Good governance, reform and capacity-building across the Commonwealth

The role of CAPAM

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Introduction

Good governance as expressed through factors like reliability, predictability and accountability is increasingly seen as key to ensuring global and national prosperity. This is especially so as recent socio-political and economic developments have increased the attention given to the role that good governance plays in achieving development. In the area of the public service, the direct relationship between good governance, stable governments and better social and economic outcomes is irrefutable. As a result, it is pertinent for public services across the Commonwealth and beyond to exhibit, build and enhance their capacities for sound policy development, meticulous programme design, conscientious programme implementation and efficient citizen service delivery. Achieving these laudable goals within the public service requires a strong, well-trained, motivated and professional public service, capable of competent and ethical management of resources and programmes in a manner that is open, transparent, accountable, equitable and responsive to people’s needs. In this vein, public management reforms have been a key factor in ensuring good governance and improving capacities to address issues such as:

• the perceived lack of public confidence in government;
• the growing need for services; and
• the increasing demand for better and more responsive services.

The need for reforms over the past two decades has been facilitated by drivers of change, which include:

• increasing environmental pressures (both international and domestic);
• changes in public and community expectations;
• changes in political influences in public service management; and
• an increasing demand for accountability.

These drivers of change provide the impetus for public services to adopt strategic reforms and management practices.

The aim of the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management’s (CAPAM) intervention, as a non-profit association, is to promote the practical requirements of good governance and just and honest government across the Commonwealth countries and beyond. Created in 1994, CAPAM provides a forum for the active exchange of innovations, knowledge and practice in citizen-centred service delivery, leadership development and growth, and public service management and renewal. CAPAM serves as a centre of excellence in good governance, and endeavours to build a more responsive and dynamic public service. As a member-supported non-profit association, CAPAM represents an international network of some 1,000 senior public servants, heads of government, leading academics, and researchers from across the Commonwealth. It is guided by international leaders that believe in the value of networking and knowledge exchange and the promotion of good governance to improve the lives of citizens across the Commonwealth.

Since its inception, CAPAM has delivered learning programmes, seminars, lectures and conferences in all regions of the Commonwealth. It has built up a wealth of reports, academic papers, case studies and best practices. In recent years, CAPAM has focused on strategies, approaches and implementation challenges in three main programme areas: human resource management and governance; leadership in the public service; and innovations in citizen-centred service delivery.

Human resource management and governance

It has long been recognised that for government to be effective, good people must be hired, trained and rewarded. This is because their abilities are critical to the performance and achievement of public purpose. There is also a well-established tradition that a properly designed system for managing people is critical to good government. As a result, there has been a recent move towards strategic human resource management, renewed commitment to the merit principle, and an increase in transparency. Likewise, a shift away from insularity, the standardised treatment of all individuals, and a rigid following of rules towards a greater integration into strategic decision-making, recognising and rewarding performance and collaboration, and responsiveness to internal and external changes has fuelled the need for different abilities and talents for public human resource managers. In light of these strategic shifts, CAPAM has recently begun to focus on managing human potential within the public service. Its 2009 conference in Tanzania on human resource management, themed ‘Governance Excellence: Managing Human Potential’, explored the role of a non-partisan public service, training and professionalism, planning and recruitment practices, and performance.
Leadership in the public service

Leadership development is neither new nor unique to the public sector. However, it is a critical component and lies at the heart of good public governance. The most important role of public sector leaders has been to solve the problems and challenges faced in a specific environment. When we say we want more leadership in the public sector, what we are really looking for are people who will promote institutional change in the public interest. Leadership in this sense is not value neutral. It is a positive espousal of the need to promote certain fundamental values that can be called public spiritedness.

CAPAM has organised several leadership programmes, the most recent being in Botswana, Jamaica and Malaysia in 2009. The Malaysian conference, themed ‘Building Public Service Leadership Capacity, focused on the unique challenges of leadership in the public service. It examined leadership from the perspectives of ministers and of the public servants. It was noted that public service leaders operate in an environment with many divergent and sometimes competing priorities, with the most important leadership challenge faced by the current public service being that of preparing individuals for the complex and unpredictable world. Leaders in the public service thus need to find a balance between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’, and aim to develop the capacity to address the complexity of networked and interconnected states. The search for a new balance means developing new capacity, new knowledge, new skills and new competencies.

What capabilities, old and new, do governments need to serve in the 21st century? What capacities are needed to address complex issues in the increasingly unpredictable environment of our globalised economies, networked societies and fragile biosphere? What does this mean for public servants and future public sector leaders? All of these questions were raised at the conference.

Attending speakers and delegates noted the dichotomy between the need for consistency in public services, and the simultaneous need for continuous change and improvement. In Tanzania, for example, developing greater accountability to citizens and achieving national growth and poverty reduction are key concerns of public service leaders. Public service leaders are, therefore, grappling with a difficult and change-oriented working environment.

Delegates and presenters also highlighted the increasingly prevalent issue of cultivating the next generation of leaders. Large numbers of retiring public servants and the ‘juniorisation’ of the public service underpinned discussions on the urgency of identifying clear strategies to monitor, cultivate and develop young professionals into future leaders. There was a call for the need to:

- expose a ‘new generation’ to significant and meaningful experiences and projects;
- provide mentoring and training programmes that will transfer knowledge from the current generation to the next;
- identify possible future leaders at an early stage;
- establish a leadership pipeline in the public service with targeted training programmes; and
- predict and identify leaders of tomorrow through a systematic process.

Speakers from Kenya, Jamaica and the UK noted the great challenge and effort associated with bringing about change in the way leadership training is managed, and that one of the primary challenges of building leadership is overcoming political interference, poor management and limited resources. Building leadership capacity would therefore involve identifying cultural and attitudinal change within the public service, by providing a training link between all levels of government and public services. This would enhance the ability of leaders to respond to new strategies and approaches, and also help them to govern and lead more effectively.

The conference highlighted the point that developing leaders is a more difficult challenge than building leadership skills, and that leaders today must be able to deal with complex issues and be able to lead by discovery.

Accountability in the public service

There is no issue more central to good governance than accountability and trust in general, and the accountability of those in government to their citizenry in particular. Consequently, there is no issue more central to any discussion of the challenges facing government and civil servants than the matter of commitment to a high degree of accountability. Indeed, issues of accountability to the citizenry are quite simply the most important elements of contemporary governance and, as a consequence, need to be at the very centre of any discussion about good governance.

CAPAM’s 2010 ‘Good Governance, Accountability and Trust’ conference, held in Abuja, Nigeria, sought to engage the issue of accountability in the public service. Close to 400 delegates from 18 countries attended the conference. Among the participants were Cabinet Ministers, heads of public/civil services, Cabinet Secretaries, Permanent/Principal Secretaries and other high-ranking government officials, chairpersons and commissioners of public service commissions, heads of management development institutes, representatives of statutory institutions, academics and researchers. The conference was also privileged to have representatives of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The conference highlighted the need for a clear separation of administration and political functions and that an efficient, accountable and non-partisan public service is essential to earn the trust and respect of citizens. It was also noted that trust cannot be demanded, pronounced or legislated; it must be earned through open and transparent engagements, and demonstrated values and ethics. Building trust is a long-term commitment through transparent actions, unbiased decision and ethical behaviour.
Conclusion

Governments and their public services are facing the following formidable challenges:

- In many parts of the Commonwealth, the demand for fundamental social services of healthcare, education, housing and employment far outstrips governments’ capacity to respond. The need to eliminate regional and gender disparities, harmonise religious and ethnic discords, and to develop consensus on national priorities add further complexity to the challenge. Ministers and their public service officials must have the capacity to develop innovative policy options that are supported by rigorous and realistic programme-implementation plans.

- The very nature of public service organisations also presents unique challenges. It is not uncommon for the public service to be the largest employer and most complex organisation in a country. Administration and management of human and financial resources, the establishment of sound management practices that can stand up to public scrutiny, the recognition and cultivation of public service values and ethics, and the development of a well-trained and well-motivated workforce are critical yet daunting challenges.

- Most important of all, the development of successful policies and the effective administration of public service organisations require strong leadership. Such leadership is needed at all levels – from ministers, their senior officials and all public servants tasked with upholding their part of the responsibility to serve citizens and to ensure their well-being. Developing leadership skills and cultivation of exemplary leadership are essential to achieving accountable results for citizens.

Good governance within the public service leads to good management, good performance, good stewardship of public resources, good public engagement and, ultimately, good outcomes.

CAPAM will continue to support public service development across the Commonwealth by promoting the practical requirements of good governance and just and honest government across all jurisdictions.