

# Skills Development in Malawi's Public Service: Key to Effective Human Resources Productivity?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines training and development practices in Malawi's public service. In sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi, improving public service delivery through competent and well trained human resources is a major concern. The paper is based on literature review and key informant interviews. It contends that the quality, applicability and relevance of training and development in Malawi's public service is complicated by the lack of systematic and well-coordinated leadership and management development programmes, vested interests of public officials and inadequate and elusive quality and quantity of human resources, There is dearth and paucity of professionalism, as the public service is not only politicised, but it also corrupted and lacks financial resources. The paper concludes that public service transformation through training and development is critical for improved performance and productivity. Therefore, attention must be paid to the role of training institutions and on-going capacity development. The paper concludes that provision of systematic training and development programmes is not a luxury. There is need for regular assessment of training needs at all levels, as well as the mobilisation of human resources in terms of quality and quantity and finances for efficient and effective public service delivery.

**Keywords:** Development, Malawi, Public Service, Skills, Training

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the training and development practices and challenges in Malawi's public service. In sub-Saharan Africa which includes Malawi, improving human resources productivity and public service delivery is a major concern for both government and development partners. The centrality of improvement of the skills development with the aim to enhance public service delivery through efficient management of physical, financial and human resources is well documented. According to Andries (2016), the productivity by public officials depends on the extent to which they are developed. Skills development enables managers and leaders to inculcate new skills and knowledge required to perform appropriate tasks, identify problems, assess options for responding to the problems, formulate effective policies, implement appropriate activities, and sustain such activities to have an impact on socio-economic development (Smoke, 2015:97). The fundamental aim is to ensure is to achieve sustained competitive advantage and long-term sustainability and survival and to bolster public management, governance and accountability and equity in public service delivery. However, despite various skills development efforts, the quality, applicability and relevance of the programmes in the public service are

unsatisfactory. There is relatively limited empirical evidence of the beneficial outcomes of training and development programmes. This raises a number of questions. Why do countries pursue the programmes although evidence shows attainment of quality and quantity human resources for effective public service delivery is still elusive? How can practitioners better design and implement training and development programmes that lead to the attainment of the desired goals? What are the challenges facing training and development programmes? Thus, unless the contingencies affecting training and development are understood and pragmatically addressed, the various initiatives undertaken to improve public service delivery will yield minimal results. Therefore, this study was undertaken with the aim to examine the training and development practices and challenges in Malawi's public service. The results of the study are presented in this paper, which focuses on a review of the concepts, theoretical underpinnings relating to training and development, the methodology, results and discussion and conclusion and recommendations.

## 2. Concepts & Theoretical Underpinnings

From the outset it is important to clarify key concepts that underpin this analysis, namely, training

and development in view of the wide variation in their usage and interpretation in relation to the public service.

## 2.1 Training

It is the process of teaching new employees the job skills needed to complete their assigned tasks. Training involves improving the knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees for the short-term, and particular to a specific job or task. It is implemented through employee orientation, skills & technical training and coaching. The purpose includes updating employee's skills, reducing learning time for new employees; helping solve operational problems, preparing employees for promotion and orienting new employees to the organisation. More often training is necessitated by some event, for example: new policy, a reform programme, a change in working methods, a realisation that performance is inadequate, and promotion or transfer of individual employees, among others.

## 2.2 Development

According to Van Dyk, Nel, Loedolff and Haasbroek (2001:148), development is about 'preparing personnel for higher levels of performance' and it encompasses all the processes, systems, methods, procedures and programmes an organisation uses to equip its employees with appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes. Several terms are used to describe a variety of formal training and development interventions. According to Garavan, Hogan and Cahir-O'Donnell (2008), these include 'education, training, learning, and career development and performance management, coaching and mentoring' It is about learning opportunities which are created for employees focusing on a wide range of activities rather than on just specific skills and knowledge (Grobler *et al.*, 2016:300). Successful training and development involves considerable effort both before and after the programme implementation. According to Grobler *et al.* (2006:300-305) 'a systems approach to training and development' includes interrelated phases, namely, assessment; design and delivery; and evaluation. Coetzee (2007:235) argues that the purpose of need assessment is to gather and evaluate data about employees' capabilities and the organization's current and future demands for skills. It is conducted at three levels, namely organisational level to determine major problem areas that may indicate a need for training

and development, who needs training and what skills, knowledge, abilities or attitudes need to be acquired or strengthened. The design and delivery entails taking into consideration factors relating to learning outcomes, skills of the trainer, resources and facilities, management of the delivery process. (Grobler, 206:300-306). Evaluation of training and development programmes involves making judgments about the quality of the training interventions but also to add value to it. On the other hand, evaluation can also inform training practitioners whether changes or improvements in learners' performance in the workplace had occurred as expected or planned (Coetzee, 2013:444). Evaluation of training can take place at different times. It can take place before a training intervention or during or after a training intervention.

## 3. Methodological Approach

The research methodology, which was adopted for this study, was qualitative. The existing literature on skills development was systematically reviewed and synthesised. This involved a review of journal papers, conference papers, books, official reports and internet sources. A systematic review of literature attempts to collate all empirical evidence to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimise bias and thus, providing more reliable findings from which conclusion can be drawn and decisions made (Cochrane, 2003). According to Mulrow (1994), a systematic review of literature is appropriate in identifying, appraising and synthesizing research based evidence and presenting it in accessible format. This methodology was the most appropriate since the research area required a review of local development planning approaches in district councils and a broad range of countries.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Policy Framework

The Malawi Government through the national training Policy of January 1996 recognises that the delivery of quality public services depends on the availability of well trained staff. The Policy framework highlights several issues relating to training and development. The aspects include the training mission statement, goals, objectives, priorities, programmes, strategies both national and operational, the role of individual MDAs and the private sectors, the institutional

framework for local training and the administrative machinery for coordination of training.

The mission of training and development is to ensure timely training of adequately appropriate human resources in response to development needs and any policy intervention while the goal is to ensure self-sufficiency in terms of quality and quantity for optimal performance at organisational, managerial and individual levels. The training policy clearly spells out that among its training priorities are to provide training and development programme in the fields where qualified staff are currently scarce as well as focus on training and development at all levels. The strategies include long-term the Malawi Government Scholarship Fund (MGSF) established to address human resource capacity gaps by sponsoring Public Servants to pursue various post-graduate degree programmes in line with the national development priority areas; and short-term programmes which include normal courses run by training institutions; induction Courses; Government introduced compulsory induction and orientation programmes for the Malawi public service to improve service delivery and public sector reforms, civil servants will only be eligible for confirmation in appointment after attending and passing a relevant induction course at Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) and Staff Development Institute (SDI) and this will also form the basis considering officers on promotion and other rewards (circular number HRP/DPOL/20 of 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016).

## 4.2 Institutional Framework

The training and development is provided by a network of institutions which include the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC), DHRMD in collaboration with other institutions specifically MDAs, and UNIMA (GoM, 2018). This analysis does not intend to duplicate the elaborate discussion of the institutions which is well documented in government official document. It is beyond the scope of this analysis and therefore below is synopsis of their roles in relation to training and development.

### 4.2.1 Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC)/DHRMD

The OPC provides overall leadership on the implementation of the Malawi Government National Training Policy as well as the Training Guidelines and Procedures for the Public Service (GoM, 2018). It also ensures that there is a sustainable training financing

strategy in place In order to improve the delivery of public services. It appoints the Public Service Training and Scholarship Selection Committee and advises Government on matters relating to priority areas for training sponsorship, consistent with national development goals. The DHRMD which is a component of the OPC implements the national training policy in the public service in liaison with sector agencies (MDAs and education and training institutions) as part of its mandate under the Public Service Act No. 19 of 1994. The specific roles include:

- Consult relevant stakeholders on the formulation and review of the Training Policy and Public Service Training Guidelines and Procedures;
- Facilitate the mobilization of financial resources for training;
- Compile a Consolidated Training Plan for the Public Service from prioritised annual training plans which are submitted MDAs;
- Prepare budget estimates for the MGSF which are submitted to the Ministry of Finance covering tuition fees, students' allowances, air travel expenses and other operational expenses;
- Administer scholarships under the MGSF and donor funded scholarship programmes;
- Disseminate information on donor funded training opportunities;
- Serve as a secretariat to the Public Service Training and Scholarship Selection Committee and Collaborate with development partners on the development of human resources.

### 4.2.2 Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs)

The Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs) design their projects so that they should have a training component for capacity building within the projects and as such some public servants are sponsored for short term or long term training by funds under the projects and ORT funding from the Treasury. For example, specialised and professional training for the common service is sponsored by particular MDA, for example, DHRMD-HR common service; Accountant General – Accounting Common Service, OPC-Economic Planning and development – Administration Common Service and Economic Common Service or Economists. Central Agencies

sometimes secure funds either from Government or from development partners to pay for short term and long term training of staff from their respective Common Services. The role of individual MDAs include to:

- Undertake Training needs assessment.
- Undertake induction courses and professional training in liaison with DHRMD, UNIMA and other training institutions;
- Submit prioritised training budget, plans and proposals to DHRMD;
- Manage the training function using National Training Policy and Training Guidelines;
- Select Public Servants for award of scholarships under the MGSF through interviews.

The MDAs are required to send quarterly training reports to the DHRMD but they do not comply with this requirement such that DHRMD does not have records of public servants who are being sponsored under ORT. The national advisory board is set to provide monitoring and advisory services on matters of training.

#### **4.2.3 Public Service Training and Scholarship Selection Committees**

The Public Service Training and Scholarship Selection Committee are organisational based and oversee organisational training function (GoM, 2018). The responsibilities include to conduct scholarship selection interviews and recommend to Government Public Servants to be awarded scholarships under the MGSF taking into consideration the priority areas in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), and regional and gender distribution. The specific roles of the committee include to:

- Provide technical policy guidance and direction and leadership on issues relating to training and staff development;
- Submit to DHRM a prioritised training plan for post-graduate sponsorship;
- Vet training proposals submitted by Heads of Section to ensure that selection of employees to attend training programmes is based on objectively identified skills gaps;

- Ensure transparency and equity in the provision of training opportunities to all employees including Common Service staff; and
- Approve the Consolidated Training Plan for the Public Service which is compiled by the DHRMD from the prioritised annual training plans which are by submitted by MDAs.

#### **4.2.4 Development Partners**

The development partners provide training support by funded scholarships through DHRMD to address human resource capacity gaps. Some Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) also receive donor scholarships directly. In addition, specialised bodies which include African Union, AAPAM and Commonwealth Secretariat also offer training and development programmes to Malawi's public servants.

#### **4.2.5 Education and Training Institutions**

There are several education and training institutions for provision of training and development. The national Training Policy of 1996 categorised the institutions into: specialised, technical and professional training under MDAs; institutions managed by DHRMD for example Staff Development Institute (SDI); the Malawi Institute of Management (MIM); autonomous and semiautonomous notably the University of Malawi's (UNIMA); Chancellor College, Department of Political and Administrative Studies; and privately owned training institutions.

The Staff Development Institute (SDI), is the earliest government institution which was first established in 1962 as a civil service institution to train public servants as part of the Africanisation of the civil service. According to Kayuni (2014:175), the Institute offered courses covering leadership and management. The Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) which was established by Act No. 7 of April 1989 has the primary responsibility to provide to provide high quality skills training and development programmes. The flagship programmes that the institute has conducted over the years include Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) and the Public Sector Administration (PSA) to enhance leadership, and management skills. The Department of Political and Administrative Studies, (PAS) which was born out of the Institute of Public Administration at SDI and became part of the University of Malawi offers a wide range of courses for the training and development (MIM, 2016). Currently, the curriculum

includes undergraduate and postgraduate programmes leading to MA, and PhD degrees awards in Political Science, Public Administration, and Human Resource Management. In short, Malawi's public service has adequate training and development institutions for all levels of staff in Malawi's public service.

## 5. Challenges Facing Training and Development in Malawi

The realisation of effective training and development remains elusive. Despite the numerous training and development programmes, there are challenges facing the production of capable managers. Although the training policy goal seeks to ensure self-sufficiency in terms of quality and quantity for optimal performance at organisational, managerial and individual levels the outcomes of developmental programmes have been unsatisfactory remains elusive. According to GoM (2012), the government neglected both mandatory induction courses and leadership and management courses for over 15 years. This has resulted in serious leadership and management gaps in the public service which in turn has led to inefficient public service delivery. According to PSRC (2017), Malawi's public service is characterised by leadership and management paralysis due to the camaraderie, "buddy-buddy" relationships. Those in leadership positions ignore their supervisory roles and the omissions of Junior Staff which include violation of set rules and procedures relating to performance and time management. Thus, government business is in a state of paralysis and inaction on the part of the senior government officials. The situation is attributed to inadequate skills and competencies at all levels, poor coordination and collaboration among government institutions and other stakeholders compounded by the pitfalls highlighted below:

### 5.1 Politicisation of the Public Service

The nature of the public service system in Malawi exhibits dominance of neopatrimonialism. Despite the adoption of multiparty democracy strong patronage networks exist in Malawi's public service. The public service including the public education and training institutions are tainted by politicisation. Most senior public officials are political appointees and their deployment and development is influenced by 'political connections and networks' rather

than merit (Chimjeka, 2017). The political leadership appoints directors for training institutions and they are busy with partisan interests rather than training and development. Most public officials tend to serve in a manner to retain the status of the executive and the ruling party. The education and training institutions are treated as simply symbols of national pride and the focus of the institutions is shifted from that of training and development to improve and transform public service delivery to tools of gaining political mileage by the existing regime.

### 5.2 Rampant Corruption

The rampant corruption in political and bureaucratic circles has resulted in diverting public resources and capital for investment necessary for effective training and development for private gains. Since the advent of the multi-party dispensation in June 1994, all the political regimes have been associated with some form of corruption. Ngoma *et al.* (2017) observes that the UDF regime was associated with complete breakdown of the state's capacity to formulate and implement tangible policies as the regime was characterised by misappropriation of public resources, collapse of state service provision, extensive fiscal indiscipline. Similarly, the DPP regime (2004-2012) is associated with the president's unexplained MK 65 billion of personal worth accumulated within three years. The PP regime (2012-2014) is famous for the Capital Hill Cash Gate scandal. This involved a massive plunder of over US\$20 million of public money by high profile public officials through payments to non-existing suppliers, deletion of transactions, procurement done without the knowledge of the Office of the Director for Public Procurement (ODPP) and inflation of prices (Chimgwede, 2013). Clearly, effective implementation of training and development programmes cannot be attained in the face of high-level corruption.

### 5.3 Administrative Inefficiencies

The fundamental reason why training and development has not improved the public service is partly because of administrative inefficiencies. The public service is therefore characterised by ineffective recruitment system with high vacancy rate estimated at 41.7 percent, the lack of human resource management development and retention strategy, high staff turnover, poor incentives and low morale due to inconsistent leadership and management

development programme. While there are a number of dedicated senior public officials in positions of power who genuinely strive to ensure effective training and development for effective public service delivery, the majority lack the commitment towards effective skills development. The adverse disposition by public officials is attributed to their tendency to see the training and development programme in terms of how it affects their personal interest and aspirations. Practical examples which illustrate the lack of commitment included the 'failure to attend leadership and management courses at MIM because of absence of allowance; venues for a leadership course for Agriculture Managers was shifted from MIM to Capital Hill – government headquarters as a sign of reluctance to go to the MIM due to low allowances.

#### 5.4 Inadequate Capacity

The major hurdle facing training and development programmes is inadequate capacity to offer regular programmes. Malawi has seen rapid expansion of the public sector development programmes and government operations as well as increase in the number of reforms and activities including decentralisation reforms and public sector reform policy which necessitate skills development. However, the demand for skills development to better manage the reform exceeds capacity and resources available. Thus, the weak institutional and individual capacities attributed to the inability of government to adequately capacitate training institutions is a challenge that needs to be addressed. According to GoM (2012), strategic capacity gaps at institutional and individual levels are undermining the implementation of the national development agenda in Malawi. The inadequate human resources both in terms of quality and quantity, shortage of finances and the lack of commitment or poor motivation are the major reasons for ineffective training and development and poor public service delivery. The situation has resulted in haphazard design and delivery of training and development programmes. Many public officers have never attended leadership and management training since they joined the public service as far back as 13 years ago. Weak capacity by local training institutions translates into failure to offer training and development programmes in some of the areas desired by Government in line with priority areas. The pace at which new courses are being introduced does not tally with what Government is expecting.

#### 5.5 Lack of Individual Skills

There is a lack of skills in the design and implementation of systematic training and development programme. This is attributed to the changing nature of the workforce and non-responsive human resource policies towards training and development which have resulted in competency gaps in the public service and the inability to attract and retain quality personnel (due to poor conditions of service). The limited skilled professionals in government is depleted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic with the 8% and 14% national prevalence rate among the production ages of 15-49. (Kutengule *et al.*, 2004:51). There are problems associated with assessing the actual training and development needs of executive and top leadership result in leadership and management training that focus on management theories, practices, tool and techniques which do not address their felt needs.

#### 5.6 Financial Constraints

Most training and education institutions and MDAs are poorly financed. The limited availability of finances makes it difficult for sectors to provide adequate and continuous support training and development programmes. According to GoM (2012:8-9), the lack of finances, lack of skills and competence, and poor incentives and working conditions culminate into the glaring lack of commitment to quality implementation of skills development programmes in government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs).

The financial resource constraints translates into the inability to send their officers for skills training and development courses soon after promotion, the lack of physical and material resources, inadequate quantity and quality of personnel and poor reward system. The financial constraints are compounded by limited tax base for Malawi's agro based economy, corruption and the dependence by most sectors on development aid partners. Training and development is often treated as a luxury and discreet event. The lack of financial capacity in most training institutions has contributed to the weak capacity.

### 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, the quality, applicability and relevance of management development in Malawi's public service is complicated by the lack of systematic

and well-coordinated training and development programmes, vested interests of public officials and inadequate and elusive quality and quantity of human resources. There is dearth and paucity of professionalism as the public service is not only politicised, but it is also corrupted and lacks financial resources. However, public service transformation through training and development is critical and therefore, attention must be paid to the role of education and training institutions and on-going capacity development. The political and bureaucratic leadership is a major factor which influences how training and development are undertaken to improve public service delivery both at the central and the local level. Successful implementation of training and development depends on adequate capacity in terms of human resource quality and quantity and financial resources. Thus, top level political and administrative support is critical to move the country in the direction of careful programming and mobilisation of physical, information, human and financial resources for improved productivity in the public service. There is need for proper coordination and alignment of training and development programmes and activities relating to the policies and public service reforms in order to maximise synergies among the various agencies operating at the central and local levels. Furthermore, coaching and mentoring programme for all levels in the public service should be institutionalised for improved knowledge, confidence and motivation for effective delivery of services. The capacity building processes should focus on strengthening attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to fulfil the existing and future demands in the broader context of public service reform. Collaboration between the public service and training institutions such as University of Malawi-Chancellor College, Malawi Institute of Management and Staff development Institute should be strengthened for effective design of training and development programmes. In summary, there is need for regular assessment of training needs at all levels, as well as the mobilisation of resources to support training and development for increased productivity and efficient and effective public service delivery. To crown it all, in order for public service to improve productivity and deliver services efficiently and effectively, it is imperative that training and development programmes should be effectively managed.

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