

United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration
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AFRICA AT THE CEPA MEETING OF THE UN, 4 – 8 APRIL 2005**

**AGENDA ITEM 3: REVITALIZING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION:
STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

1. The negative image of public administration and the difficulty that it has experienced in recent decades to maintain its role under the onslaught of marketization and the disenchantment of citizens with their governments' performance prompted this Committee to motivate for the theme "Revitalizing Public Administration". The question we therefore have to answer is "What to do to re-energise Public Administration and to restore its legitimacy?" "How should we go about to restore life to a discipline and practice which seems to be under threat?" "How should we strategically position Public Administration to equip it to come up with an adequate responses to contemporary complex and wicked policy problems?" This is the task that we have set ourselves last year to come back to this year. The task is enormous and particularly challenging and in the time allocated I will certainly not be able to pay justice to the theme, nor be able to respond to the background paper in detail. Allow me therefore to make a number of points, which are not entirely following the logic of the paper, nor are in any sequence related to one another.
2. The secretariat attempted to provide a background paper that should inform our deliberations on this matter, and for that effort I would like to express my appreciation. However, whilst engaging with this paper I was not 100% convinced that my understanding of this theme, and the way the authors of the paper approached it, coincided on all scores. In general the background paper seems to have been written with the emphasis on pro-poor development and anti-

poverty initiatives. It seems as if the paper has been developed with a particular emphasis on developing countries, and in particular their relationship with donor countries (note for example the elevated emphasis on management of overseas development aid) and developing countries and the international/ global policy agenda. This is a noble focus and agenda, and coming from the developing world I can appreciate this focus, but such a focus still begs the question as to what kind of public administration do we need in order to realize this particular kind of development and anti-poverty strategies such as the MDGs. And once we have answered this question for developing countries, we still need to bear in mind that public administration as a discipline and practice is present in developed and developing countries. Much of the contestation about the legitimacy of government in the eyes of citizens and the commensurate efforts of rolling back the state are phenomena particularly associated with developed countries. How relevant is the focus as presented in the background paper then for all concerned or are we inadvertently back at a place where we have a special kind of public administration – in colonial times known as development administration for developing countries, and something else that are discussed in other fora for developed countries?

3. Although broad consensus has emerged in recent years of the fact that an approach of minimizing the role of the state were highly problematic, in our deliberations on revitalizing public administration we have to acknowledge that the contemporary public administration landscape - in both developed and developing countries - have been significantly re-shaped as a consequence of the push for marketization, outsourcing and agentisation of the machinery of the state. The activity of public service delivery has become significantly more complex as a consequence of working in partnerships, relying on networks, decentralising responsibility and so forth. Although such alternatively delivery structures also brought with it some benefits, it has increased the need for integration and coordination exponentially. Mention is made in passing of this fact in the background paper. I would however, argue, and I know that I will find myself in the company of some of the foremost writers on public administration on this point, that one of the biggest strategic challenges, if not the most important challenge, we face in public administration is how to reconcile the bureaucratic organizational form, with its hierarchical characteristics and functional basis for

structuring with the new organizational forms of network structures, partnerships and the like that are more in tune with prevailing policy realities and responsive to place-based and process-based policy challenges. These structures are materially different, but they co-exist. The latter horizontal structures have not, and will not replace vertical and hierarchical structures akin to traditional public administration. They have become superimposed on one another. This has significant implications on issues of decision-making, resource management and accountability – to mention but the most important. To figure out the intricacies of these important facets of administration and governance are the issues that should occupy our minds during this session of the CEPA. They are central to the revitalization of the subject field. Although the background paper mentions these aspects, I believe they are largely decontextualised in the manner in which they are raised (the exception being the last paragraph, paragraph 50) and they are certainly not problematised and engaged with to any meaningful extent. Given the novelty of these institutions we ought to pay much closer attention to detailed research of how these structural and systems interfaces interact and what challenges they pose. I would go as far as to suggest that this committee in its next term of existence should actively construct a research agenda in collaboration with the professional bodies, research institutions as well as universities in the field that will provide empirical evidence on which the discussion on these challenges can move forward. Note for example that recent research in the Netherlands has shown that in reality the idea of public-private partnerships are less than ideal and that partnerships tend to revert back to contracting out relations and that organizations tend to separate responsibilities, rather than incurring joint risks and accepting joint responsibility.

4. South Africa has become known as a trendsetter in terms of multi-stakeholder based processes of decision-making, but also implementation and evaluation. However, I can categorically state that these are not easy processes, nor that traditional public administration practices are easily reconciled with participatory and inclusive processes. On a political level we actively drive these processes with great success. The translation of these into influences on administrative action is much more difficult and in some instances I would argue deliberately scuttled by appointed officials. We need to constantly remind ourselves that organised civil society is not entirely pro-poor. These organizations are

responsive to a wide range of interests, some extremely reactionary and others clearly responding to an agenda of perpetuating class distinctions and preserving the rights of the wealthy. Unfortunately organizations with their power bases found in technical knowledge and expertise, sufficiently resourced to access opportunities of policy discourse, consultation and with sufficient systems in place to become active players in terms of the public governance constructs, seems to more easily find a willing ear in public servants who deem themselves more akin to these in terms of academic qualifications, professional training, economic class, knowledge industry and so forth than in populous pro-poor organizations which are more informal and more difficult to access and relate to in terms of modern management systems and requirements. There is also strong evidence starting to emerge that the non-profit sector, and as a consequence civil society, has not been left unaffected by the marketisation trend and in many instances are shedding some of the positive qualities that are often uncritically attributed to it – something that the background paper is not innocent of, I would argue. Note for example evidence that has emerged that non-profit organizations have become less keen to service the needs of the really poor and hard to service, since the financial burden on them makes the activity too costly – the same as is the case for the private for profit sector. In this regard public administration has a definitive contribution to make to stem this erosion of endearing democratizing qualities of civil society by for example to avoid setting up competitive processes between non-profits and for-profits in terms of awarding service delivery contracts, and rather opting for complementary, coordinated processes of co-operation across sectors, that are based on the recognition of interdependency. Once again, though, I found that the background paper mentions and advocates the issue of multi-stakeholder and participatory processes, without giving guidance as to the potential vexing questions that manifests in practice and the possible challenges that these approaches might bring to bear on the very democratic governance practice that it tries to ensure.

5. Further to this, I think in our move towards multi-stakeholder processes and recognizing civil society as a key component in the governance construct, we need to be constantly mindful of the different way in which the third sector is structured in our respective regions of the world. In South Africa the bulk of our non-profit organizations are extremely small, neighbourhood-based, largely informal

organizations employing a maximum of one or two people and exhibiting particular transient characteristics. Most of these organizations in their current form poses inherent limitations on the level at which they can engage with government, represent interests or act as delivery partners for government. It will not be feasible and certainly not result in effective and efficient service delivery to partner with such organizations – the oversight/ accountability burden will be crippling to say the least. At the same time, our larger organizations come from either a history of political contestation, agitation and mobilization or were closely allied with the Apartheid regime. Neither of these histories where organizational culture and form of action has not necessarily been transformed to adapt to the situation now that a democratic government is in place, do not easily ensure the development of relations of trust, the foundations on which any partnerships and network structures have to be built. This situation, is for example markedly different from the situation in the USA where the non-profit sector is very formalized, with a long history in terms of undertaking service delivery functions that broadly fits within the public realm. In the meetings we have often argued against a one size fits all approach as far as public administration goes. I would like to remind us that the same goes as far as our assumptions in terms of the sectors we are encouraged to partner with.

6. I wish to turn to paragraph 37 that deals with Sub-Saharan Africa's progress in terms of establishing mechanisms to enhance ethical and transparent governance. As in the analysis of the other parts of the world, it is fundamentally important that we also recognized sub-regional and country differentiation in the discussion of this region. In South Africa we have just concluded an extremely successful cross-sector anti-corruption summit where all sectors have committed themselves to a programme of action that will further enhance our efforts as a country to root out corrupt behaviour. We have already been recognized by the UN as having some of the most advanced regulatory and legislative systems in place in terms of addressing this problem. In Africa much has happened on the governance front after the UN DESA study of 1999/2000 with which the paragraph starts its analysis. The African Peer Review Mechanism to which mention is made is in our opinion one of the most innovative and transparent sound governance measuring mechanisms in operation in the world today. Preparation is well on its

way in those countries that will go in for the first round of assessments, the results that will be made known in 2005.

7. In the final instance, in the discussion on the revitalization of public administration, we need to remain clear on the distinction between means and ends. We need the means to establish effective administration in order to be able to implement the MDGs. We need the means to establish effective administration in order to mobilize and manage ODA. We need the means to establish effective administration in order to cope with disaster. Implementing MDGs, managing ODA, coping with disaster, and so forth, will not in and of itself revitalize public administration. We also need to remain very clear as to what is the realm of legitimate political decisions and behaviour and what falls within the realm of administration. The international redistributive aspects on which the success of the MDGs rests to a large extent does not fall within the purview of “revitalizing public administration” and public administration should not have to carry that burden. My reading of the background paper is that we do not necessarily get these aspects right in all the places.