

CRITICAL REVIEW OF MDIs AND THEIR PERFORMANCE

MDIs in Africa have been the subject of considerable criticism by academics and practitioners alike. Those criticisms relate to genuine problems whose solutions the critics have reason to believe could be provided by the MDIs. In this section we review a few general critical comments on MDIs in Africa. Peter Blunt and Merrick L. Jones (1992 p. 315) writing on management in Africa, were quite categorical in their statement that the record of the continent's many national institutes of public administration is disappointing. Such criticisms were not limited to external researchers like Blunt and others.

The Report to the Regional Training Council of SADCC (NASPA 1985) was quite representative of African MDIs when it reported that "National institutions for training in public management are in trouble". Safavi (1981) explained the trouble in Africa MDIs to include the fact that they faced conflict between classroom and culture and between western theory and African reality. Balogun (1986) once a chief executive of an African MDI, judged the performance of these institutions to be "well below standard ... they have failed to influence development policy and public sector management practices .. their contribution to the cross-fertilisation of ideas between the public and private sectors is minimal". Other African academics like Adamolekun (1989) and Kiggundu (1991) subscribe to the criticisms by calling for the reform of the MDIs to meet critical shortages of skills to make "a significant contribution to management development in Africa".

However, the deficiencies in managerial capability in Africa should not just be attributed to ineffective contributions by MDIs alone as some critics have tended to do. Montgomery (1987) describes Africa as "one of the most difficult administrative settings to be found anywhere in the world", and goes on to suggest that "the changes the administrative system needs are the hardest to bring about" This view is shared by other writers like Jones (1990); Jenkins (1982); and Rutherford (1991). As Leonard (1987) admits we certainly have no clear knowledge now of "what reforms might be (best) used to improve performance of Africa's public organisations".

It is also appropriate to suggest that MDIs as organs in the 1990s may not be exactly what they have been portrayed to be by the many critics in the 1970s and 1980s. The major criticisms and shortcomings of the MDI were first that they were no longer focusing on the real needs of the client or consumer. Such needs were changing in line with the global and environmental changes taking place in society. Human resource management techniques were not moving away from mechanistic structures since human resources policies had become aligned with organisational strategy. To this extent, their approach was not client-centred. Secondly, MDIs

organisational culture was still pyramidal with the chief executive at the apex and staff along the base. They remained hierarchical in structure, even in situations which required lean and flat organisations capable of delivering services to the clients efficiently and effectively. While the client had changed, the MDI had not changed fundamentally. Consequently, the needs of the clients were not adequately served and criticisms were publicly expressed by the clientele.

THE DEGENERATION OF MDIS

Over a period of time, MDIs were gradually pushed from the centre of advice and expertise to the periphery of the administration. They were no longer consulted before governments took policy decisions and were consequently accorded low status, inadequate funding and insufficiently skilled personnel to provide the required services. As a result, MDIs were no longer capable of offering the technical advice and service expected of them and were effectively marginalised by the system. The training and research functions were referred to outside agencies to which governments paid heavily for the services that could have equally been provided by the institutes.

Although many reasons have been advanced for the failure of MDIs in the policy reform process, the following are among some of the contributory factors:

1. Limited budgetary allocation by governments making it impossible to conduct research, offer best training services, attract qualified, competent personnel and provide facilities and infrastructure for executive training.
2. Lack of a systematic approach to human resources development and an absence of a well co-ordinated and defined training policy for senior managers in policy development and management.
3. Lack of appreciation of the value of training and development management and its contribution to improved performance and policy management. This has resulted in the emergence of negative attitudes towards management training, especially among the professional and technical personnel who often regard themselves as "above training" (Dlamini 1995).
4. Absence of institutional linkage for co-ordination and co-operation with MDIs became evidence of poor management development policy and a lack of necessary leadership and guidance which sometimes resulted in the design of inappropriate curricula.
5. Management development was in the main offered by the donor agencies often abroad or in the region by institutions, often with little knowledge of local needs and social environment.

6. Poor remuneration and conditions of service of staff made it difficult to attract and retain suitably qualified personnel, while MDIs' close links with the government denied it the necessary autonomy and flexibility needed for independent decision-making in recruitment, appointment and promotion of staff.
7. Because of limited funding, lack of attraction of qualified and competent staff, whatever little training offered by the MDI became ineffective and insignificant. The impact of training on personnel was not effective, noticeable or formally recognised as an important tool in improving the performance of the human resources, particularly in the changing environment in which the public service is being reformed.
8. The poor morale, poor remuneration, lack of incentives, absenteeism, poor promotion opportunities, and fear of becoming redundant, which prevailed in the public service also existed in the management institutes which were still part of the civil service and the Ministry of Public Service and Personnel. The management institute was therefore bedevilled by the very same negative factors prevailing in the public service. Consequently, the performance of the institute was negatively affected.

THE PARADOX OF MARGINALISATION

The privatisation of certain public enterprises and the related commercialisation of agencies of government resulted not only in an increase in competition to provide services to government but also made it possible for ministries to select training services outside government institutions. Because of the deteriorating competitiveness in MDIs, they could not compete favourably with the already established institutions in the private sector. Government could now purchase services anywhere and, in most cases, preferred the more modernised, customer-friendly, private sector training institutions which tended to design their training to suit the needs of the customer.

In some instances, when the government needed training services urgently but did not have adequate funds, it would expect the MDI to provide such services since it was a government-owned institution. In equally worse situations, government delays making its payments for services rendered by MDIs. Some MDIs have complained of non-payment by governments because ministries have exhausted their budgets before the end of the financial year.

Delay in payment, or non-payment for services already rendered by the MDI, affects the survival of MDIs and incapacitates it in the delivery of services. They cannot compete favourably with other training institutions if financial resources are not available. One of the indirect and unintended consequences of these situations

is that an MDI is forced to provide services to clients who can either pay or pay promptly. In such instances, the MDI would be more than likely to offer training services to the private sector or non-government organisations who can pay on service delivery. The consequence of such a change in providing services to non-government clients by a wholly-owned government institution leads to goal displacement. In other words, the original goals of providing training services to government would be replaced by the need for survival of the MDI. Goal displacement leads to pressures brought to bear on the change in its status, mandate, structure and focus by the government. Some governments have even privatised public institutions for training, as in the case of the Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA) in the United Kingdom.

Attempts to transform MDIs in order to suit the changing environment and client needs is, therefore, paradoxical. The paradox lies in deciding whether to offer training services to government knowing full well that the government may or may not pay for the services rendered. Such decisions are made in the circumstances in which the grant from the government is no longer made available since the institute is supposed to be autonomous and self-financing. The other side of the paradox is “whether the institute should concentrate on those clients who can pay for the services rendered even if they are in the private sector”. The transitional process is paradoxical.