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Redesigning African civil service reforms

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1980s, many African countries have been reforming their civil services as a part of the process of state redesign. Unfortunately, these reforms have not been very successful because of faulty diagnosis and prognosis. They have failed to tackle the major problems confronting African civil services. These include serious human resource management issues of leadership, merit pay and related governance reforms, the appropriate strategy for mobilising resources for civil service reform (CSR) and for implementing such reforms. These issues must be adequately addressed before African countries can make significant progress in CSR and in development.

INTRODUCTION

There is some consensus today on the relevance of the state to economic development. The 1997 *World Development Report* (World Bank 1997: 1) which focused on the theme: 'The State in a Changing World' underscored the significance of this new consensus on the state when it argued that 'an effective state is vital for the provision of the goods and services – and the rules and institutions – that allow markets to flourish and people to lead healthier, happier lives. Without it, sustainable development, both economic and social is impossible.'

The civil service (CS), as the principal instrument of the state, has inevitably attracted renewed attention. But African civil service reforms (CSRs) of the 1980s and 1990s have not benefitted fundamentally from this new consensus on the state. Rather, as a product of the stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the late 1970s, they sought to reduce the relevance of the state in development and the size and cost of the civil service. Many countries in the region are now several years into the reform of their civil services, but these reform efforts have had limited impact.

A major evaluation of the CSRs by the World Bank, which has also orchestrated reforms in African civil services for almost two decades, showed that 'the impact of programs to contain the cost and size of

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civil services through emergency pay and employment reforms has so far been small' (Nunberg & Nellis 1995:vi). Another appraisal of the Bank's CSR programmes found that these have been predominantly African, with the continent accounting for 64 per cent of all of the Bank's CSR operations, and that the evaluations have not been satisfactory (Nunberg 1996:2). These negative evaluations agree with other studies of the subject (Dia 1995; Kiggundu 1996; Klitgaard 1997; UNECA 1996). However, contrary to the general tendency to blame poor performance on the implementation of CSRs, my argument here is to call the content and strategy of the CSRs themselves into question. I argue that CSRs fail because of their preoccupation with purely technical concerns of reducing the size and cost of African civil services, and their failure to tackle the more challenging task of building and sustaining the institutional capacities of African civil services within the framework of political, cultural, economic and fiscal changes in the region.

Few can disagree with the 1997 *World Development Report* when it argues that just as 'state-dominated development has failed', so will stateless development, and that 'development without an effective state is impossible' (World Bank 1997:25). I will try to demonstrate that central to that notion of an effective state is an effective civil service. Many African countries do not today have such civil services that can support the development process. Their civil services have eroded in capacity over time as a result of misdirected economic policies as well as poorly targeted CSRs. Better designed CSRs are required which focus on the sustainable enhancement of the capacity of both state and non-state institutions.

WHAT IS CSR AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT?

Confusion as to what constitutes the civil service and its relevance to national development is often at the heart of policy errors in CSR policy design, as data for comparative analyses are often lacking. While some countries make a distinction between public and civil services, others do not, and the practices sometimes vary over time and within different regions in the same country.

There are three main approaches to defining the civil service. The first approach conceives of the civil service as a system of employment, focusing on the size of civil services, and rules of civil service employment as these relate to such issues as recruitment, selection, job

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evaluation, training and development, performance appraisal, and the role and composition of the higher civil service as against the rest of the service. Second, civil services can also be conceived as instruments of governance, institutions that serve as the bridge between the state and specific administrative organs. Finally, civil services can be defined in terms of their role in the policy process: as 'policy authorizers, implementers, fixers, payers, producers, arrangers, and clients and consumers' (McGregor 1991:33).

The civil service derives its importance from the above-mentioned roles in the society and the economy: as organs of employment, governance and policy-making. These multiple roles justify its need for a core of highly skilled personnel at the higher levels. Such persons require demonstrable competence and commitment to state goals, and must operate under the general guidance of the public or their representatives. They devise strategies for the rest of society while stimulating other social institutions to operate as productive agents. To this end, many of today's industrial states, as well as the newly industrialising countries, have invested heavily in their civil services to make them operate at fairly high professional levels. In most cases, the civil service began as sinecures but, over the years, the organisation was separated from the realm of partisan politics and transformed into a professional organ, through competitive entry, accountable use of public resources, and competitive compensation systems that cover not only the active life of the civil servant but also the period of retirement. The objective of administrative reforms in these countries, and the newly industrialising nations of East Asia, is to raise performance levels in the civil service to higher levels over a period of time, in spite of resistance from the environment (see Caiden 1967; Mutahaba 1995; Quah 1995).

Critical to the civil service is the higher civil service. Those who operate at these levels must be not only proficient, but must set the moral tone for the civil and other public services as well as other social institutions. The strong attachment to merit (hence meritocracy) ensures that the most competent are not only recruited but rise to leadership levels in the civil service. This group provides professional leadership and takes responsibility for accountable performance of the civil service and quality advice, in the public interest, to the political leadership. Countries that do not subscribe to the career system operate systems that guarantee the competence, confidence and credibility of their senior civil servants (Smith 1984).

These roles make the civil service a crucial aspect of modern

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industrial society. It is regarded as both a cause and a consequence of economic growth, and as an essential condition for the emergence of the modern state (Jacoby 1976; Migdal 1988:274). Even in an age when business has become globalised and triumphant, governments in most industrial countries are still responsible for a quarter to one-half of their countries' gross domestic product.

African civil services, originally modelled on their metropolitan precursors, are thus expected to assist the development of the rest of the public sector and non-state institutional actors, i.e. the private sector and other civil society organs. But their own capacity to attract and retain professional leadership has eroded over the years. Unfortunately, the serious problems of weak and declining capacity of African civil services are not being seriously confronted by current CSRs, which are different from earlier, pre-1980, administrative reforms. Whereas pre-1980 reforms sought to increase the role and reach of the state, the overarching concern of post-1980 reforms is to reduce the size and cost of the African state through privatisation, closure of public enterprises, and contracting out and retrenchment in the civil services, in the hope that this will set free other actors in the private and non-governmental sectors. In the next section, we examine the major elements of the civil service components of these reforms, based on evaluations of a number of African CSRs, including those in Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

MAJOR ELEMENTS OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM

The elements of CSR vary from one African country to another, but its key components remain prominent and consistent. They can be classified into two broad types, 'core' and 'non-core' elements. The core elements include the following.

Organisational restructuring

Organisational reviews and restructuring are popular in all countries, but their impact is often quite limited (see Ingraham 1996:254). Restructuring takes three main forms.

Ministerial reorganisation: the government of Ghana, for instance, eliminated four agencies early in its reform efforts. Similarly, Uganda reduced the number of ministries from thirty-eight to twenty-one as a prelude to its own CSR in 1989.

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Creating or strengthening of central coordinating organs: in Ghana, for instance, considerable resources were devoted to strengthening the office of the head of the civil service (OHCS) and its main functional divisions/directorates.

Simplification and flexibility: elimination of non-essential functions, unnecessary paper work and regulations are elements for the regulatory reform required in many countries. So also is cutting excessive red tape which was a major focus of the CSR in the Central African Republic (Rambourg *et al*. 1995).

Personnel management

Since the focus of most of the African CSRs of the 1980s and 1990s has been on retrenchment and pay reform, personnel management issues have tended to dominate CSR in Africa. There are four major issues.

Improvement of the management of personnel records: regarded as necessary for the identification of ghost workers, ministerial reviews, hiring freeze and retrenchment. In most cases, the strategy adopted is to integrate the payroll and personnel records as in Ghana. In Uganda and Tanzania, this has been further developed into Personnel Control systems as the records are now computerised.

Retrenchment: this involves the dismissal of redundant civil servants and is one reform which formed the core of all efforts to have an affordable service in many countries of Africa. It is also one which has readily received support from donors.

Ministerial reviews: these often form the basis for retrenchment or reorganisation activities in ministries and agencies of the government. Organisational and efficiency reviews have been one of the most universal elements of CSR in Africa. In some countries, e.g. Uganda, such reviews have also been extended to the local authorities.

Pay reform: this is perhaps the most difficult aspect of African CSRs because of the deplorable salary situation in most African countries. Wages have not only been severely eroded by runaway inflation, but there has also been substantial wage compression between the lowest and highest paid in the civil service. Rather than confront this problem frontally, pay reforms in African countries have emphasised two elements: the monetisation of benefits as in Tanzania, where benefits-

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in-kind represent 400 per cent of salaries at the topmost levels but only 35 per cent at the lowst levels; and wage decompression. Ghana was able to decompress wages from 2·2:1 in 1984 to 10·1:1 in 1991. The target was 13·1:1 but it slipped to 9·1:1 in 1995. However, actual salaries in Ghana are still low, at US$3,200 to $357 p.a., though much higher than for many African countries.

Only a handful of countries (notably South Africa, Uganda and Ethiopia) have been able to tackle the issue of public sector pay across the board. Uganda raised salaries from 25 per cent to 56 per cent of the government's definition of a minimum living wage between 1990 and 1995, while Ethiopia did the same, raising salary levels globally in 1995 (the first time in twenty years), and is currently seeking to target professionals that are in the greatest demand in the private and public sectors: teachers, doctors and engineers.

Budgetary and financial reforms

These have three key main elements. First, on the *revenue side*, the objective is to try to identify additional revenue sources and methods of increasing revenue collections from present sources. With respect to the latter, many countries have sought to broaden their tax bases, by developing user charges, consumption taxes, and taxes on businessmen and those outside the public sector, to supplement their meagre direct revenue sources. On the latter, some countries have used an enclave approach by creating revenue administration agencies with substantial autonomy and clearer lines of responsibility as well as higher incentives, with remarkable results. For instance, when the government of Ghana created the National Revenue Service as an enclave within the civil service with substantial autonomy, accountability, better salaries and working conditions, compared to the rest of the civil service, customs revenue collection increased from 6·6 per cent to 12·3 per cent of GDP. Gambia and Zambia have also used this approach successfully. I argue below that future CSRs could do much more in this area.

The second and more prominent component of budgetary reforms is improvement on the *expenditure side*. Expenditure reviews are helping to identify which activities should be undertaken and which should not be undertaken, so as to reduce or eliminate some expenditures (e.g. tertiary health care) in preference for others (e.g. primary or preventive health) which are more cost-effective. The objective is to reduce the ratio of the wage bill to government expenditure, so that resources can be released for growth and operations and maintenance activities.

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Third, countries are reforming their *systems of financial management and accounting*. They are moving from traditional accounting methods to zero-based and Planning Programming and Budget Systems. Not all of these have succeeded, but some have.

Non-core reform elements

Although there is considerable variation from country to country, these include: first, strengthening the capacity of policy-making institutions such as the Cabinet, as the principal institution for policy-making. Zambia and Mali are two of the best examples, although in each case, the effort is differentiated from the mainline CSR. Other related measures include efforts to improve the relationships between ministers and civil servants, the public, stakeholders, parliament and the prime minister's office.

Second, increasing political responsiveness of top civil servants. The notion of neutral senior civil servants who serve under political executives has not been popular in African countries. In the days of the one-party state, top civil service positions were politicised in many countries. Even as late as 1988, Nigeria's CSR transformed permanent secretaries in the Whitehall tradition into directors-general, political appointees who served as deputy ministers and were required to vacate office when the administration that appointed them left. Ghana's CSR also adopted a modified version of the Senior Executive Service (SES) in which special contracts were given to those who provided leadership in the civil service.

Third, capacity building in the civil service. A few, more recent CSR reform efforts focus on building the capacity of African civil services. Generally, capacity building is taken to mean training of human resources. Agencies such as UNDP, ECA and the World Bank have lately highlighted the importance of capacity building (see Olowu 1998).

EXPLAINING THE FAILURE OF AFRICAN CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

It would be wrong to indicate that current CSRs are a complete failure. They have succeeded in particular areas and contexts. In particular, they have achieved spectacular success in the area of retrenchment. Civil service numbers have been reduced in many countries, although this is often not from retrenchment but from other mechanisms such as

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TABLE 1
Gross domestic product and central government expenditure, 1995

Country	GDPpc (US $)	Government expenditure (% of GDP)	Budget deficit/surplus (% of GDP)
Sierra Leone	180	19·8	−5·0
Madagascar	230	18·8	−4·8
Kenya	280	27·4	−3·2
Gambia	320	15·5	−3·5
Ghana	390	20·6	−2·5
Zambia	400	16·8	−2·9
Cameroon	650	15·5	−1·9
Namibia	2,000	40·7	−4·8
Botswana	3,020	38·3	—
South Africa	3,160	33·2	−6·2
Mauritius	3,380	23·3	−1·4
Korea	9,700	17·8	−0·2
United Kingdom	18,700	49·9	0·1
France	24,990	46·8	−5·5
Singapore	26,730	20·1	0
USA	26,980	22·9	−2·3
Denmark	29,890	43·5	−2·0
Switzerland	40,630	27·1	0·1

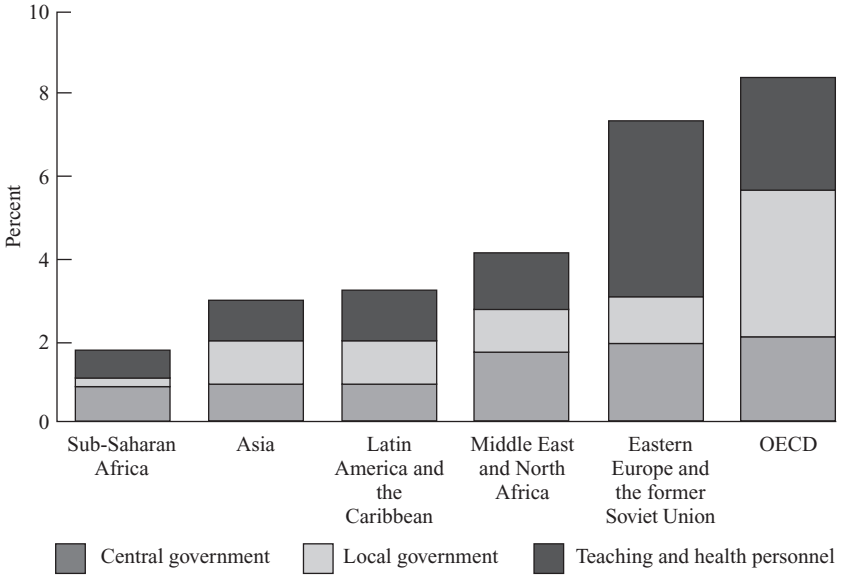
Source: World Bank 1997, Tables.

attrition, job inspection and identification of ghost workers. Ghana reduced its civil servants from 131,089 in 1990 to 80,000 in 1995. Uganda eliminated 170,000 jobs, and Tanzania retrenched 47,279 by 1995, including 14,700 ghost workers. Even though the net losses might not be as high because of confusing definitions of civil and public services, and also because of 'the revolving door problem' (retrenched people being recruited as new entrants in other departments), in most countries there has been a halt to the expansion of civil services at the lower levels where there was least demand for them. Moreover, some countries such as Uganda and South Africa, and to some extent Ethiopia, have also managed to work out a more nationally determined CSR component which focuses on some of the elements described as non-core above.

Having noted these successes, the majority of CSRs none the less fail because they do not address the serious human resource problems confronting the civil services in the countries concerned. Their diagnosis and prognosis are both faulty, but so also have been their strategies of reform implementation.

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FIGURE 1
Government employment as percentage of population (various recent years)



Sources: World Bank: Sector Management Team; country desks; various public expenditure reviews and country economic memorandums; various resident missions. IMF: *Government Finance Statistics Yearbook*, 1994; staff estimates. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: *Public Management: OECD Country Profiles*, 1992. Government sources: statistical yearbooks, yearly budgets. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: *Statistical Yearbook*, 1995. World Health Organization: *World Health Statistics* (1993)

Note: Local government includes all levels of government below central government. All averages are unweighted.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Côte d'lvoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Asia: China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen.

Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Hungary, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

OECD: All member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Wrong diagnosis

Preoccupation with financial costs led to the assumption that the African civil services were too big. While it is indeed the case that

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African civil services grew phenomenally in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, available data seem to suggest that there was nothing in itself wrong with this growth. Countries coming to political independence are confronted with a number of competing economic and social issues which they must tackle. And, in an era when the private sector was not well developed, the state must move in to fill the void, even if only temporarily. Although wage bills in many countries were responsible for 70–90 per cent of current government expenditures, total government expenditures were only 15–30 per cent of GDP. This compares favourably with industrialised country governments, which spend between 23–55 per cent of GDP. Moreover, when the African figures are examined, it is precisely in those countries with impressive economic performance that government expenditures were higher than normal, such as Botswana, Namibia, Gabon, and South Africa (see Table 1).

It is also difficult to understand how African civil services can be regarded as 'too big'. In reality, African civil services lacked the numbers and quality of civil servants that they required. Figure 1 shows that African civil/public services are characteristically much smaller per head of population than their counterparts in other parts of the world. For example, civil servants per 10,000 population number 370 and 125 respectively for France and USA (Rowat 1990), whereas the most recent (1996) figures for Uganda and Ethiopia are 83 and 50 respectively. Furthermore, whereas it was true that African countries had large 'excess staff' in the junior grades, they lacked the appropriate number of persons in the critical skilled grades. A survey of ten countries in the mid-1980s found that 'the typical African civil service remains both understaffed and overstaffed. It is significantly understaffed in professional and managerial areas, and perhaps overstaffed in semi-skilled and unskilled areas' (United Nations 1992: 19).

The reason for understaffing at the higher levels (represented in many countries by large numbers of vacancies) is not necessarily one of absence of supply. It also reflects the inability of civil services to attract and retain high quality professionals. Available data on comparative public sector pay for African countries showed that as wages eroded, African civil services lost the ability to compete for critical human resources that could provide professional leadership for the rest of the civil service. In many countries, this led to serious organisational and ethical problems for the civil and public services (see Chew 1990; Adamolekun 1993; Rasheed & Olowu 1993). Increasing employment of lower-level civil servants (and the wage compressions which aggravated

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TABLE 2
Major civil service problems: Uganda

1. Dysfunctional civil service organisation
2. Inadequate personnel management and training
3. Insufficient management and supervisory skill
4. Inadequate facilities, assets and maintenance culture
5. Inadequate pay and benefits
6. Inadequate ethics, transparency and accountability, creating incentives for corruption, and low staff morale and motivation
7. Underestimation of the Required Minimum Living Wage (MLW)
8. Distortions in the salary structure
9. Unanticipated negative consequences of decentralisation
10. Other factors: vagueness of CSR policies, leading to multiple interpretations, focus on internal transformational processes (e.g. cost, size, reorganisation) rather than performance criteria (e.g. service delivery), misuse and abuse of office by political and civil service leadership, and underestimation of the importance of societal and contextual factors.

Note: Similar lists have been made from rankings from sampled respondents in other SSA countries. *Source*: Langseth 1995.

this trend) provided additional evidence of how serious these problems were.

A review of major civil service problems in a number of African countries shows that there has been a breakdown of the civil service's institutional capacity as a result of the inability to hire and retain senior officials (see Table 2). The result has been low productivity, particularly evidenced in the weakened ability of many countries to respond strategically and intelligently to changes in the international economic environment. This was an important part of the explanation for Africa's poor economic performance (see Sachs & Warner 1997; UNECA 1996). Low productivity in the civil service has been fed by five specific problems, of which the sharp decline in civil service salaries and the consequent meltdown of the merit system are only two. Others are weak accountability systems, excessive centralisation and low resource mobilisation. Each of these merits further elaboration.

Sharp decline in compensation for professional skills and breakdown of the merit system

A key ingredient for organisational efficiency is the ability to recruit and retain the most critical skilled human resources. Research on African civil services indicates that civil service salaries have fallen

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TABLE 3
Uganda: Monthly basic salary in the civil service, parastatals and private enterprises (in New Uganda shillings, 1988)

Category of Employee	Civil Service	Parastatals		Private sector	
		Large	Medium	Large	Medium
Middle management position (equivalent of principal secretary in the civil service)	1,950	4,974	3,450	34,500	8,200
Newly recruited university graduate	1,049	3,561	2,755	26,600	4,500
Newly recruited clerk	495	1,332	1,200	19,600	2,200
Newly recruited messenger	450	803	1,025	10,000	1,600

Source: Chew 1990, p. 1011.

sharply as a result of inflation and currency devaluation. The worst hit have been those in the high skilled categories. They have suffered not only severe wage erosion but also wage compression (see Lindauer & Bamberg 1994; Adedeji *et al.* 1995; Robinson 1991). In Uganda, for instance, it was found that the monthly incomes of a messenger (least-paid), a university graduate (middle career professional officer), and the head of the civil service (the most paid) were: US$11.00, US$16.99 and US$19.00 respectively. Even the salary of the highest-paid official, the head of the civil service, could only last for nineteen days, if he fed from the local *matoke*, which was rather cheap. Chew (1990: 1004) noted that:

> Real starting basic salaries fell calamitously between January 1975 and September 1988 for all categories of employees. The real value of the basic salary of a newly recruited messenger in September 1988 was only a quarter and that of the head of civil service was a minuscule 3% of the January 1975 value. The ratio of the basic salary of the head of the civil service to that of the newly recruited messenger was 34·2 in January 1975. By September 1988, it had dropped to 3·9.

These salaries were also low when compared with other sectors of the economy. Table 3 shows that comparative salaries in other sectors of the Ugandan economy were much higher, and particularly so for those who were in the high skilled categories: about four times in parastatals and 35 times in the private sector. Given the substantial support that NGOs currently receive from their northern counterparts, pay in that sector is much higher than in the civil services of many countries.

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This experience is not peculiar to Uganda. Civil service salaries have fallen precipitously in many other African countries. But the critical issue is how civil servants have responded to this problem. They have sought salary upgrading and rapid promotions, further facilitated by internal and external brain drain; a majority of professionals who can find jobs in other sectors domestically or externally have sought greener pastures. Other responses include abuse of allowances and training funds, payment to ghost workers, moonlighting and work absences and other fraudulent practices, all which have actually raised the wage bill. A major study by the International Monetary Fund found a strong correlation between public sector wages relative to manufacturing wages and the level of corruption in a country. It estimated that government wages needed to be 2·8–7·4 times higher to make corruption negligible (*Economist* 16 August 1997). Some governments have actually encouraged their senior officials to take on second or third jobs to supplement their incomes, which exacts a severe toll on efficiency and effectiveness in the services. As a result, many civil services are no longer merit systems: they recruit those who are not able to find jobs in other sectors – private, international or civil society.

Weak systems of accountability

Accountability has three major components: responsibility, reporting and reward systems. All three require top level professionals. African civil services have since colonial times prided themselves on their fairly effective systems of internal accountability: clear assignment of individual responsibilities which constitute the basis for report writing and rewards/punishment. All of these have broken down, and, in many African civil services today, there exists no system of accountability for performance. Officers who are not paid their own salaries, or who are paid irregularly, can hardly enforce the ethical codes of the civil services against subordinate officers who are moonlighting or guilty of other misdemeanors. This is even more so if the leaders themselves are guilty of the same fault. A governance environment in which political leaders are disconnected from the citizens and which ensures that citizens are practically excluded from the governance processes has only aggravated this situation.

In particular, structures for imposing accountability from outside the civil service are everywhere weak. Many African countries, for instance, do not have audited accounts and, where they have, they are seven to

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ten years in arrears. Even many of the democratising countries, such as Ethiopia, have no Public Accounts Committees (PACs). And those that have (e.g. Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya) lack the critical resources (personnel, office space, equipment, information processing systems) to ensure their effectiveness. Generally, citizens learn of important public policy decisions long after they have been made, and attempts by media organisations to publish or discuss information on these issues are treated in some countries (e.g. Nigeria, Zimbabwe) as criminal.

Excessive politicisation and centralisation

A weakened civil service leadership leads to a situation in which the policy process is dominated by poorly skilled politicians and/or external (international) consultants (Hyden 1984; Mutahaba & Balogun 1992). Besides the fact that this results in defective policies, it has also helped to heighten the centralised nature of the civil service. Yet, it is widely recognised that the closer the providers are to the users of any service, the more efficient and effective the service is likely to be. This gap is wide in many African countries, because of the high levels of administrative and political centralisation and the resultant weakness, in terms of the quantity and quality of personnel, of both field administrations and local governments. Hence, it is not unusual to find large vacancy numbers in the field and local government administrations coexisting in the same countries with surplus staff in the headquarters (United Nations 1992:24; Wunsch & Olowu 1990). In the 1990s, some countries began to strengthen the capacity of their local governments, but this is often confused with the field administration system and in most instances disconnected from the CSR process.

Inadequate resources

Smart civil services are expensive, not only in terms of the pay and perquisites of their elite staff, which must be competitive with the private sector, but also because of their spatial, equipment and other operational requirements. The most serious problem for many cash-strapped countries with high debt-service ratios in Africa is finding the resources to pay for quality civil services.

Wrong prognosis

On the basis of the conviction that African civil services were already overestablished, mandatory personnel reductions/retrenchment be-

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came a standard requirement of CSRs. In some countries, civil services were simply cut by a percentage, such as 25 per cent, without reference to the numbers on the ground. In addition, a freeze was placed on hiring new staff and on salary raises. The preoccupation was with keeping costs down. Yet the hope, rather curiously, was that savings in retrenchment would pay for future increases in salaries for the civil servants who remained. The experiences of CSRs in country after country largely belied these assumptions. A few of the reasons for the failure to realise these expectations are proffered below.

First, retrenchment has been more costly *financially* than was originally expected. There are several elements of this cost: (a) severance payments are generally high, especially if the idea is to redeploy civil servants to be engaged fruitfully in the private sector; (b) the costs expended in identifying the retrenches have also been high; and (c) the savings from retrenchment have generally fallen well below the amount that would be needed to raise the salaries of those who remained in the service. In Ghana, there were cumulative losses as a result of downsizing from 1987 to 1990, after which some savings came to be realised. The experiences of other countries were no different. It took a minimum of five years for savings to be made, if at all (Lindauer & Nunberg 1994: especially chapters 7 and 8). Unfortunately, in most voluntary retrenchment exercises, it was usually the most able who left first, attracted by better opportunities and pay to non-state sectors.

Second, retrenchments have *politically* been a very difficult proposition for many governments. In Tanzania, the prospect of the 1995 elections made the government lukewarm about retrenchment, because it was very unpopular. Governments have also tried to exempt the social sector ministries from retrenchment. On the other hand, in Uganda, the government was able to present retrenchment to the public as the precondition for having a smaller, more muscular and more effective civil service. Finally, CSRs which focus on retrenchment have not only further weakened the civil service, but have tended to be gender-blind, because the cuts differentially affect the sectors in which women tend to be more represented.

Strategy and fundamental dilemmas

Not only has the content of the reforms been problematic, but also the strategy adopted in introducing them. The reforms have tended to be generally minimally participatory, often excluding the key stake-

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holders, the civil servants (particularly so in Ghana, Tanzania and Nigeria), even though greater participation by these actors might make the reforms more sustainable. It was feared that involvement of stakeholders might slow down the implementation of retrenchment programmes in the civil service. CSRs have also tended to focus on the short rather than the long term, because donors, who have provided the impetus for most reform efforts, must come up with immediate results to appease their domestic constituencies.

Moreover, CSRs are largely disconnected from other political and economic reforms taking place in these countries. With the exception of a few countries, already cited above, they do not include critical public sector reform issues such as decentralisation, strengthening accountability and improving transparency which are all cornerstones of reform in economic and political realms. The original notion associated with most SAPs, that civil services were major obstacles to the activities of non-state institutions, has been largely disproved. In fact, preliminary research results suggest that both private and NGO sectors are heavily dependent on the civil services in most countries (Gibbon 1996).

It is likewise widely acknowledged that reforms on this scale involve changes not only in structures but in organisational behaviour. Changing behaviour takes time to bear fruit, for which some observers have suggested a period of 10 to 15 years. But the donors who provide the funds for reform need to show quick results to convince their domestic constituencies. Hence, even though African ownership is stressed, the reality of most reform initiatives is the dominance of external timetables and immediate results. Robert Dodoo (1996), the head of the Ghanaian civil service, lamented that the first set of Ghana CSRs had such limited success because of 'donor time-tables, agendas and conditionalities'.

Fortunately, donors have also come to recognise the need to come up with a different set of CSRs which emphasise the building of the capacity of the civil service and the public sector. A seminar on African public administration in 1995 came up with a document, 'Rethinking Donor Approaches to Civil Service Reform', which was subsequently developed to 'Guiding Principles on Civil Service Reform', issued by the Special Action Programme for Africa (Ademolekun *et al.* 1997). Finally, the World Bank (1997) identifies a number of specific strategies aimed at improving the capacity of state institutions, including the civil service. These include restoring meritocracy, improving accountability and competitiveness. Little attempt, however, has yet been made to use

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these insights to develop a sustainable genre of CSRs. This is the purpose of the final section of this article.

TOWARDS A NEW GENRE OF AFRICAN CSRS

The present consensus on the critical importance of the state for development purposes provides an opportunity to redesign CSRs. These should be linked to programmes of economic and political reform, and should integrate donor and African government concerns. The most important requirement is to improve the capacity of African civil services by raising their institutional capacity. Institutions require critical resources: human, material, financial, and policies or procedures. CSRs should focus on how to *increase* these resources in African countries. From the above analysis and the emerging consensus, five major strategies appear to be crucial.

Re-assert meritocracy

A merit system has a number of attributes. The most important is that it offers an attractive salary and incentives package which is able to attract and retain the best. As discussed above, some countries in the developing world and even in Africa (e.g. Botswana, South Africa and Uganda) are trying to ensure that civil service salaries are competitive with those in the private sector and the large number of well-paid non-governmental organisations, most of which are funded by donors.

An evaluation of the Ghanaian CSR underscored the pre-eminent importance of meritocracy to the success of CSRs and of civil services: 'Restoring the competitive position of the civil service-pay condition, schemes of service, effective career management etc. should be addressed earlier on. Talent has to be attracted and retained before any progress can be expected' (Brown *et al.* 1995:36). Other African CSR evaluations raise the same issue. Merit systems should not preclude the application of representativeness for ethnic, racial or gender balance reasons. However, none of these must be at the expense of merit. Furthermore, a merit system should not preclude the appointment of political advisers to the government to provide alternative advice to that from the civil service and also to promote advocacy.

Several possibilities exist, although it is widely recognised that there are no real alternatives to stronger national economies. With the exception of a few countries, this is a longer-term option. For the mass

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of the highly indebted poor countries (HIPCs) with large debt service ratios, alternatives must be sought in the short run. One proposal is that since African countries need meritocratic civil services which few can afford, the scope of those covered should be reduced to only those in the senior policy-making ranks (Ademolekun 1993). Similar approaches include the targeting of the scarcest skills in the public service for a pay system which reflects market rates, rather than an across-the-board application of meritocracy. The problem confronted by all these suggestions is how to finance even these modest changes. This issue is taken up later.

Improve accountability

Higher pay alone will not lead automatically to higher productivity. Equally critical is the need to *improve accountability*, a goal that is impossible to deal with in countries that are not disposed to reforming their economic and political systems. To this end, CSRs should focus only on African countries that are ready to undertake economic and political reforms designed to improve the accountability of governance processes in the economic and political realms. In other countries, an attempt should be made to raise consciousness for CSR and overall governance reform.

One important issue to be addressed is whether to keep top officers within the civil service career system or to create a separate system for them. The important thing, however, is that accountability has to be enforced at the most senior levels. It is also critical that citizens be empowered to pressurise their political representatives to exact higher levels of accountability from those who manage the civil service. Many politicians come to office without a clear idea of how to work in an harmonious and responsible way with their civil service managers, often leading to fractious relationships. CSRs should thus incorporate regular and effectively institutionalised training in policy management for political executives and administrative managers. They should also include civic education on the public's rights and institutional opportunities for effecting greater accountability.

A related reform focus is the overhaul of accounting and auditing systems. Strengthening these systems will not only enhance performance, but also improve transparency of the civil service. Reforms must include not only financial accounting but also human resource audits, organisational audits and physical performance audits. Audit reports should be submitted both to the executive and to the legislative branches of the government.

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To give teeth to these reports, there is a need to strengthen the capacity for each of the three branches of the government: the judiciary, parliament and the executive. All of them need to enhance their capacities for taking poorly performing ministries to task and penalising culprits. The executive needs to enhance its own internal audit reporting mechanisms, the judiciary its capacity to handle cases expeditiously, and the parliament its scrutiny of audit reports through Public Accounts Committees (PACs). PACs are critical for instance to drive reforms in the civil services. In Sierra Leone, the president's office was developing an Office on Governance and Transparency to ensure that departments and ministries performed transparently and responsibly, before the soldiers struck in 1996. Some countries, such as Botswana, have also established specialised and well resourced agencies to fight corruption in the public and private sectors. The media should have freer access, by law, to these reports and be able to comment on them. These conventional processes can be further supplemented by service delivery surveys, opinion polls and civil service charters which some countries, such as Namibia, have already adopted.

Decentralise operations and structures

CSRs should focus on decentralisation not only of structures but also of operations. Structurally, CSRs should seek both deconcentration and devolution where possible. There is also a need to decentralise operations at all levels: providing greater opportunities for inputs from the public to the decision making processes, but also ensuring a more equitable sharing of government investments, and providing opportunities for people to criticise government operations. Little progress can however be made without a polycentric governance regime that recognises and values multiple centres of institutional power to replace the present monocentric constitutional regimes in most countries (Ostrom 1996; Migdal 1988). Besides enhancing opportunities for greater accountability, stronger decentralised structures may help to synergise the presently disconnected formal and informal structures of governance and enhance opportunities for co-production of services.

Mobilise resources for CSR

Once there is agreement that African countries require more and not fewer institutional resources, much more attention should be focused on

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how to raise the financial resources to attract these institutional resources. The current reforms do not pay enough attention to this issue.

Many scholars believe that there are severe limits to mobilising additional tax resources in African countries. However, the experiences of a number of countries that have ventured, such as Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, have shown that there exists greater potential for improving tax systems and partial cost recovery in many African countries than has generally been recognised. For example, the property taxes which initially financed the development of municipal infrastructures in today's industrialised countries remain completely underdeveloped and untapped in many African cities. The problem is that such tax reforms would require a lot of effort, but donor financing for reforms should focus on these strategic areas rather than on cost reduction, which is the current preference. Another important advantage of reforms which focus on tapping additional resources is that they create a pressure to improve accountability, services delivery and decentralised governance.

In the short or medium term, resources generated from these sources are unlikely to suffice. In most instances, debt relief will be essential. Although a vexed and contentious issue, many African countries, as indicated above, are spending a large proportion of their recurrent expenditures on debt payments and service. There is the fear that debt cancellation may send wrong signals and can indeed condone corrupt leadership. On the other hand, available data indicates that there is very little room left for some countries to undertake costly reform and social and economic development after large debt deductions. It is indeed in the best interests of Africa's present and future trading partners to assist countries that show a willingness to reform their civil services.

One way to do this is for Africa's external development partners to create a special capacity building trust fund which can make funds available in the form of grants and loans to enable some African states that have demonstrated willingness to undertake major economic and political reforms to carry out capacity building programmes. These should target the recruitment and retention of scarce skills and the rehabilitation of their civil service systems over a period of some five to ten years. The World Bank proposed Trust Fund on Capacity Building can thus have two portfolios, one for loans and the other for grants. HIPCs should qualify for the latter.

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Improve the Information Base

It was noted earlier that much of the confusion on the appropriate direction for African CSRs arises because of a lack of reliable information on their civil services even within the countries themselves. And what exists in most instances is not comparable over time and space. African governments and donors need to collaborate to build up information systematically over time on African civil services.

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CSRs in Africa should be properly conceived of as a part of the process of state redesign to increase capacity of the state for penetration, regulation, resource mobilisation and utilisation. But state capacity can only be improved if resources can be mobilised from the society, and if these resources are utilised in ways that promote societal desires. The disconnection between the state and society is one of the fundamental causes of the crisis of the African state and its civil service systems. What Africa needs is not necessarily smaller but more capable and reconfigured civil services. The latter are bound to cost more not less, and everything must be done to leverage these resources in the short and long terms.

Ultimately, the route to the revitalisation of African civil services is rapid economic growth. Classical scholars of the bureaucracy recognised the linkage between economic growth and effective civil services. It is surprising that this relationship does not receive the explicit emphasis which it requires today in LDC CSRs, except in the countries referred to as the 'Asian tigers'. Just as effective delivery of services promotes economic growth, because of the ready availability of infrastructures which the private sector will not provide, the surplus which a growing and vibrant economy generates is essential to enable the civil service to pay competitive salaries, keep its officials highly motivated, and empower its immediate public/customers to assert accountability.

All of the above underscores that what is required may therefore not be better implementation of the present CSR policies, but rather a redesign of CSRs, so that they focus on building and retaining institutional capacity over time can promote the emergence of developmental democracies in sub-Saharan Africa.

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