

HUMAN RESOURCE CAPACITY AND THE DEMANDS OF DECENTRALIZATION PROCESS IN THE GAMBIA

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Abstract

This paper attempt to explore the documented challenges that constrain human resource development (HRD) under decentralization process in Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in The Gambia. Critical review on the demands of decentralization and human Resource Capacity gap was thoroughly done to set the basis for the paper. The Paper used documentary sources to gather information relevant to the thematic area. These included journal articles, books, Government Reports and Local Government Service Regulations. Observation method was also used based on the author's background and experience in the thematic area. The paper found that decentralization as a process and as an approach has limited potential that enhance development of Human Resource Capacity in the Local Government Areas in The Gambia. However the paper noted three major challenges which are multi-faceted and integrated in character. They comprise policy induced challenges, skills and Organization challenges and performance induced challenges. Hence the paper strongly recommend an institutional review and to re-design the institutionalization of HRD, conduct a robust capacity assessment in all the Local Councils to measure their capacity and readiness to meet the demands of the decentralization process. Enforcement mechanisms with financial support, change of mind set and working culture and finally, a political and leadership will remain critical for bridging the existing Human Resource capacity gaps to meet the demands of decentralization within the Local Government sector.

**Keywords: Human Resource Capacity, Local Government Authorities,
Decentralization**

Introduction

Human Resource development in both Public and Private Sector institutions is indispensable in an increasingly knowledge based and globalized economies of the World (Analoui, 2007). Building Human Resource capacities (BHRC) for Public Service delivery (PSD) has been recognized and appreciated by both developed and developing nations. The New Public Management (NPM) also puts emphasis on capacity building on people component for institutions to remain relevant and responsive in performing their mandates (Hope, 2001). Hope (2001), understands decentralization underscored change for effective and efficient service delivery. He further recognized decentralization and Human Resource Development as potential and critical strategic policy elements for institutional change.

Hope (2001), views decentralization as a means through which governments would be able to deliver requisite quantity and quality services that meet citizen needs and aspirations. Decentralization under New Public Management is considered imperative as it reduces bureaucratic controls especially by the Central governments. Decentralization is accepted in both theory and practice as a means to ensuring local governance in terms of delivery of Public Service which are more effective and efficient. However, the assumption is dependent on decentralization design, institutional setup and characteristics, technical and Human Resource Development (HRD) governing its strategic implementation (World Bank, 2000 and Pollit, et al, 1998).

Namara (1990) at the African Leadership Forum on June, 1990 raised and appreciated the importance of developing human resource capacity. He emphasized that it is imperative to build Local African capacities as the cutting edge of Africa's Strategic development agenda. In his view, lack of necessary skills and well managed public institutions for long term, sustainable growth was priority to be included in every development activity in Africa because of its implications for improved governance and development management.

The World Bank (2000), also noted that, Africa must solve its current human development crisis if it is to claim the 21st Century. Africa's future economic growth will depend less on its natural resources, which are being depleted and are subject to long run price declines and more on its labor skills and its ability to exploit available opportunities and demographic transitions.

The World Bank observation is a recognition that in an organization, the capacity of the human resource is the most precious and critical resource, this position is shared also by Armstrong (2009) who clearly recognized that, human resource is the most valuable asset in an organization as it interprets policies, plans and objectives into actions and tangible results.

Organizational efforts need to be conceived, planned and executed by knowledgeable people who can coordinate and organize inputs into outputs, hence failure or success of organizational endeavors rests on the type of people involved in the process (Powell, 2001). To this regard therefore, it is not surprising that human resource capacity and development issues remain of great importance and concern to Public Sector Managers and reformers using decentralization as a service delivery model in Local Government Areas (LGAs).

The question that calls for an in-depth study is whether decentralization as a service delivery model and an institutional change using New Public Management principles and the quest for adequate human resource development and capacity can work in the Local Government Areas with its bureaucratic tendencies looking on the challenges embedded and which constrain the Human Resource Development.

Rationale of the paper

The Public Service Reform (PSRP) which was a comprehensive reform program identified general constrains which include; institutional weaknesses, poor service delivery, under-utilization and management of human resources, poor performance management culture, lack of a comprehensive and attractive incentive system in Public Sector, lack of effective records and information management systems and under-developed Human Resource in Public sector (Decentralization Policy, 2007, World Bank, 2000 and Alam, 2009).

Decentralization as part of the wider Sector Public Service Reform in The Gambia was a reaction to a vide publication of the cabinet paper on decentralization in 1993 which intended to address the challenge of service delivery at the grass root levels. To re-inject new vigor and dynamism into the process, with the change of government in 1994 the issues of decentralization was placed high on the development agenda of the new government once again. With the lost momentum regained, the 1997 Constitution provided for decentralization by devolution of some central government functions to the local governments. The constitutional provision led to the provision of the enabling policy and legal environment for decentralization in the country. This led to the enactment of the Local Government Act in 2002, the Local Government Finance and Audit Act in 2004, the

Decentralization Policy in 2007, Local Government Service Commission Regulations (2010);and Local Government Staff Service Rules (2003).

Issues of Human Resource Development and Capacity, was one of the major components in that Policy (National Policy for Decentralization and Local Development, 2014). The Decentralization Policy was conceived as one of the strategies to bring major policy changes, processes and practice with the aim of strengthening the capacity of Local Government Administrative System as one of the crucial Public Sector Institutions responsible for public service delivery in the country.

In the Gambia, issues with regard to adequate human resource capacity, decentralization and centralization are more historical. The country since 1965 after independence, inherited an administrative system from the colonial government which was prepared to serve the colonial government (Sagnia, 2014). The Local Government System which was operational was more or less centralization, since institutions were controlled from the Central government as the principal policy maker and a pivotal referee of the operational standards.

This background information therefore brings attention on the difficulties and challenges of developing people as a valuable asset in the Public sector, specifically in decentralized Local Government Structures in The Gambia. Thus, the study is envisaged to explore the documented challenges that constrain decentralization for human resource development in Local Government Areas in The Gambia.

Objective of the paper

The key objective was to explore human resource development under decentralization in Local Government Authorities in The Gambia.

Specific issues to be explored included

- (i) To find out the importance of adequate Human Resource Capacity under decentralization in The Gambia.
- (ii) To identify documented achievements on human resource development under decentralization in The Gambia.
- (iii) To identify the documented challenges on Human Resource Development concerns and decentralization in The Gambia.

To address these objectives, the paper answered the following questions

(i) What specific importance is placed on Human Resource Capacity Development under decentralization in The Gambia?

(ii) What are the documented achievements on human resource development under decentralization in The Gambia?

(iii) What are the documented challenges on Human Resource Development concerns and decentralization in the LGAs in The Gambia?

Theoretical assumptions

The question of having knowledgeable, competent workforce and capacity building has been a matter of concern and features out in development literature, organization theories and performance management. Larbi (1998), points out that, capacity is not the same as Capacity building. Rather the absence of capacity, calls for capacity building; hence effective capacity building must be preceded by assessing the existing capacities. In the context of Public Sector, capacity is the ability of government to plan, manage and sustain the development process of their economies and societies; and keeping with aspirations and potential of their respective people (ECDPM, 1994, and Larbi, 1998).

Lane and Wolf (1990) understand capacity as the ability to govern, which is embedded to human resources available in government institutions. Grinole (1995) define capacity as the ability to perform appropriate task, meaning that capacity is task performance, achieving purpose effectively and sustainably either at individual level, group, community, organization or government level.

The Institutional theory and open system theory can explain better the underlying philosophy between decentralization and Human Resource Development in the Local Government Authorities. The institutional theory as pointed by Hope (2001) that institutions shape the relationship of individual within an organization, shapes decision making styles, shapes allocative and productive powers and also defines what is allowed and what is prohibited.

The system theory and specifically the open system theory can also best fit in understanding issues of Human Resource Development as its premises assumes that organizations have similar characteristics with other living organisms (Analoui and Karami, 2003). A System is generally defined as an arrangement of interrelated parts. The interrelated parts are the structures which work in an interdependent elements forming an entity that is the System (Jackson and Schuler, 1999).

An Open System and Institutional theory, all depends much on the internal and external environment. The external environment may necessitate change of frameworks and policies while the later i.e. the open system can be affected by the external environment for inputs that are transformed to produce outputs that are exchanged in the environment. It is generally understood that managing an organization requires effective deployment of three key resources that is Financial, Physical and Human Resources. However, it should be noted that among the three resources, the most valuable and critical resource is the people (Human Resource) to this note, it has been observed that developing human resource in an organization is a sub-system of Human Resource Management embedded in the larger organizational System (Analoui and Karami, 2003, Armstrong, 2009).

The system theory and institutional theory both imply that developing human resources while guided, contributes to the building of competent management and performing organization (Wright and Snell, 1991). It is further argued that HRD should be integrated in an organization in order to deliver high quality products and services. The Gambia has always seen decentralization as an ideal approach to rural and urban development (Fye, 2015). The Ministry of Lands and Regional Government is assumed to play a regulatory role in the process (Sagnia, 2014).

Local Government Reform Program in The Gambia is one among the major reforms in the Public Sector Reform Programme which includes the Public Financial Management Reform Program and The Legal Sector Reform Program. The Local Government Reform Programme (LGRP) in The Gambia aims to restructure local government authorities so that they can respond more effectively to local priorities of service delivery in a sustainable manner. Various sector reform programmes are undertaken in line with the Local Government reforms to complement the LGRP.

The Gambia Government Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper II (PRSP) document which is builds on the long term development vision 2020, clearly spells out that the objectives of these reforms are to improve service delivery to the public, (Decentralization Policy, 2007).

According to Ngwale (2005) and Lukamai (2006), the Local Government Reforms as part of the major public sector reforms are used as a driving vehicle of Decentralization by Devolution (D-by-D) policy to strengthen the local government authorities with the overall objective of improving service delivery to the public. Thus, made it through transferring power of the decision making, functional responsibilities, and resource from central government to local government authority.

Shukuru (2006) however, points out that there have been cases including lack of involvement of stakeholders in the planning process, on the side of the human resources involved in the process. To achieve this, well trained, compensated and motivated human resource is imperative. This study made an attempt to explore how these elements happen under the decentralization process in The Gambia at Local Government level specifically looking at the importance, achievements and challenges facing human resources development in LGAs in The Gambia.

Methodology

The methodology for the study was influenced by the presence of multiple actors in the public organizational setting, hence the adoption of an exploratory design was considered imperative. Secondary sources of data were collected for the study. Observation method was used to collect primary data. Documentary source was done through review of various documents related to human resource development and decentralization. Qualitative analysis took the form of transcribing recorded notes and content analysis of observation and documents.

Results and Discussion

The paper had three specific objectives and questions. This section documents the findings in a logical flow with reference to those specific objectives and questions. The questions were: What specific importance is placed on Human Resource Capacity under decentralization in the LGAs in The Gambia? What are the documented achievements on human resource development concerns under decentralization in LGAs in The Gambia? and What are the documented challenges on Human Resource Capacity concerns and decentralization in the LGAs in The Gambia?

Specific importance placed on Human Resource Development under decentralization is LGAs in The Gambia

Local Government Staff Service Rules and Human Resource Development (HRD) provides for a strategic approach to develop the human resource capacity. It provides a framework that is useful for identifying skills needed by employees within the organization for both current and future employee development requirements, and for the identification and incorporation of individuals training and other related development needs (Hope, 2001). The ultimate aim is to have a workforce that has the pre-requisite skills and knowledge to undertake the tasks required for the organization, and a workforce that is eager to learn and accommodate new skills in order to meet current and future challenges. Thus Human Resource Development under decentralization in the Local Government Authorities in The Gambia placed emphasis on the strategic importance of achieving Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives of Local Government Areas. LGAs as organizations must demonstrate their relevance and value to stake holders (government, private sector and citizens), and ensure that the values and principles are adhered to (National Governance Policy, 1999).

The HRD also serves the following purposes and objectives:

- i. To enhance the skills and capacities of the human capital of the LGA in order to carry out targets of development plans and program to achieve the vision and mission of LGAs. This position is also shared by Armstrong (2006) who pointed out that HRD makes a major contribution to the successful attainment of organization objectives.
- ii. To further human resources management towards productive contributions to achieving the vision and enhancing efficient service delivery.
- iii. To sharpen the recruitment, promotion, retention, personnel relations, rewards and incentives as well as succession planning and retirement practices and policies beneficial to both individual employees and to the LGAs at large.

In order for the LGAs to effectively and efficiently implement its core functions (service delivery to the citizenry), there is a crucial need to continuously improve the current workforce by promoting its qualifications and professional portfolios. The intended improvement would be based on service offerings, as well as future strategy expansion as per national and constitutional mandate.

HRD provides opportunities for an individual worker to improve current and future job performance, while simultaneously best utilizing human capital in order to improve the

efficiency of the organization itself. Ideally, well-developed and well-implemented HRD systems are integral to the organizations strategic plan and benefit both the employer and the employee.

Documented achievements on human resource development under decentralization in LGAs in The Gambia

The emergence of the New Public Management and Decentralization model has changed the landscape, and public sector organizations face comparable levels of complexity. There is more demand for quality and reliable services from the public and there is more competition for competitive and productive human resources. Institutions have to legitimize their existence, necessitating the adoption of complex outcome-focused systems and procedures.

Documented challenges on Human Resource Development concerns and decentralization in LGAs in The Gambia

Generally, the paper found that the HRD challenges under decentralized local government in The Gambia are multi-faceted and integrated in character. They comprise policy-induced challenges; skill, task and organization induced challenges and performance motivation induced challenges. To be more specific they include Low job satisfaction due to poor salaries, inadequate funds for training and development, and unequal training and development opportunities for all employees.

Other challenges observed include rapid expansion of services and employment. The quest to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals is possibly a contributor to making the decentralized structures proactive and vibrant as entry points of developments in the delivery of public services such as social, education and health services.

Issa (2011) pointed out that inability to hold subordinates accountable for meeting targets; failure to create a shared vision; insufficient attention to client needs and customer care; tendency to micro manage, inadequate delegation and encouragement of subordinates, inadequate collaborative skills are some of the challenges facing HRD in public sector in The Gambia including LGAs.

Conclusion

This study investigated the human resource development capacity challenges facing local governments in The Gambia. The paper sought to explore the major human resource development capacity building challenges facing local government administration in The Gambia. The key objective explored was to explore the documented challenges that constrain human resource development notably the Local Government Authorities and decentralized structures in The Gambia.

The main research conclusions suggest that human resource capacity challenges manifest in three-dimensions as: policy related, task/skill/organization-related and performance motivation-related. Confronting these challenges has far reaching implications for policy and human resource management development practice. One of the conclusions, is that decentralization has the potential to improve local public service delivery and ensure good governance through having competent and skilled human capital.

However, for this agenda to materialize, several human resource development policy interventions are critically necessary and required to be in place, including: establishing functional, well re-tooled and professional HRD institutional and integrated structures at all levels of local government administration and at national level.

The documented challenges and implications for human resource development practice, might be useful to focus on the following issues: Improving the core competencies of staff and management in decentralized local governments:- by promoting an integrated approach to organizational learning that would require the development of three inter-related human resource capabilities, including: human capital (knowledge, skills and competencies); social capital (network of reciprocal relationships and support); and corporate capital (embedded culture, assets and information system).

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