

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN AFRICA: ISSUES, LESSONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Public service has always been the tool available to African governments for the implementation of developmental goals and objectives. It is seen as being crucial to the growth and development of African economies. The paper reviews the nature of the current public sector reform in Africa, lessons of international and African perspectives, and the future directions of the public sector reform in Africa. It argues that the reform is in the interest of the conservative international financial institutions that were merely interested in globalizing the neo-liberal economy orthodoxy for the interest of powerful global capital and not in promoting autonomous development, which is what Africa need for economic progress. It, therefore, concludes that effective public sector reform in Africa must put into consideration the behavioral pattern, the social context, as well as cultural milieu of the people whom the reform is meant for together with the vehicle of the reform.

Keywords: Public Sector Reform; New Public Management; Public Service; Management; Development; Public Administration

INTRODUCTION

The current drive to improve management in governments through public service reform programs to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and the delivery of quality service to the public is common to many African countries, including Nigeria. The public sector has, for long, enjoyed a pride of place, particularly since the post-industrial revolution era. Public administration moved away from being mere watchmen, to being the engine of the society and become the major provider of various services, including regulatory and distributive ones. Generally, all societies have some forms of public service provisions for reasons of economics, risk, and moral responsibility. Governments, in many parts of the world, are structurally and constitutionally tied to the civil service, irrespective of the system of government (Olagboye, 2005). This according to Agagu (2008) explains why the relationship between the government and the public service in Nigeria endured in spite of the various forms of governments the country has been experimenting with since independence.

Almost all African countries are caught in the web of public sector reform. Good governance and efficient public administration are regarded as a wishful thought without public sector reform. Also, accountability, transparency, and merit-driven public service are thought to be unachievable except programs of public sector reform are drawn

up. Efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness of government to the yearning of its citizens could only be gauged through the lenses of the public sector reform (Omoyefa, 2008). African governments are, therefore, churning out policies on a daily basis. Not minding their relevance and positive impact on their people provided, these policies are part of the new public sector management in the name of public sector reform, not minding the fact that the public sector reform was suggested and imposed on the African countries by external interests.

Public service reforms, which have taken place in Africa during the last two decades, are part of a global phenomenon that has touched all parts of the world – developed, developing, and countries in transition (Mutahaba & Kiragu, 2002). While the African leaders innocently and ignorantly accepted the externally induced programs of reforming their public sector institutions as a way of bettering the lives of their citizens, the developed countries that are propellers of donor agencies are interested in re-colonizing African countries through the back donors. It is a subtle way of neo-colonialism and consequent perpetual slavery without realizing it.

In Nigeria, for instance, the Public Sector Reform (PSR) has been on the agenda for a number of years. As noted by Obasanjo (2005):

The reform of the civil service is one of the central themes of the government's agenda. For without a transparent and effective civil service, government business and service delivery to the public will be crippled and mired in dishonesty and graft. I am convinced that an efficient transparent and accountable civil service should be the hallmark of our democratic transformation and development. The Nigeria people deserve nothing less.

Indeed, it has been argued that at independence in 1960, the public sector in Nigeria was regarded as one of the most important legacies of some sixty years of British colonial rule (Gboyega & Abubakar, 1989). Moreover, given the performance of the public service in the first few years of independence, there was great hope that the expectation of Nigerians for rapid socio-economic development would be fulfilled with reasonable efficiency. This was because giant strides were taken in the provision of social infrastructures and capital investments (Agagu, 2008). It is instructive to note that by the mid 1980's, the Nigerian public sector was far from being ideal. It was tradition-bound, somewhat ponderous and showing signs of deterioration. Indeed, at that point in time, the civil service was displaying a patent inability to cope effectively with the challenges of modern, complex, and development hungry society (Adegrooye, 2006).

The ills of the Nigerian public sector have been identified at various times. A few years ago, the Ayida Panel, which was instituted to review past public service reforms in Nigeria with a view to proffering measures to further re-invigorating the service, identified the major ills of the service, which needed to be corrected to improve the dynamism and effectiveness of the civil service. Adegrooye (2008) identified among others, politicization of the top hierarchy of the civil service; lack of financial accountability and probity; perpetual breakdown of discipline; virtual institutionalization of corruption at all levels and segments of the service; disregard for rules and

regulations; loss of direction; and general decline of efficiency and effectiveness, as some of the major ills militating against the effectiveness of the civil service in Nigeria and other African countries.

Thus, over the past decades, there have been a host of reform initiatives to bring about changes in the government delivery system with a view to providing efficient and responsive service to the citizens. These reforms have been concentrated on areas of creating an efficient civil service focused on the need for provision of high quality service to the public.

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

Public sector reforms was initiated against the background that the government required a departure from its old traditional method of running administration and the urgent need for a renewed public sector to propel government in its quest for sustainable socio-economic, political, and technological developments. So, there is a need for structural re-engineering of the public sector with the infusion of new spirits, values, professionalism, accountability, responsiveness, and focused sense of the mission for maximum efficiency of the economy (Omoyefa, 2008).

In the view of Minogue (1998), the public sector reform is the final aspect of the New Public Management (NPM). According to him, although public sector reform may form part of a broader program of institutional and political reform, when associated with NPM, it is more likely to focus on the basic issue of internal organization with reference to size, recruitment, remuneration, career management, and promotion. In many ways, public sector reform incorporates aspects of deconcentration and management decentralization. As with other aspect of NPM, public sector reform spreads to the developing world through the influence of the World Bank, and the “Northern” states who had undertaken similar policies. Public sector reform has become a global phenomenon, but it has had its most significant impact in Africa. World Bank studies shows that between 1987 and 1996, 64% of all public sector reform operations were conducted in the African states (Kiggundu, 1998).

Public service reform is a planned intervention to raise the level of public service performance. It must have carefully defined goals and a strategy to attain these goals. The ultimate aim of the public service reform is to see remarkable improvement in the public service outputs, such as more effective and responsive service deliveries. This is the driving force behind the public service reform (Tarawa, 2001). To Schacter (2000), the public sector reform is about strengthening the way that the public sector is managed. Omoyefa (2008) sees it as the total overhauling of the government administrative machinery with the aim of injecting real effectiveness, efficiency, hard core competence, and financial prudence in the running of the public sector.

The public sector reform in Uganda, for instance, was conceptualized as soon as the National Resistance Movement (NRM) captured the state power on January 25, 1986. The NRM’s argument for this reform was to improve on its performance and to deliver the promises of the protracted people’s revolution. Also, the reform

was intended, in an accountable and transparent way, to enhance the performance of the public service to achieve good governance and optimum resource utilization that was in scarcity due to the misrule of the past regimes (Yasin, 2007).

In his contribution to the conceptualization of the public sector reform, Omoyefa (2008) argued that: *Whenever we mention public sector reform, it is often the case by many researchers to have a myopic view of it within the government administration machinery. It goes beyond that. For a meaningful public sector reform, both the private sector and the civil populace have to be embedded in it. The tripod cannot be separated if any meaningful change would have to take place in a country. For it is an incontrovertible fact that the need for reform in the public sector derives its impetus from the perceived success of the private sector. Also, the citizens, who constitute the end users of the products of the reform, are deriving both the public and private sectors. In essence, what would have been the appropriate name for public sector reform is "body polity reform". The wrong understanding of foundation meaning of public sector reform accounts for the erecting of defective edifice for the reform programs.*

In Africa, most of the post-1980 public service reforms were initially in the framework of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and were mainly, if not entirely, externally generated (Mutahaba & Balogun, 1989). Public service reform has come to include the plank for restructuring the government/central administration to create an effective instrument to manage the affairs of the nation in this new institutional environment. Questions related to the nature of the modern public service and its role, as well as the skill and expertise required, have had to be addressed (Klitgaard, 1994).

All public service reform initiatives and programs are to ensure that the objective of the Economic Recovery Strategy for the Wealth and Employment Creation are to be achieved and in the process. The country progressively achieves the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The government will undertake the reform initiatives in a comprehensive manner through the development of a public sector reform strategy validated by key stakeholders.

It is instructive to note that while there have been different views and different definitions with regard to the meaning of the public sector reform, the fact remains that many scholars see it as the attempt, by the government of a particular country, to change ways of doing things.

REVIEW OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM EXPERIENCES: LESSONS OF INTERNATIONAL AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Most reformers do not invent completely new ideas; they buy or borrow management ideas and techniques from elsewhere. Merchants in this trade include organizations and even some academics (Pollitt, 2004). The point we are trying to make is that it is imperative for us to know how public sector reforms enter the governance of

different countries, how it is been practiced, and lessons for Africa. For this will make us to appreciate the motives of the international donor agencies in conscripting African countries to embrace the public sector reforms.

It must be pointed out, however, that this trend in the public sector reforms has begun in Europe in the late 1970, particularly in Britain, since Margaret Thatcher took up office (Kickert, 1997). As observed by Agagu (2008), the reform of public service has been placed on the policy agenda of almost every European government whatever their political complexion, although the timing, the pace, the extent, the nature, the reasons, and the impact vary greatly across European countries. These vast arrays of administrative reforms being pursued by European governments were meant to modify the size, the structure, the functions and functioning, the efficiency, and even the culture of traditional public administration.

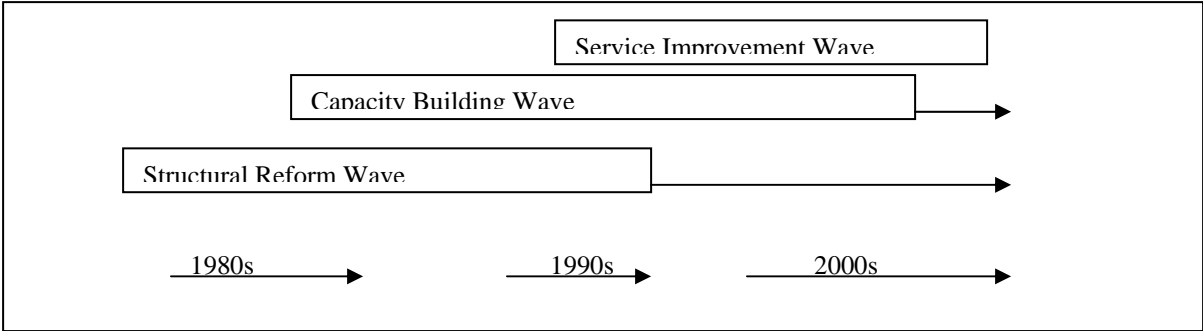
Following the global reform trend, Korea has adopted many reforms toward New Public Management (NPM), especially the Kim Dae-jung government. Economic crisis, telecommunication revolution, as well as globalization seem to have steered the government towards the NPM style of reform. Like many Western governments, the Korean government has been adopting such reform measures as re-organization and downsizing, deregulation, performance management, customer satisfaction administration, etc. (Kim, 2000).

The Federal Republic of Germany, for instance, realized that “the establishment of an efficient public administration performing its function under the rule of law is one of the most important and urgent objectives of achieving equal living conditions throughout the federal Republic of Germany through the introduction of the new steering model or *Neves Streuerungs*” (Seiller, 1993), The features of this model according to Agagu (2008) include output and result-orientation; output budgeting and performance indicators; service and client orientation; concern-division model; and delegation of responsibility to business units. This model was basically fashioned after the Dutch local government reforms in the 1980s. The prominent role played by local authorities derives from the fact that the central government plays a relatively minor role in Germany (Kicker, 1997).

In Africa, as observed by Mhone (2003), “the calls for [a] comprehensive public sector reform was first articulated in the World Bank’s 1981 report entitled, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Sahara Africa*”. The focus of the report is the economic growth and development in Africa. Stockhlom (2005) provides empirical results from the attempts to reform African public service in accordance with the New Public Management (NPM) in five countries: Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. He noted that they all received substantial donor support to implement a NPM-type reform. They show both successes and failures, but, more importantly, they underscore the notions of three generations of reforms in the continent. It is also noteworthy that in the five countries, many of the gains of structural public sector reform program measures have been reversed. This is particularly so in the cases of Ghana and Uganda. In Ghana, a wage hike in 1992 cancelled out the previous gains on controlling the wage bill, which, as a percentage of GDP, nearly doubled from 4.5 percent in 1990 to 8 percent.

Furthermore, by 1996, the size of the public service had risen to 330,000, about a quarter above the level achieved in the late 1980s (Mutahaba & Kiragu, 2002). They stated further that in Uganda, public service numbers have also been on the rise since 1998. The size of the public service is currently put at about 197,000 and is set to increase significantly above that in the medium term. Also, the measures to improve transparency of the compensation package are being reversed by the re-introduction of non-salary allowances. Structural reforms, therefore, had some limited enclave successes in improving service delivery in a few instances. In a general perspective, there have been three waves of public sector reform in the region, as shown below in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: An illustration of the three waves of public service reforms in Africa



Source: Mutahaba and Kiragu (2002)

African countries have, over the past twenty-one years, undertaken reform in the framework of these three planks. The first generation focused on structural reforms as part of the SAPs, imposed by the World Bank from the beginning of the 1980s. Public Sector Reform then sought to make the government learn and affordable through cost reductions and containment measures. It focused on the redefinition of the role of the state with a view to ensuring that it only performed functions that should be at the level of the state leaving the other functions to sub-national governments, the private sector, and voluntary sector. The main issues here are the need for the state to provide an environment that is conducive to private sector development, decentralization of functions to sub-national governments, and the privatization, commercialization, or liquidation of non-functioning, unnecessary public enterprise (Mutahaba and Kiragu, 2002).

The second generation of reforms focused on capacity building for improved service delivery. Lessons from the SAP based reforms indicated that the weak capacity was the root problem in the poor delivery of services. The next focus for reforms shifted from cost reduction and cost containment for capacity building (Stockholm, 2005). This second generation of reforms, in the view of Kiragu (2002), involved the adoption of efficiency measures to enhance public management performance. The resources includes, among others, improvement of functional and personnel management system with an emphasis on increase autonomy for managers (with corresponding responsibility), pay reform (linked to performance), and continued skill development and upgrading.

The third generation of reforms focused on service delivery improvement. A number of factors made this necessary, besides the inadequacies of the first and second wave of reforms. Among them were the need to demonstrate early results, public demands for transparency and accountability, influence of new public management, the need to support sector wide approaches, and an integrated systems approach. It, therefore, laid emphasis on measures for enforcing the accountability of the governors to the governed through increased transparency, openness, and citizen participation.

In Ghana, for instance, public sector reform became a component of the government economic program, with the financial support given through World Bank, Structural adjustment lending. As part of the SAP conditions, the Ghanaian government had to commit to an initial retrenchment of 15,000 public servants by October 31, 1987 with compensation and retraining program to be established for those who had been made redundant. However, where the program did not perform adequately was in the provision for retraining and counseling, with delayed and limited programs (McCourt, 1998).

In Kenya and Zambia, the pace of implementing structural public sector reform programs has been comparatively slow and less far reaching. In Kenya, the retrenchment of public servants through a voluntary early retirement scheme, between 1994 and 1996, was reversed through the hiring of teachers during the same period. In Zambia, the downsizing of the public service started in 1997. From then until the beginning of 2000, the total number of government employees fell from 139,000 to 102,000. Therefore, in both countries, macroeconomics and fiscal adjustment – driven reform measures remain high on the agenda of the public sector reform programs, despite the fact that SAP driven reform initiatives were formally launched in the early 1990s (Kiragu, 2002).

In Uganda there has also been substantial public sector reform, with a number of important successes initiated in 1982. The programs created a smaller civil service with better-paid and more efficient and effective staff. The success of reforms in Uganda is not typical of the African experience, where the majority of countries failing to reduce the size of their civil service, while allowing real wage levels to deteriorate over time. The Uganda success can also be attributed to the commitment of the Uganda government and the steps they took to educate the public on the necessity of reform (Baird, 2007).

Generally, African countries have, over the years, strived to employ the machinery of the public administration to a fast-track socio-economic development and put behind them their state of backwardness. While noticeable achievements have been made, nevertheless, much still remains to be accomplished.

UNDERSTANDING CURRENT PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN AFRICA

Public sector reform has gained widespread importance across the various countries. Almost all African leaders see the public sector reform in terms of initiated actions to change or better the existing situation in public policies. That is why Schacter (2000) sees the public sector reform as synonymous with the government. In his

opinion, like many African leaders and, to some extent, some scholars, the public sector reform starts with the government action and also ends with the government. This is a wrong notion and conception of the public sector reform. Omoyefa (2008) claimed that this has contributed, in no small measure, to the failure of the so-called public sector reform.

Meanwhile, Schacter (2000) observed that much of the Public Sector Reform activity supported by donors over the past 20 years or so fits into different areas which include the administrative capacity building; strengthening policy capacity; institutional reform; and civil service downsizing. Activities in these areas may be undertaken either as part of a comprehensive program of public sector reform that covers many or all governmental departments and agencies, or a narrower program that focuses on only one or a few agencies. In his contribution to the present public sector reform programs, Pollitt (2004) opined thus:

The idea of one best way - and of one best practice - is a tremendously seductive one. Each generation seems to go through a circle of excitement at finding the best way, and then disappointment as more analyses and more studies appears to show that it is not, so universal in its effectiveness, and that it also has downside effects.

The public management reform in the past 20 years has been extensively influenced by this cycle. Although a number of justifications have been made for the current reform efforts across the globe and, particularly, in Africa, it is instructive to note that the public sector reform was not designed to tackle malfunctioning of the public sector, it was not meant to evolve the blueprint for the infrastructural development of African states, and it was not meant to develop the abundant human resources of the continent. Rather, it was an accidental policy by the World Bank and United Nations Development Program to protect their loans and credit facilities granted to African countries for development programs (Harmes, 2006). So, the public sector reform was driven by the idea of “a call to arms for advancing a new agenda of development assistance, the perception being that financial or technical assistance would not be put to good use until such concepts as transparency and accountability, due process, probity, and efficiency were institutionalized in the system of government of recipient countries” (United Nations, 2005).

The international agencies have imposed the public sector reform on the African leaders that the government should not be seen as “Father Christmas”, rendering selfless service to the people. Rather, the government should be seen as creating wealth-like, profit-making organizations. To this end, African leaders see the public sector reforms as commercialization of all state-owned enterprises so as to make profit. Consequently, every sector of the economy is commercialized: health; education; electricity; agriculture; etc. are all commercialized in African countries, whereas these services are heavily subsidized in the developed countries (Omoyefa, 2008).

Africa has been through periods of intense enthusiasm for the New Public Management for what Osborne and Gaebler (1992) called “Reinventing government” for partnerships and networks. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) for example, claimed that:

If the rise of entrepreneurial government is an inevitable shift, rather than a temporary fad, as we argued, we would expect it to happen in other nations as well (as the USA). And, to a startling degree, a similar process of transformation is underway throughout the developed world.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, contemporary scholars, like Pollitt (2002), have shown that there is no such standard solution. Neither ‘entrepreneurial government’ nor any other single approach has spread throughout the developed world- even in terms of rhetoric, let alone practice. In a recent work on state-building and governance, Fukuyama (2004) observed that,

there are no globally valid rules for organizational design means that the field of public administration is necessary more of an art than a science. Most good solution to public administration problems, while having certain common features of institutional design, will not be clear-cut “best practice” because they will have to incorporate a great deal of context-specific information.

The mistaken perception that countries share a common problem is often accompanied by the idea that there is a smorgasbord of solutions available, any or all of which will be beneficial. This misconception, peddled under the label of “best practice”, has had tragic consequences in some developing countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003).

A major factor contributing to the failure of most public sector reform efforts, according to World Bank (2000), has been the “technocratic” approach taken by donors. For too long, donors treated the public sector reform as an “engineering” problem- a phenomenon to be addressed through “blueprint” or “textbook” solutions. There was an assumption that the public sector reform problems and their solutions could be fully specified in advanced and that projects could be fully defined at the outset and implemented on a predictable timetable, over a fixed period. This accounts for the formulaic and mechanistic approach favored by donors, featuring quantitative targets for payroll and workforce reductions, redrawing of organizational charts, recruiting of job descriptions, training courses for public servants, installation of a new system for human resources and public financial management, etc. (Schacter, 2000).

Perhaps the most easily overlooked lesson about the public sector reform is that it takes a long time to achieve fundamental reform of a public sector. The experience of the developed world would illustrate this well. It took centuries for today’s industrialized countries to develop reasonably, effective public institutions. In Great Britain, for example, it was only in 1854 that a series of reforms was launched aimed at constructing a merit-based service shaped by the rule of law. It took 30 years to eliminate patronage as the *modus operandi* of the public sector

staffing. Africans are, therefore, attempting to do in the space of a few decades what took hundreds of years in what is now the developed world. It is not surprising that the record, to date, has been full of failure and disappointments.

THE FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN AFRICA

The stark truth about the public sector reform is that we know much more about what has not worked in the past, than what is likely to work in the future. There are many examples of obvious failure, the few cases of unequivocal success. However, the mistakes of the past provide indications of promising paths for future effort. The basic and fundamental approach of Africa to the reform in its public sector is the reform of the minds of African leaders. This is very important because it is only a reformed mind that can reform the body polity. In doing so, Omoyefa (2008) is of the opinion that African leaders must wake up from their intellectual slumber to ask themselves simple, but mind boggling, questions as follows:

Why is it that the public sector reform in Africa heavily depends on donor agencies and the initiative of the developed countries? Do African leaders genuinely understand the philosophy behind this externally imposed reform? Does the designing and implementation of the reform fit into the cultural ethos and values of Africa? Must reform be carried out just in the name of reform, even when it is undesirable? Don't African leaders think that reforming themselves from their old stinking ways to render quality service to their people is the necessary reform required?. These and other pertinent questions, according to Omoyefa (2008) would set in motion the necessary intellectual renewal toward what the public sector reform represents.

Africans need to overhaul its administrative system so as to make them competitive and democratic. The effort must be constructed by the Africans themselves. The main focus of the government reform must be shifted from the hardware in the public services and the government operations. There is also need to evolve an African public service culture or tradition, which is value-based. It is expected that this would draw from universal public values such as public trust, impartiality, equity, transparency, ethnical standard, selflessness, etc.

For a meaningful, impact-felt reform to be successfully carried out in Africa, it must put into consideration the behavioral pattern, the social context, as well as cultural milieu of the people whom the reform is meant for, together with the vehicle of the reform. This means that there is need to exploit indigenous knowledge in carrying out any required reform in the public sector. On the part of donor agencies, there must be a departure from the situation whereby consideration is never given to the would-be recipient of the outcome of the reform and also does not allow both the local technocrats and policymakers to make any input into the reform policy formulation. In the light of this, Mhone (2003) has rightly argued that,

There is no need to indigenize the notion and practice of governance by exploiting and adopting [an] indigenous knowledge system, particularly those prevailing in [the] non-modern sector of [the] Africa society by which the majority of [the] African people live and abide.

Furthermore, Africa should redirect their attention first to institutionalizing selfless and purposeful leadership before talking about the public sector reform. If this is achieved, the government apparatus would be well managed to deliver the necessary public goods, which would render reform in the public sector irrelevant or minimal. Where the public sector reform is absolutely necessary, African leaders should jettison the idea of accepting wholesomely its presentation by the donor agencies; instead, enough consideration should be given to how this wholesome package of the public sector reform would work in their countries. In essence, there is a need for the re-orientation of Africa leaders who believe that whatever comes from the developed countries and the donor agency is perfect and fault-free.

Reformers in Africa and their donor partners require a long-term perspective because of the fundamental changes demands sustained efforts, commitment, and leadership over many generations. Mistakes and setbacks are a normal and inevitable part of the process. The big challenge is to sit upon the mistakes as learning opportunities, rather than using them as excuses for squashing the reform. To be successful, the public sector reform can seldom be bought 'off the shelf'. Much more often they need to be co-produced.

From the lessons learned from the public sector reform in Africa, we would like to conclude with the words of Tarawa (2001) "we should not spend much effort and time in reforming, but put greater strengths to designing strategies that ensure the success of the reform process".

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that the main vehicle of the government is the public service and personnel. Hence, it is imperative to harness this resource. Building of critical institutional capacities for good governance, economic growth, and development is a pre-requisite. Nonetheless, any reform to this end should be carefully formulated and implemented, taking into account the specific needs of the continent.

This paper has argued that although the public service reform is essential in order to invigorate the process of service provision to the public, an attempt must be made to indigenize the public sector reform in Africa. The paper is an attempt to redirect African thought to the public sector reform. It is not meant to disparage whatever might be any genuine developmental assistance to Africa. It has exposed the taproot of the failure of the public sector reform in Africa and has proffered future directions. The paper has also shown that the current public sector reform in Africa is completely detached from the people, which the reform is meant to improve their standard of living.

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