

THE WAY FORWARD: IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS

The Commonwealth Secretariat-sponsored workshop held in Maseru, in February 1998, on the role of management institutes in the public service reform process, outlined the expectations of the key role-players, namely the ministries responsible for MDIs, and the MDIs in meeting the latter's performance obligations. In order to improve the functional relationship between parent or responsible ministry and the MDI, the seminar made the following recommendations which could be summarised as follows:

A Memorandum of Understanding

In view of the mistrust and poor understanding between MDIs and governments, there is a need to develop proper understanding and better working relationships between MDIs and government. This can be achieved by preparing a Memorandum of Understanding which would spell out areas of operations and collaboration between the two key players. This Memorandum could include factors that enhance an environment that promotes a fair chance for MDIs to compete, to be involved in the civil service reform process, and to accept and recognise the advisory role of the MDIs.

There should also be joint identification of management needs, utilisation of available skills in the re-structuring and re-organisation of the state machinery, and joint involvement in the development and management of human resources.

The mission, objectives and strategies of MDIs for relevance to the reform process

In order to match the expectations of governments involved in public service reforms, the missions, objectives and strategies of MDIs should be transformed and aligned with the government's reform orientation. They should bear in mind the environmental changes currently going on in the public sector. These include:

- changes in the philosophy of the government where market-orientation entrepreneurship, good governance and accountability are being emphasised;
- restructuring of the public service which includes downsizing or right-sizing, decentralisation, deregulation, etc.;
- change in the value systems emphasising efficiency and effectiveness; responsiveness and accountability; customer care; integrity; honesty etc.; permanence versus contract; and openness versus confidential reports;

- management of reforms in areas such as performance management; strategic management; executive agencies; management by objectives etc.

Since many MDIs seem to be lacking in strategic corporate plans, they should prepare them for, say, five years with a clear vision and mission, incorporating therein all other essential elements like objectives, strategies, time-frame, and physical and financial implications.

Since there is a general complaint that programmes run by the MDIs often lack relevance, are not job-specific, and are not based on identified needs, they should ensure that, apart from a few programmes of a generic nature, most of the programmes they run are needs-based. For this, training needs assessment (TNA) should be carried out periodically and new curricula developed on the basis of the needs identified. There should also be an appropriate organisational mechanism to undertake TNA in ministries, in collaboration with MDIs. TNA should be undertaken by specially-trained management trainers.

Research and consultancy

Among the main functions of training, research, and consulting, many MDIs seem to concentrate only on training at the cost of the other two important functions. Some African MDIs are very poor in research and consulting activities. They are trainers and not consultants. Accordingly, efforts should be initiated to carry out research in areas relevant to public service viz, size of staff and productivity; impact of retrenchment; turnover rates; gender balance in productivity etc., with a view to enhancing their collaboration and co-operation with the public service. By so doing, the public service will see MDIs as reliable and credible allies in helping them to prevent and solve policy reform-related issues and problems.

Initiatives of policy reforms

Having regard to the fact that MDIs, due to their own inadequacies, have been pushed to the periphery of policy-making, they should henceforth seize the initiative of policy reforms by conducting viable research and consultancy on public sector issues for their governments. In this way, they can be more credible and perceived as allies of government.

Recognising that one of the major obstacles to a cordial relationship between MDIs and the ministries, the lack of autonomy of MDIs, and recalling that the Commonwealth Secretariat had convened a workshop in Lesotho on autonomy ten years ago, the workshop recommends that immediate action be taken to getting MDIs that are not yet autonomous to work towards autonomy with the necessary legal framework. The workshop further recommends that for cordial relations between MDI and their stakeholders, the Boards of MDIs should include representation from the various stakeholders.

Critical skills and strategies for coping with reforms

In order for MDIs to be more relevant and useful to government in policy reforms they should:

- (a) Acquire specialist knowledge in relevant areas of public administration so that they will be advantageously positioned to render professional advice on policy reforms.
- (b) Acquire critical skills including negotiation, lobbying, presentation, analytical and monitoring skills which they and their clients need to cope with policy reforms. But with reference to the latter they should make special efforts to pass on these skills for improved performance.

Networking and exchange of programmes

Recognising the need to increase local capacity to meet the demands for training, research and consultancy, the workshop recommended the need for networking at the local, regional and international levels. The workshop called on all MDIs to develop a strong network relationship with other MDIs, the universities and other training institutions within their respective countries in order to build up a formidable team to undertake the required teaching, research and consultancy needs in their respective countries.

In view of the fact that all the MDIs are not on the same professional platform, staff and programme-wise, the workshop concluded that MDIs in Africa should embark on a massive exchange programme so that they can profit from the collective wisdom of each other. This could initially be done through their networks.

The workshop further called on the Association of Management Training Institutions of Eastern and Southern Africa and the West African Management Development Institutes Network to continue the close collaboration they had started and to work with other African networks in fulfilling some of the requirements of the African region. The networks are further urged to co-operate with other international networks.

Infrastructural development and funding

In order to improve the physical facilities of MDIs, governments should ensure the availability of appropriate and suitable buildings, capital equipment and other necessary facilities. MDIs, on the other hand, must expand their resources through research and consultancy, the lease of facilities and negotiation for loans and grants.

Support for infrastructural development could be further enhanced through:

(a) Donors

Recognising the importance of international donors in the development of various economies and the high respect governments have for the donors, the workshop urged all MDIs to develop a close relationship with donors and use the relationship to attract funds and get donors, where possible, to stress the importance of MDI in the public reform process.

(b) The Commonwealth Secretariat

The workshop appreciated the role being played by the Commonwealth Secretariat in enhancing the capacities of MDIs to cope with public service reforms. Participants requested it to do more by:

- assisting those MDIs which do not have strategic plans to develop them;
- including Directors of MDIs in meetings and workshops for principal/permanent secretaries and ministers responsible for public service in Africa so that they can make inputs to discussing and follow up those issues of concern to them;
- assisting MDIs to enhance the skills of the leadership of MDIs to enable them play an effective role in the reform processes of their countries;
- organising on a biannual basis, similar workshops to take stock of the performance of policy reforms in the region with a view to improving what is on the ground.