

Supporting Sierra Leone's Public Service Commission

How the Commonwealth Secretariat has made a difference

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Why Public Service Commissions matter

Public Service Commissions (PSCs) are often a crucial component in attempts to reform the public sector, especially in the developing world. This is because, in principle at least, PSCs have a critical role to play in providing strategic direction in terms of human resources management and civil service policy and regulation, as well as in ensuring and maintaining the integrity of the public service. One crucial function is to guarantee effective and transparent recruitment and promotion processes that will lead to competent staff selection and retention in the public service. PSCs are also intended to provide overall guidance for staff discipline functions and policy for Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) on human resources management to ensure consistency throughout the public service.

However, in practice, PSCs may not always be able to perform their key functions effectively. They are often politicised because, among other things, human resources and the civil service are a key source of patronage and clientelism (O'Neil, 2007). This is especially true of fragile states that are attempting to recover from conflict. As these states attempt to build more effective and responsive institutions, they also need to maintain a precarious balance between contending groups and forces seeking privileged access to state resources (OECD, 2011).

The case of Sierra Leone's PSC is a powerful illustration of the challenging and political nature of public sector reform in fragile states. In 2008, the PSC in Sierra Leone was a very weak institution, unable to carry out its key functions and responsibilities and unsure of its role in leading/supporting efforts to reform the public sector as articulated in the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP II). A new chairman was appointed that same year, and he showed considerable commitment to the task of turning the PSC into a more effective and purposeful organisation.

Commonwealth support of the PSC in Sierra Leone

Under this new leadership, the PSC approached the Commonwealth Secretariat for support. The Commission requested assistance from the Commonwealth Fund for

Technical Co-operation (CFTC) in helping it to assume its constitutional mandate more effectively. As highlighted in the technical proposal submitted to the Secretariat, the PSC strategically approached the CFTC rather than another donor because of the added value that the Secretariat can bring to the table regarding its approach to development, notably its ability to act flexibly to address key gaps and to focus on areas that other donors may not be paying (enough) attention to: 'The Commonwealth Secretariat... has been providing specialised support in discrete forms, focusing on the provision of expertise in specific areas, often filling capacity gaps, and in some cases providing support to institutions which are strategic to the delivery of public services, but traditionally [have been] orphaned in terms of donor support.'

After a series of discussions, by August 2009, the CFTC agreed to support the Management and Functional Review (MFR) of the Commission. The purpose of the initiative was to help the PSC carry out an MFR as a means to become a more effective body with the capacity to deliver its mandate to oversee the appointments and promotions, as well as the control and discipline, of Sierra Leone's public service.

The MFR, carried out between September 2009 and March 2010, was intended to:

- Assist the PSC to redefine its role in light of the ongoing challenges of public sector reforms in a post-conflict setting.
- Assess the legislative implications of the new functions of the PSC.
- Assess the capacity of the PSC to assume its new responsibilities under the proposed Multi-Donor Funded Public Sector Reform Programme, and make recommendations on the required institutional adjustments and capacity development needs of the PSC.
- Analyse the existing component structures and skills mix of current staff with a view to recommending revised structures, job profiles and appropriate allocations of staff.
- Analyse other aspects that impact on the need for structural reforms in the Commission with a view to increase its effectiveness.

The significance of the Secretariat's intervention

From a financial perspective, this intervention by the CFTC was relatively small. The cost of the consultancy, getting stakeholder inputs through a seminar, and printing and disseminating the study, was approximately £10,000 (in addition, of course, to staff inputs in terms of designing the terms of reference, reviewing and providing inputs for the different drafts of the final report). However, as attested by reports from the PSC to the Secretariat's Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) in December 2010, and more recently during a GIDD visit to Sierra Leone in March 2011, the catalytic effect of the MFR has been much wider and more significant.

Among other things, the Review has led to the publication of a report that has been widely circulated and discussed among a wide range of relevant stakeholders, including donors and government representatives. The report's conclusions and recommendations have been endorsed as a viable basis to reform the PSC going forward. The president of Sierra Leone, H.E. Dr Ernest Bai Koroma, has been solidly behind the report's findings. He launched the MFR himself, thereby signalling that its implementation is a key national priority. Today, the PSC is beginning to turn into an empowered institution with leadership and vision – a situation that seemed unimaginable a few years ago.

What has made CFTC support so meaningful and effective? Part of the explanation has to do with the ability of the Secretariat to work closely with an organisation largely neglected by other donors, who fail to appreciate its strategic importance. This intervention helps to highlight the Secretariat's unique capacity to focus on areas and projects that other development partners may have

considered too small or marginal but that remain nonetheless essential. Now that the PSC has begun to show some of its potential and that the MFR has provided a roadmap for reform, other donors have become more interested, and international support has been more forthcoming.

For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has picked up the Review and it will contribute to move towards a second phase of support that will consist of consultancy services for strategic planning. The CFTC will collaborate with the UNDP on capacity-building to continue to strengthen the development of the organisational structure of the PSC. Other donors looking to engage with the PSC include the EU.

This intervention is a testament to how a rather small but strategically significant intervention, of the kind the Secretariat is particularly well placed to carry out, can make a big difference. The role of the Secretariat as catalyst is also worth highlighting here. As the chairman of the Commission put it, through its support, the 'CFTC in its usual manner [has sown] an acorn that will grow to an oak tree'. The CFTC will continue to be there to support the human capacity development of the PSC and to co-ordinate donor support as may be required in the years to come.

References

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