenditure is more effectively controlled.

(viii) To develop understanding and commitment to civil service reform both within and outside the civil service through effective leadership and management of the reform process (GoM 1996b: 2).

These objectives can easily be subsumed under the primary topoi of civil service reform, promoted by the World Bank and the IMF: privatisation (i, ii), expenditure control and retrenchment (iii, iv, vii), performance improvement (vi, vi) and “ownership” of the reform (viii) (Dia 1993; IMF 1997; World Bank 1992, 1994). But what was actually done to achieve these objectives? Which actions were taken, which orders were issued and were these orders obeyed?

This chapter addresses these questions and turns from the realm of policy discourse to the actual implementation process of the civil service reform and investigates their relationship to each other. Many studies have shown that it is not as simple to determine the outcomes of policy intervention as the proponents of social engineering claim. The implementation of policy cannot be adequately captured with a linear model that distinguishes the planning phase, implementation and outcomes. This simplistic approach isolates the “project” from the social “context”. However, the inside and the outside of policy intervention might not be as easily separated as this model suggests (Long 1992; Shore & Wright 1997). Instead the analysis of policy intervention must transcend the parameters defining the space and time of a particular policy measure and approach them as a subject of study rather than an a priori given. According to Long (1992), policy interventions consist of complicated, contested and multi-stranded processes, “which involve the reinterpretation or transformation of policy during the implementation process, such that there is no straight line from policy to outcomes” (Long 1992: 34).

Transcending the instrumentalist vision of social engineering requires a much wider scope of inquiry, including “factors” that seem to have no direct causal relationship with the policy intervention and unforeseen side-effects. A number of studies investigate how unintended consequences may undermine the efficacy of policy measures (e.g. Long & Long 1992; Moore 1973; von Benda-Beckmann 1993). As early as 1967 the famous development economist Hirschman drew attention to the importance of influences outside the scope of the project design and the occurrence of unexpected side effects:

[E]ach project turns out to represent a unique constellation of experiences and consequences of direct and indirect effects. This uniqueness in turn results from the varied interplay between structural characteristics of projects, on the one hand, and the social and political environment, on the other (Hirschman 1967: 186).