



RESEARCH ARTICLE

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN A DECENTRALISED CONTEXT: THE CASE OF MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

This paper has examined the link between decentralization, popular participation and human resource management challenges and prospects. It is evident that decentralization has very good intentions aimed at enhancing popular participation in decision making and bringing governance and service delivery to the grassroots. This process involves entrusting local district, town and city councils with authority and responsibilities for delivering services like housing, water, roads, health facilities, bridges, transport, land management issues, among others. However, such transfer of responsibilities is not accompanied by corresponding transfer of the human resource function to the local levels. Consequently, decentralization practices impose a huge capacity burden on the local institutions as they cannot attract the right caliber of staff as local authorities lack the requisite autonomy to command the respect that human resource managers at the centre have to recruit, reward and discipline officers and ensure they can motivate them to perform effectively. Thus, the success or failure of decentralization initiatives rest on how the human resource function is decentralized. It is therefore suggested that one of the key interventions from which more others shall spring, is to undertake a comprehensive capacity and resource assessment survey in order to unearth capacity challenges which have to be addressed in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, decentralized governance has been favoured by many countries as the most suitable mode of governance by which poverty reduction objectives can be realized. It is widely believed that decentralization will facilitate greater participation of communities in problem analysis, project identification, planning, implementation and oversight thereby increasing ownership and chances of sustainable development. One of the reasons for the shift from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Africa was the realization that the political machinery and - more importantly - the public service machinery for executing social and development policies was far from the people at the grassroots. This in turn has had the effect of preventing them from participating in key decisions and public policies with significant impact on their public life. That is why there have been several waves of decentralization since independence in most developing countries. However, there is a growing disenchantment with decentralization owing to the wide

discrepancy between expectations and achievements so far in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Smith, 1985). According to Kiggundu (2000), decentralization remains an ideal rather than a reality. Public management at the local level remains centralized in most developing countries despite the rhetoric of citizen participation by politicians and pressures from international donor agencies on decentralization. In Sub-Saharan Africa, experiments with decentralization boosted central control rather than enhanced local autonomy (Hussein, 2003; Chiweza, 1998; Mawhood, 1983). A lot has been written, discussed and shared by academics and practitioners regarding challenges facing well-intentioned efforts at decentralization. While others have talked of financial constraints, elite capture, unwillingness of the centre to lose power, to name a few, this paper focuses on the human resource management function as one of the major determinants to the success or failure of decentralization initiatives. It is worth noting that in the context of NPM or Public Sector Reforms (PSR), decentralization and 'human resources management' have been recognized as essential strategic policy elements in the implementation of reforms. According to Green (2005) human resource management should be seen as an essential component in the

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design of decentralization rather than a separate stand-alone process. This paper builds on Green's (2005) paper to unearth some of the key human resource management issues which pose as key challenges in the implementation of the decentralization policy despite sound legal framework. These include issues and questions of personnel and institutional capacity, autonomy of local level managers, and issues of staff motivation all of which shall be discussed under the broad rubric of capacity challenges and prospects. The paper has six sections. After this introduction, the paper analyses the concept of decentralization and popular participation. The role of human resource management and a proper framework for sound human resource management for decentralized administration is presented in the third section. The fourth section analyses human resource management constraints presently undermining meaningful decentralization and realization of enhanced local participation, effective service delivery, transparency and accountability and generally good governance ideals. The fifth section discusses suggested ways for improving the human resource function in a decentralized context. The sixth section concludes the discussion.

Decentralization and popular participation

Decentralization involves the transfer of authority to perform some services- like the promotion effective local governance, preparation of district development plans, water and community development, fisheries, agriculture, land, roads, environment and education- to the public from an individual or an agency in central government to some other individual or agency which is closer to the public to be served (Hussein 2003; Turner and Hulme, 1997). As for Hope (2001, p.124) decentralization is seen as the means through which governments are able to provide high-quality services that citizens value; for increasing managerial autonomy, particularly by reducing central administrative controls for demanding, measuring and rewarding both organizational and individual performance. This embodies several concepts including devolution, de-concentration, delegation, delocalization and privatization (Kiggundu, 2000, Matlosa, 2003). Devolution and de-concentration are the most widely talked territorial forms of decentralization. Devolution of power to sub-national units of government, which include local government, local authorities, district, town, city and state governments, combines the promise of local democracy and technical efficiency. Traditional features of devolution include a constitutionally created local body responsible for local services, possesses its own treasury and authority to raise revenue, employs its own staff, majority-elected council determining policy, with central government being external advisors and inspectors (Mawhood, 1987). Many hope that the process of decentralization will facilitate greater participation of communities in problem analysis, project identification, planning, implementation as well as oversight which in turn will increase ownership and the likelihood of sustainability of such initiative. It is argued that communities are empowered if they access information and are included and participate in forums where issues are discussed and decisions are made. They are also empowered when they can hold decision-makers accountable for their choices and actions and have the capacity and resources to organize to aggregate and express their

interests and to take on roles as partners with public service delivery agencies. Empowered communities can take steps to ensure that public officials adhere to their promises and plans through the exercise of accountability mechanisms. The decentralization process envisages the desire to break the workload of governance and reduce the role of central bureaucracies. The assumption is that decongestion of the workload at the center promotes cost-effectiveness and greater efficiency in public resource utilization, service delivery and local development (World Bank, 1989 in Hussein, 2004).

Politically, decentralization is considered as a means to promote community participation in the policy formulation, which is taken as a right and a necessity of political democracy. Administratively, decentralization is regarded as a key strategy that facilitates effective coordination and promotes community participation in development planning and implementation of development policies (Hussein: 2003). A major obstacle to the effective performance of public bureaucracies in most developing countries is the excessive concentration of decision making and authority within central government. Public sector institutions are perceived to be geographically and socially remote from the people and to take decisions without knowledge or concern about actual problems and preferences. Proximity, autonomy, participation, accountability and democracy are usually viewed as positive consequences of decentralization (Turner and Hulme, 1997). In order for the objectives of decentralization to be achieved, proper recruitment, selection and appointment, training, promotion, rewarding and disciplining of human resources is indispensable. Thus, effective management of the employees at the central government and local government levels and the relationship between the two levels is as critical. The right people have to be appointed; managers at the local levels should possess enough authority to re-design jobs and select appropriately skilled persons who they can motivate to perform various job related activities; and be able to evaluate and reward their performance without interference of the central government machinery. Competent persons with the flexibility and autonomy to respond to local contexts can effectively and efficiently plan, implement, monitor and evaluate locally identified projects and therefore being able to deliver services to the local citizenry. It for this reason, that our focus in this discussion is on the challenges and prospects of managing human resources in a decentralized context.

HRM Framework in a Decentralized Context

Public and private sector organizations cannot function without human, material, financial, information and time resources (Dzimbiri, 2015 and Analoui, 2002). However, out of the resources at the disposal of an organization, the human resource is the most critical of all since human resources use the other resources to produce goods and services for human consumption. Machinery has to be operated, vehicles have to be driven, patients have to be treated, budgets have to be drawn and equipment and materials have to be procured by people. Due to the significance of this resource, there is a distinct field of management called human resource management (HRM). HRM is an integrated approach to the management of the most intractable asset of an organization (Armstrong, 2010) - the

men and women who keep the wheels of the organization move. Organizations need for drivers, carpenters, engineers, doctors, accountants, planners, among others, to perform various activities in the organization to ensure that sectional, departmental, divisional and overall- organizational goals and objectives – are achieved. HRM involves the recruitment, selection, appointment, training, supervision, motivation, disciplining and evaluating the performance of persons in the organization. Decentralisation broadens the range and scope of the role and activities of local institutions while reducing pressure at the central government level. In Malawi, the National Decentralization Policy was finally approved by the Cabinet in October 1998. Parliament has since passed a new Local Government Act (1998), which enshrines the Policy of decentralization. The decentralization Policy seeks to achieve among others the following objectives: (1) Creating a democratic environment and institutions in Malawi for governance and development, at the local level, which will facilitate the participation of the grassroots in decision-making. (2) Eliminating dual administrations (field administration and local government) at the district level, with the aim of making public service more efficient, more economical and cost effective. (3) Promoting accountability and good governance at the local level in order to help government reduce poverty and mobilize the masses for socio-economic development at the local level. The National Decentralization Policy therefore seeks to devolve powers, functions, responsibilities, and resources to enable Local Governments perform their roles adequately. According to section 146 (2) of the Malawi Constitution and Section 6 (1) of the Local Government Act of 1998 the responsibilities of district assemblies include; making policy and decisions on governance and development; consolidate and promote local democratic institutions and democratic participation; promote infrastructure and economic development through the formulation, approval and execution of district development plans; mobilize resources within the local government area for governance and development; maintain peace and security in conjunction with the Malawi Police Service; make by-laws for the good governance of the local government area; appoint, develop, promote and discipline its staff; cooperate with other assemblies in order to learn from their experiences and exchange ideas; perform other functions including registration of births and deaths and participate in the delivery of essential local services. As Hussein (2003) rightly points out, both the Constitution and the Local Government Act gives enormous responsibilities to district, town, municipal and city councils. These responsibilities call for new skills, new approaches and systems of human resource management and administration in order to attain managerial effectiveness and efficiency. Since human resources are critical in terms of both quantity and quality, there is need for appropriate and viable human resource systems, adequate and appropriately trained human resources. According to Hussein (2003), human resources in the local governance system encompass councilors, administrators including the chief executives or district commissioners, directors of departments and other employees in junior ranks.

The management of human resources in a decentralized context will vary between centralization and decentralization with some hybrid variants in between. As rightly noted by Green

(2005), there are genuine theoretical and practical reasons for the support of centralization of local government human resource functions. Centralization of civil service ensures some standardization in working conditions across the country since local government in poorer areas will find it difficult to compete against richer areas in the scope and provision of national public services. Centralisation of the human resource function has the potential to expand public servants' career path by opening channels between the local and central employment. Also, the centre may wish to retain control over hiring and pay to shield sub-national governments from local pressure to over spend on wages and salaries. It is also argued that centralised rules can be important in sectors that enforce minimum professional qualifications, such as with teachers, doctors, and nurses, thereby maintaining standards. Again, where ethnic or other tensions threaten stability, the central government may use the public service as a tool for national integration.

However, in a truly democratic context where local citizens are empowered to participate fully in electing their leaders and through them proposing development agendas in their respective areas, centralization of local government human resource management is at odds with the spirit of decentralization. There is no amount of lobbying that will justify central control of the human resource function in a decentralized context. Any structural initiative like decentralisation that does not take into account the human resource implication is doomed to fail. Proponents of decentralising responsibilities to managers assert that this increases the efficiency and effectiveness of HRM, and public administration machinery in general. Decisions can be taken faster; recruitment can be tailored to specific needs of the organisation; less complex procedures are needed to deal with local issues than would have been the case if central procedures are implemented to localities without taking into account variation in context. Effectiveness is increased because decentralisation increases the managers' discretion, thus enabling them to recruit, evaluate, offer incentives, promote, offer training and communicate directly. Since the transfer of authority from the centre to the periphery ranges from deconcentration through delegation to devolution, the degree of decentralization of human resource management authority will depend on the degree of administrative decentralization. The major assumption in this paper is that the success or failure of decentralization initiatives are won or lost in the effective decentralization of the human resource function. Just as policy makers (politicians) at the centre are made effective through the works of an efficient bureaucracy (principal secretaries and their deputies down the hierarchy to messenger levels), the effectiveness of the local government policy makers (ward councilors) will to a large extent depend on the effectiveness of the local bureaucracy (local managers and their subordinates). Putting it simply, the paper argues that human resources management should be seen as an essential component in the design of decentralization rather than a separate, stand-alone process.

According to Green (2005) there are five major features of an effectively functioning system of decentralised civil service management. First, local government functions are clearly

defined to reduce role ambiguity. Thus, employees at the local as well as central levels know exactly what is expected of them and managers are able to adapt the local civil service to reflect what needs to be done, how, when without severe overlaps with central and provincial levels of government. Secondly, local government can allocate staff across functions as needed. In other words, senior managers at the local levels have some degree of autonomy as well as influence in shaping the functioning of the local structures through designing and allocation of workers in various sections, departments and divisions at local level. The third feature is that local government is able to attract, select, develop and maintain qualified individuals. This is linked to the fourth feature which is, it is far easier for local institutions to pay reasonable salaries, offer attractive benefits, train staff and buy the required equipment or tools the ability of local government to be flexible in managing financial resources. With adequate financial resources for them to use. The fifth feature is that local government can hold staff accountable for their performance. This requires the capacity to supervise and monitor civil servants, the ability to reward good performance through pay increases, promotions, and other benefits, and the authority to punish deficient performance through disciplinary measures or dismissals. As will be discussed below, what Green has discussed as a framework for an effective HRM in a decentralized context can be described as the capacity issue. The capacity to do what is presented above will vary from one local government to another.

HRM constraints in a decentralized Context

While the process of decentralization was intended to make local governments more effective and responsive to the local population, and may have opened a way to achieve such purpose; however, this assumption while holding much promise is contingent upon its design as well as the institutional, technical and human resources development capacity (World Bank, 2008). In essence, the wider implications of decentralization for human resources management are, however defectively understood. It is worth noting that decentralizing the management of human resources can improve the responsiveness and resourcefulness of the local government. Yet without careful design, devolution can also bring fiscal imbalances, negative incentives and confused accountability at the local level. In view of this, various scholars and practitioners identified challenges associated with a decentralized human resources management system. These challenges among others include; lack of capacity to motivate and capacity for autonomy, inefficiency, unclear organizational structures and lack of oversight (Dzimbiri, 2015; Anoloui, 2008; Green, 2005; World Bank, 2002).

The key human resources domains where problems arise as a result of the way in which decentralized management are well discussed in this part. As noted by Anoloui (2008) there are many human resources challenges that arise due to decentralization process. First, unclear organizational structures, inappropriate roles and responsibilities are some of the challenges. Generally, difficulties arise for several reasons such as personality conflicts, mistrust, professional pride, or jealousy can all arise in the course of implementing

decentralization. Second, ensuring the technical and managerial competence of workers through the turbulence of decentralization is a major challenge. The transfer of power raises several complex issues, which alone or in combination jeopardize the competence with which workers discharge their new post-decentralization duties. The first issue is a shortage of skilled staff. Third, according to the World Bank (2002) achieving efficiency in a decentralized context is another challenge. A centralized human resources department functions more efficiently. A single office requires far less overhead than a decentralized network. In the latter situation, everything from office space to computer equipment to building insurance and utilities must be replicated at each location. A dispersed staff may duplicate functions. Fourth, lack of oversight is another challenge affecting human resources management in a decentralized context (Anoloui, 2008). Dispersed managers who know their jobs and work diligently function well, but problems can occur if some managers require oversight that they are not getting. Unsupervised, individuals may do things their own way, at odds with company policy, or sometimes do nothing at all. This can lead to inconsistency and inefficiency.

Green (2005) and Dzimbiri (2008) note that there are several capacity issues that bedevil meaningful decentralization of the HRM function and therefore full realization of the intentions of decentralization. These include issues of capacity, motivation, autonomy and financial muscle. There are several ways in which the word capacity can be visualized. According to Matovu (2008) it means having aptitudes, resources, relationships and facilitating conditions that are necessary to act effectively to achieve some intended purpose. UNDP sees it as the ability of individuals, institutions and societies to perform functions, solve problems; and set and achieve objectives in a sustained manner. For the World Bank, it is the ability to access and use knowledge and skills to perform a task, to act in pursuit of an objective. In other words, the ability to perform effectively and achieve organizationally set goals is at the centre of the word 'capacity'. While we can talk of individual capacities, it is also possible to talk of the capacity of institutions and whole societies in terms of whether or not they have capacity or capability to discharge their various mandated functions, activities and responsibilities (Dzimbiri, 2008). In this paper the concept of capacity is used to mean the competence with which individuals, institutions, systems or governments or sub-national governments including local governments are able to discharge their various functional roles to achieve pre-determined goals.

In terms of the HRM function, capacity denotes the ability of public servants at the local level to deliver higher quality services such as education, health, provision of infrastructure, among others, as the decentralization program envisages. From the above observations, capacity will therefore be a product of the ability factor, resources, management and leadership effectiveness and organizational capacity. Without the requisite knowledge or skills to perform a particular activity, an individual cannot create a good or provide a service. Proper attitudes are also an important aspect of capacity or competence because an individual poor in human relations cannot perform effectively as a customer relations officer. There are several resources an organization needs to have in

order to perform its activities. Human resources- qualified and competent people in appropriate numbers are needed to handle various tasks to accomplish pre-determined goals. Others include material resources like raw materials, equipment or machinery, computers, finance, information. Management and leadership capacity is crucial for creating vision and strategic goals, coordinating and controlling the activities of the organization as well as motivating/inspiring followers to forge ahead with enthusiasm, zeal and high degree of commitment. Human resources and others need to be harnessed and integrated in a productive relationship which will enable the effective delivery of services or production of appropriate goods. This is one of the most critical capacity requirements of many organizations. In other words, local and central government need capable managers and leaders to inspire and lead the process of development at national and local levels (Dzimbiri, 2015). Appropriate organizational structure and office space is an important capacity element for decentralization. To undertake any function that has been mandated to an institution or group of people, there is need to a proper organization structure, enough space be it office, warehouses, staff housing etc.

Enabling environment is an important constraint for the effectiveness of the human resource function at the local government level. The context within which an organization is operating is an important component of capacity. Government policies or legislation, rules and procedures are part of an enabling environment. For local government, the existence of a decentralization policy, conducive democratic tradition in a country, donor goodwill, a well functioning media, political stability, a buoyant economy and government commitment to service delivery and citizen involvement, among others, can be seen as an enabling environment and therefore an important aspect of capacity. Employer-employee relationships are governed by constitutional provisions, employment acts, and industrial relations acts, health and safety regulations, to name a few. The nature of these legal and policy instruments will, to a large extent, influence the degree of industrial harmony, worker commitment, autonomy, job satisfaction among managers and employees, and therefore performance and service delivery. A 2005 survey by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) revealed that despite high commitment and good intentions among African governments to implement decentralizations policies to improve service delivery and citizen empowerment, many lacked capacity in local government to manage their decentralized functions and responsibilities. Of the 26 countries reported, 19 had below 50% capacity; 2 had 50% and only 5 had between 58 and 70% with Niger being highest (70%) (Matovu, 2008). In this study, factors that were frequently cited include inadequate human resource capacity, inadequate institutional capacity, financial capacity, corruption, weak systems, widespread poverty, lack of equipment, machinery and other material resources. There is a growing consensus among prominent writers on local governance that the unsatisfactory results of local government reforms in most developing countries can partly be explained in terms of the absence of appropriate human resource capacities, financial resources, and inadequate and inappropriate abilities, skills, knowledge and poor human resource management systems (Kiggundu, 2000; Hussein, 2003; 2004). Thus, issues

of capacity- in various dimensions- need to be addressed pragmatically for decentralization to achieve its stated objectives. For Hussein (2003) effective performance in local governance system requires competent workforce, managers, decision makers, professionals, technocrats, workers and well-informed representatives.

Capacity to motivate staff

Management theorists particularly those in the behavioral sciences are generally agreed that while human resources have the skills and knowledge required to perform their mandated functions, they need to be induced to do so willingly and in a committed manner. Motivation therefore is the major drive for superior performance among workers. Contributors to this school of thinking such as Abraham Maslow, Chris Argyris, Douglas McGregor and Fredrick Herzberg (Dzimbiri, 2015), to name a few, have given a good number of suggestions on how to motivate people. These include challenging jobs, advancement, fringe benefits, good salaries, sound policies, participation in decision making, flexible styles of management, good interpersonal relations, effective communication etc. Some of these techniques require good skills and knowledge of management while others require availability of monies to pay for the benefits as well as incentives. More often than not, local government institutions lack sufficient financial muscle to handle this aspect of motivation. It is also known that local government does not attract the first level of graduates in management as most of them would like to enjoy social amenities and modern facilities in the city. Besides, with little funds, they cannot afford to send their managers to management training institutes for basic and intermediate management skills. As Green (2005) rightly points out, the particular hardship conditions in many rural settings de-motivate teachers, doctors, nurses and other skilled personnel to accept remote postings. The challenge is to motivate people working in remote areas with limited infrastructure, services and choices in many ways is akin to the challenge of retaining people in-country (Ibid.) Some local civil services are too small to offer significant opportunities for career advancement, and poorer local governments may be unable to pay salaries high enough to attract talent. In remote areas, a combination of low pay and difficult working conditions creates a vicious circle whereby an inability to attract high-quality staff leads to further deterioration in conditions (Ibid). The consequence of this scenario is failure to attract and appoint high caliber staff, further resulting into poor service delivery and loss of confidence in decentralization as a useful political and administrative reform mechanism. As Botomani (1986 in Hussein, 2003) noted in his study of human resource management context during the one-party period in Malawi, the working conditions in most district councils were associated with delayed payment of the meagre salaries, poor housing, conditions, poor infrastructure and a lack of basic services. All these factors conspired against the workers and consequently contributed to frustration and de-motivation among local government workers.

Capacity for autonomy

Autonomy is the extent to which managers can have discretion over certain aspects of organizational life. For example, the

extent to which managers can make decisions to appoint, promote and reward as well as discipline an individual employee will determine the effectiveness with which they can discharge their functions at local levels. If managers have little or no autonomy, then decisions are made from above. Very often in a decentralized setting, human resource decisions relating to recruitment, promotion or disciplining of supervisors and senior managers at the local council level still rests with the Ministry of Local Government headquarters. Consequently speed and effectiveness with which a position would have been filled are affected to the detriment of local service provision. For example, while the Malawi Government has prepared guidelines on conditions of service, salary structures, appointment and disciplinary procedures, and human resources development and training systems to assist local councils to establish viable and professional staffing systems the audit of the existing human resource in district assemblies revealed major deficiencies, inadequate and inappropriately qualified human resource, many unfilled vacancies and at times recruitment or disciplinary matters took more than 12 months (Kamanga et al., 2000; in Hussein, 2003). This was due to the delays by the central government recruitment agency (the Local Authority Service Commission) to advertise, invite, interview and appoint persons to certain positions higher than grade 7. It is obvious that these anomalies, which have the great potential for derailing the objectives of efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery can be avoided if local authorities were given autonomy to recruit and appoint, supervise and discipline officers at all levels. Local autonomy in allocating human resources can improve efficiency by allowing managers to hire staff whose skills align with planned activities, to decline or dismiss effective staff, and trim numbers to keep costs down (Green, 2005). The argument that decentralization boosts the responsiveness of civil servants assumes that local managers have authority to respond to demands of their constituents (Green, 2005). Yet the truth of the matter is that they may not have the authority to make decisions. According to Henri Fayol, one of the principles of effective management is that authority be commensurate with responsibility. Why expect such a long list of services to be delivered by incapacitated institutions which do not have autonomy and worse still funding capacity to meet the cost of service delivery?

Ways of improving the HR function in a decentralized context.

Building capacity can enhance human resource management effectiveness and therefore the effectiveness of local government in discharging its mandated functions. There are various ways in which capacity can be built for human resource effectiveness. It has been observed from the above discussion that there are different capacities that human resource management for local government suffers from, thereby, making it difficult to implement decentralization policies in an efficient and effective manner. Since we cannot generalize the type of capacities to be developed as the range and scope will vary from one context to the other, it is advisable to have a systematic approach to the identification and design of appropriate interventions to develop these capacities. It is therefore necessary to examine different ways in which capacity can be built based on the wider literature and the

experience of others. Capacity needs and resource assessment (CNRA), human resource development programmes strengthening local training institutions, enhancing autonomy of local government institutions and enhancing financial capacity shall be examined.

Capacity Needs and Resource Assessment CNRA

In order to establish the capacity strength and weaknesses, knowledge and skills gap as well as resource gaps in a local government, central government and other institutions involved in the design and implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decentralization policy, a comprehensive assessment needs to be undertaken as a starting point. For the World Bank, this is capacity enhancement needs assessment while EU and UN term it as capacity diagnosis (Dzimbiri, 2008). The advantage of CNRA is that a system-wide picture of capacity strength and weakness is identified for central government, local government institutions and individuals. Secondly, priorities can be developed easily and interventions can be designed and implemented in a systematic manner. This reduces the tendency for adhoc and fragmented interventions.

Case study 1

Management Training Needs and Resource Assessment for the District Focus, Government of Malawi/UNDP 5th Country Programme, 1994. Before the decentralization policy was formulated, the Malawi Government with sponsorship from the UNDP commissioned a study in which the author participated as a consultant to assess the capacity of various district officials and structures as well as the various institutions to be involved in the decentralization programme. Through observations, questionnaires, individual and group interview, panel discussions etc the team produced a report which catalogued various dimensions of capacity gaps. It made recommendations for training related interventions, training courses and institutions where training could be undertaken, training plans and the training budget. Training institutions were also assessed in terms of their capacity to offer training for decentralized administration in Malawi and recommendations were also made in terms of how to develop the capacities of training institutions to handle various training for local government. (For more details see Dzimbiri, (2000) 'Building Managerial Capacities for Participatory Rural Development in Malawi' Perspectives in Social Work. 15: 1. 18-27.

Human Resource Development Programmers

Based on a comprehensive training needs assessment which is part of the capacity assessment for decentralization policy, priority training courses are identified, a training plan developed, officers for training lined up, training institutions contacted or identified and training budget developed. Some form of training can be on the job training, while others will be in the form of short courses, long courses, seminars, workshops, study tours, attachment, job rotation etc. these training programmes should not simply be for local government personnel only but also for headquarters managers. The idea is that the headquarter managers should understand the implications of decentralization on human resource

management; the need to realign human resource management practices away from centralized to decentralized systems; that there is a need for more autonomy to be given to the local government institution rather than hamstringing their efforts through unwarranted bureaucratic controls at the headquarters. The necessity of developing human resources to equip them with requisite knowledge and skills cannot be over-emphasized as human resource economist [Harbison \(1973\)](#) noted many decades ago, a country which cannot develop its human resources cannot develop anything else.

Case study 2

As part of building capacity for decentralization in Malawi, the Decentralization Secretariat organized a study visit in 2004 for Malawi's education and training institutions (University of Malawi, Staff Development Institute, Malawi Institute of Management, Natural Resource College, Management Development Centre at the Malawi Polytechnic) to meet counter-part institutions in Norway. The author represented the University of Malawi. The aim was to discuss and exchange ideas on approaches to developing management competencies among senior staff in the city and district assemblies in Malawi and to develop concrete action plans. Several initiatives were jointly identified for further elaboration, approval and implementation. They included workshops on team building, strategic planning, performance management and supervisory skills for senior managers in local government. Short courses were also planned for lower levels council staff, ward councilors, chiefs and members of ward and village development committees. There was also a proposal to develop a postgraduate programme MA (Local Government Decentralization). A research agenda to assess the various challenges facing decentralization with the view to devising appropriate interventions was also developed for joint implementation.

Organization Development interventions

While training efforts mentioned above are being implemented following a thorough needs assessment, there should also be organization development interventions aimed at ensuring organizational learning both the local and headquarters level. Organizational diagnosis efforts need to be undertaken by qualified organization development consultants who would take a detailed diagnosis of local government structures in order to identify a range of challenges with the potential to create inefficiency, ineffectiveness and low productivity. Such diagnosis might reveal human process issues- leadership, decision making, problem solving, interpersonal relationship issues; human resource management issues- recruitment, selection, reward management, techno-structural issues such as problems of structures, departmentalization, delegation, technology etc. Similarly others might be related to organization-environment relations such as strategic planning, visioning, among others. The result of this process would be to bring in as many interventions team building processes, sensitivity training, restructuring, realignment of human resource management systems, coaching, introduction of performance management systems, introduction of new and appropriate technologies, introduction of strategic planning and measuring performance, coordination, etc.

Lean Headquarters and Fat Local Government

The concept of decentralization has been discussed above. It is clear that the majority of the citizenry in most of the developing countries reside in the rural areas. That is where services such as education, health, agricultural extension, roads, electricity, land, veterinary, housing, transportation etc are in greater demand. The process of devolution entails empowering local government to undertake these responsibilities. This implies that people also have to move from the headquarters to the rural areas. We cannot transfer responsibility only. What it means is that the tasks that were to be performed at the headquarters are to be done downstairs. A corresponding move of personnel from the headquarters of senior officers to rural or local government institution is the expected occurrence if meaningful devolution is to be achieved. Ironically, most senior headquarters officers such as Principal Secretaries, their deputies, undersecretaries, down to principal, senior administrative and human resource management personnel; Senior professional and technical staff such as chief scientific officers, scientists, engineers, agricultural extension specialists, roads engineers, geologists, among others remain at the headquarters. The question is: what has been devolved and to whom? Are there already appropriate senior officers at the local government level to undertake the mammoth task that has been devolved to local government? What will the many senior officers who are at the headquarters but have devolved authority and responsibility be doing? While others might argue that they will be doing policy, coordination and monitoring role, as well as setting standards for local government structures, personnel to follow, such roles do not warrant a status quo in staffing level of the headquarters of each ministry. Is this not why there is a general view that one of the reasons why decentralization is not achieving the results intended is because of the reluctance of the centre to relinquish power and authority. There is no justification whatsoever for the local government structures to be starved of the senior personnel when the majority is at the headquarters. This paper argues that any country which is serious with the implementation of the spirit of decentralization should in fact strengthen the local government institutions at lower levels by ploughing the majority of the senior officers who are at the headquarters to the local level. There is a need for lean headquarters and a fat local government in terms of staffing. Furthermore, it is important to adopt the principle that the harder the circumstances, the more the rewards. If people at the local government level were rewarded more than those living in the urban areas, suitably qualified persons would be more attracted to go to the rural areas than is the case now. The fact that headquarters staff remains where they are shows that they are not attracted to move into rural areas. A deliberate policy can be made to enhance the incentive package- both monetary and non-monetary for those working in the rural areas to stimulate interest and motivation to work there.

Strengthening Local Training Institutions

To ensure sustainability in human resource development at an affordable cost, Governments are resorting to the strengthening of local training institutions to develop the capacity to mount appropriate courses for decentralized administration. This is

done through creating departments of local government, training existing staff in local government programmes, seconding experienced officers to beef up the existing staff complement of training institutions, providing scholarship for management trainers to develop capacity in areas of decentralization, local government finance, accounting, auditing etc. Funding of decentralization related research to unearth problems affecting the decentralization programmes would go a long way in taking corrective measures and therefore improving the decentralization process and therefore enhance service delivery and local democracy.

Case study 3

The Ministry of Local Government in Malawi has for example strengthened the capacity of the Staff Development Institute by providing resources in the form equipment, vehicles, regular visiting lecturers, beefing up the local government department at the institute, funding courses generously thereby helping the institute to generate enough funds to improve its functioning through acquiring more equipment and honing the skills of its staff. SDI has become a major training institution for handling local government training at district and sub-district level. This included the training of local chiefs, ward councilors, members of the district team, district executive committees.

Building Financial capacity

While other forms of capacities discussed above are very indispensable to the effective implementation of the decentralization policy, finance is one of the most controversial sources of poor service delivery in poor and less endowed district councils. Decentralization of financial capacity to local government through widening the tax base for local authorities, widening central government grants to local government institutions and other ways of income generating is as important. Money is required to pay employees, buy equipment, vehicles, stationery, drugs and medical supplies, fuel among many things. Decentralization of authority and power to make decisions at local levels is not adequate. Thus, capacity needs to be strengthened both in the generation of finance as well as in the effective management and prudent utilization of the same. As noted above, some of the human resource management problems facing decentralized administration is lack of capacity to motivate staff. Money is required attract graduates and highly experienced persons; to pay competitive salaries to retain talent; as well as send managers and other employees for training to hone their skills. Money is also required to build staff accommodation or pay house rent; pay allowances as well as various forms of advances (loans) like education, salary, motor vehicle and house advances. One way in which financial autonomy can be enhance

Conclusion

This paper has examined the link between decentralization, popular participation and human resource management challenges and prospects. It is evident that decentralization has very good intentions aimed at enhancing popular participation in decision making and bringing governance and service

delivery to the grassroots. This process, it has been argued, involves entrusting local district, town and city councils with authority and responsibilities for delivering services like housing, water, roads, health facilities, bridges, transport, land management issues, to name a few. More often than not, it has been noted that such transfer of responsibilities is not accompanied by corresponding transfer of the human resource function in full. The centre still remain in control of the recruitment, promotion and disciplining of key staff working at the local level. Consequently, there is a tendency towards loyalty being transferred back to the headquarters. More importantly, decentralization practices impose a huge capacity burden on the local institutions as they cannot attract the right caliber of staff. Local authorities lack the requisite autonomy to command the respect that human resource managers at the centre have to recruit, reward and discipline officers and ensure they can motivate them to perform effectively. With low capacities in terms of skills and financial base, it becomes difficult for local council to attract and maintain administrative, technical and support staff. Overall, one of the key challenges confronting local councils is lack of capacity in many important respects. The central argument however that is the success or failure of decentralization initiatives rest on how the human resource function is decentralized. It is therefore suggested that one of the key interventions in this is to undertake a comprehensive capacity and resource assessment survey in order to unearth capacity challenges which have to be addressed. As part of the various interventions, the paper suggests that improving the core competencies of staff and management in decentralized local governments is essential. Promoting an integrated approach to organizational learning, which would require the development of three inter-related HR capabilities: human capital (knowledge, skills and competencies); social capital (network of reciprocal relationships and support); and corporate capital (an embedded organizational culture with appropriate assets and management information systems. Synchronizing the nature and content of training offered by the different stakeholders contributing to local governments HR capacity building is also a strategic way forward. On the other hand, the need for building autonomy, undertaking and organization development programme, undertaking human resource development interventions, building financial autonomy, strengthening local training institutions and creating a lean centre and a fat local government by moving staff downstairs.

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