Old-school Bureaucrats and Technocrats in Malawi: Civil Service Reform in Practice

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Reforming ‘dysfunctional’ African Bureaucracies

According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), there is little doubt that African bureaucracies are inefficient and unsustainable. Corruption and mismanagement of public resources are identified as the main impediments to economic recovery. Since the 1990s, Good Governance has been promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) as instrument to remove these obstacles to economic growth. The term Good Governance denotes a set of policy-measures intended to transform ‘dysfunctional’ public institutions into efficient and transparent service-providers accountable to the public and subject to the rule of law. One of the primary instruments to improve governance has been civil service reform, the reorganisation of the state bureaucracy according to the principles of New Public Management. Accordingly, World Bank and IMF have made the reorganisation of the civil service one of the primary conditions for their financial support. In sub-Saharan Africa, where most countries have been implementing Good Governance reforms in the past decade, the reorganisation of the civil service has had mixed results. In spite of the introduction of new management and accounting systems, outsourcing and privatization of non-core government functions and the dismissal of government employees made redundant the performance and efficiency of African bureaucracies is still found wanting by the ‘donor community’.

This chapter argues that the implementation of the Good Governance agenda has failed to address the underlying dynamics of postcolonial bureaucracies in sub-Saharan Africa. The policies promoted by the IFIs are based on a technocratic conception of the state as homogenous and unified actor that needs to be repaired with a set of instruments or ‘tools’ provided by World Bank and IMF experts (see also Bergamaschi, Charters and Muñoz in this volume). This perspective is flawed since it does not account for the colonial legacy of African states and their historical trajectories since independence. Drawing on archival and ethnographic
evidence on the implementation of civil service reform in Malawi between 1994 and 2007 this chapter suggests that the implementation of civil service reform has deepened already existing fissures within the civil service rather than contributed to greater cohesion.

This is well exemplified by one of the central elements of civil service reform in Malawi, the retrenchment of government employees made redundant, deemed to be the first step toward creating a more efficient civil service by the consultants of the IFIs (World Bank 1989, 1993, 1994a, 1994b). The reduction of staff was one of the conditions for continued financial support from the IFIs and is usually considered to be one of the hallmarks of neo-liberal reform. The dismissal of employees also tends to be one of the most contested measures. It is, therefore, well suited for an analysis of the implementation of the Good Governance agenda. According to official figures the government of Malawi dismissed approximately 34,000 employees between 1994 and 2000, mainly support staff and junior civil servants. Staff reduction widened already existing fissures in the civil service that were the result of the creation of new agencies with support from the IFIs in the 1990s, on the one, and Malawi’s colonial and post-colonial history, on the other hand.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is not to establish the ‘failure’ or ‘success’ of civil service reform in Malawi but rather to transcend the contingent categories of development thinking defining ‘success’ or ‘failure’ and thereby to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of the postcolonial state in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing so it adopts a critical view of social engineering promoted by the IFIs and consciously disengages social scientific analysis from development practice. Such a perspective builds on a growing body of critical anthropological scholarship that investigates the practice of constructing or framing the very objects of development interventions (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002; Mosse and Lewis 2005; Quarles van Ufford and Giri 2003; Marcussen and Arnfred 1998).

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

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1 Anthropological fieldwork in two urban areas, the capital Lilongwe and Zomba in the south, was carried out between November 1999 and November 2000, February and March 2002, and November 2007.