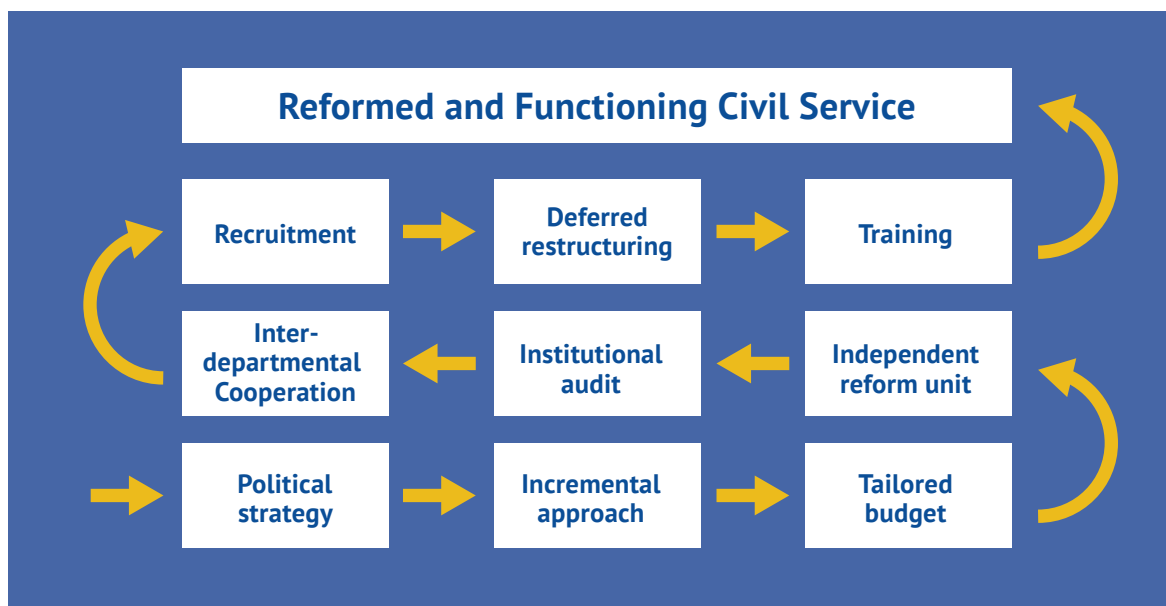# Civil Service Reform in Times of Transition

A civil service is considered functional if it can get things done and if its capacity to implement policy decisions is high. The best civil services are politically neutral, autonomous, accountable, merit-based, well-trained, representative of the larger population and responsive to its needs, with a size and structure tailored to the requirements of core state functions. Many countries do not have a civil service that meets these criteria, especially those grappling with the legacies of conflict or authoritarianism. Political transitions, however, present an opportunity for tackling the costs of a dysfunctional civil service and achieving the benefits of reform.

Consequences of maintaining a dysfunctional and ineffective civil service include fiscal deficits linked to inflated public wage bills, the proliferation of 'ghost' workers and vacant positions and duplication of government bodies and duties. More serious consequences include partisanship or elite capture of government affairs, endemic corruption in the public and private sectors, poor or at least uneven service delivery and institutionalised discrimination, all of which undermine democratic governance and public trust.

This practice brief is tailored for reformist policymakers facing significant obstacles, which might include general ones such as limited political will, lack of resources, widespread corruption and a divided populace, as well as specific ones like politicisation, patronage and human resource constraints within the civil service itself. It recommends a gradual and tailored approach to reform that is underpinned by a political strategy funded primarily through the national budget and led by a highly-placed independent reform unit. With an in-depth audit and contextual analysis as its point of departure, the reform unit can build cooperation among the government bodies implementing reforms, prioritise the recruitment of highly skilled personnel ahead of restructuring and rationalisation and invest in training for existing staff.

While contextual and institutional differences always need to be taken into account, this brief offers practical guidance based on lessons learned from recent civil service efforts across the globe, from Albania to Nigeria, Afghanistan and Guinea. Such efforts are complementary to, but distinct from, the narrower and more complex work of judicial and security sector reform, both of which have been the subject of more frequent analysis than civil service reform.

1. Start with a political strategy

- Civil service reform threatens existing power centres and institutional cultures. Instead of a series of technical fixes, it is a highly politicised process that requires a strategy for generating support, ensuring buy-in, minimising political risk and neutralising spoilers. This strategy must be flexible enough to evolve with developments in the political environment and the wider reform process.

- Successful reforms require champions among highly placed politicians and civil servants who have connections in a range of ministries and departments as well as to private sector and civil society leaders. These champions should advocate for reform internally and publicly, facilitate cooperation and ensure the sustainability of the process in the long run.

- Allies in the private sector can advocate for reform through their links to political elites, while providing technical expertise and a source of skilled personnel for the civil service.

- Allies among non-governmental organisations, academics, journalists and other civil society actors can provide data to improve reform design, facilitate consultations with stakeholders outside government and build public awareness and trust regarding the reform process. As supporters and watchdogs, they apply pressure on government to implement reforms.

- Although it is sometimes necessary to reward former combatants or potential political spoilers with government jobs, such steps endanger efforts to improve the civil service. If unavoidable, these jobs should be unconnected to the actual workings of the administration.

- An assessment of political risks and opportunities, as well as potential supporters and opponents in the public and private sectors, is essential to the development of a contextually responsive political strategy.

2. Adopt an incremental approach

- While small-scale changes can occur within six months, civil service reform usually takes at least three to five years to have a visible impact and well over a decade to take root. Fast-tracked, comprehensive civil service reform may be ideal, but the politics and capacity constraints of fragile and conflict-affected contexts generally make it unfeasible.

- In most cases, therefore, it is best to implement a series of initial reforms in a tactical manner, focusing on priority areas that are likely to result in quick wins, cause minimal political backlash and build public support. Early successes will generate political will, create momentum and attract funding for additional and more challenging reforms. For example, changes to recruitment or procurement processes may be a better way to start than ambitious efforts such as restructuring ministries or vetting the judiciary.

- These incremental reforms should be based on a long-term strategy and multi-year roadmap that are flexible enough to take advantage of emerging opportunities, cope with new obstacles and change course if any single approach fails.

3. Develop a tailored budget

- Reforms should be funded to the extent possible from the national budget, as this will ensure local control and internal buy-in while demonstrating the administration's commitment to change and building public trust.

- If political will or public resources are too limited, however, reforms should be funded by a single international donor, but under accountable national management. This will help ensure a balance between the need to maintain local control and ownership, and the need to simplify donor compliance requirements and avoid uncoordinated technical assistance.

- Where the single-donor option is not possible, multiple donors should be urged to pool their resources, coordinate their support and agree to a single compliance mechanism. This type of

donor cooperation can take more than a year to establish, but ultimately saves time and effort.

- Civil service reform processes require not only long-term, consistent budgets, but also quick-disbursing mechanisms for funds needed to fill urgent gaps.

4. Establish an independent reform unit

- An independent mechanism or entity – ideally backed by the head of state/government – should be tasked with designing, planning, implementing and then coordinating and monitoring the reform process in cooperation with relevant government bodies. In order to avoid political interference and institutional inertia, this unit should be separate from the government body that oversees public and civil service affairs.

- The civil service reform unit should be located in an office that has both political will and clout, preferably that of the head of state/government or another top official. In order to maintain momentum and support, the reform unit should report directly to this official every 4–6 weeks and ensure key decisions are made.

- The unit should ideally start as a small core team of 8–10 senior civil servants who have in-depth knowledge of local dynamics, solid networks across government bodies and familiarity with organisational development. It should be headed by a respected and well-known figure.

- Beyond the core team, the unit could include members of local civil society and/or the private sector who bring a range of expertise to the reform process, are able to counter institutional inertia and, preferably, have some previous experience working in or with government. Local and international specialists could also be recruited to support specific tasks as needed.

- To minimise confusion, redundancy and interference, the mandate and terms of reference of the reform unit must be clearly defined, along with the responsibilities of the government bodies involved in the reform process.

5. Undertake an institutional audit

- Using and expanding on the assessment that guides the political strategy, the civil service reform unit should begin by consulting with key civil servants and other individuals familiar with the inner workings of government, so as to build internal support and identify priority issues to address through the reform process.

- In order to design a locally responsive and tailored set of reforms, the unit should then undertake a comprehensive audit of the legislation, regulations and procedures that guide civil service operations, as well as the structure, number, functions and capacities of relevant government bodies and personnel at the national and sub-national level. This can be done internally or with financial and technical support from a donor or other partners.

- The audit serves as a stocktaking exercise and a needs assessment. It assists the reform unit to identify gaps that need to be addressed in order to align the civil service with both state functions and the goals of the administration. It also demonstrates the financial and other costs of an ineffective civil service, thereby helping counteract spoilers.

- Using the audit as a baseline, the reform unit should work with relevant personnel across government to identify suitable indicators for monitoring progress and measuring impact, and use this information to improve the reform process over time. The results of consistent, ongoing monitoring and evaluation can be used to demonstrate change to the public and generate momentum for more comprehensive reform.

6. Promoting Interdepartmental Cooperation

- While the civil service reform unit coordinates the process, a range of government bodies and personnel execute the reforms. As these bodies often operate in silos that encourage territorialism, the reform process must include mechanisms for ensuring that staff recognise the benefits of change, provide input on the design, have the opportunity to voice their concerns and collaborate on implementation and monitoring.

- Interdepartmental task teams or working committees should ensure co-design of the specifics of reform processes and sustainable cooperation on implementation. The work of these teams should be the primary responsibility of the personnel assigned to them, rather than an add-on to other duties.

- In addition to the roles and responsibilities defined by the reform unit, interdepartmental teams can co-develop cooperation guidelines to focus their work. They could use facilitated processes, such as problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA, developed by the Harvard Center for International Development), to identify the challenges they need to resolve, pinpoint their causes and possible solutions, reflect on the implementation process and adapt it to improve outcomes.

- To incentivise cooperation, the administration might offer departments a set number of new high-salary positions in the event they develop and implement a collaborative reform plan with clear indicators of success.

7. Prioritise recruitment

- While a bloated civil service may need restructuring and rationalisation, these measures are likely to attract resistance, cause delays and require longer time frames. For this reason, it is often best to begin by recruiting new personnel who have the skills to implement priority reforms and breathe fresh life into the civil service.

- At the beginning of the process, recruitment should be rapid and targeted, with the aim of bringing highly skilled individuals who believe in reform into key positions. While some personnel may be reassigned, the focus ought to be on hiring new staff who will be agents of change within the system, including from outside the country and from the private sector or civil society. The new hires should be given the resources needed to drive reform and shift the institutional culture. The political clout of the office housing the reform unit should be used to identify, recruit, and support these change agents.

- In order to attract highly skilled individuals to the civil service in the medium to long term, the administration might establish a fast-track programme for leadership streams. While the

civil service may not offer market-based compensation, such programmes provide the type of recognition and accelerated career progression that facilitate strategic recruitment.

- Experience shows that job security and a predictable career ladder, based on transparent pay grades and performance appraisals, are as effective as market-based compensation in attracting skilled personnel. While states dealing with human capital limitations have introduced performance-related bonuses to attract qualified civil servants, the more common approach is to follow the prevailing institutional culture in terms of incentives.

- After the first wave of hires, the reform unit should focus on establishing a merit-based recruitment system that is transparent and open to all. This will demonstrate the administration's commitment to reform, foster public trust, and go a long way toward building a professional and effective civil service.

- Recruitment should occur in stages, ranging from standardised examinations to committee-based interviews, which are open to monitoring by civil society and recorded should they subsequently need to be reviewed. In some cases, an independent institution might develop the examination and interview questions to reduce interference. The process must include complaint resolution and decision appeal procedures. Computerisation can ensure that all applicants undergo the same process and be designed to confirm their qualifications.

- Transparent processes are especially important in contexts where discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender or other factors has affected recruitment. Equity-based employment policies should be encouraged, although the political implications may require a gradual or targeted approach, for example starting with lower-level positions or focusing recruitment on a marginalised region.

8. Defer large-scale restructuring and rationalisation

- Given the tendency among successive administrations to create new entities and positions, the reform unit will eventually need to work with relevant personnel to restructure a bloated civil service in line with core state functions.

- Instead of taking an adversarial approach, the reform unit must collaborate with senior officials on restructuring, using the audit findings to highlight its benefits and incentivising them to collaborate with each other on developing reform plans with measurable outcomes, particularly via interdepartmental task teams. The government entity that oversees public and civil service affairs should take on this coordinating role in the long term.

- Restructuring, budget cuts and vetting may require reductions in personnel. Because downsizing will cause resistance and interference, it should be tackled later in the reform process and occur gradually. Instead of purging personnel, it is best to retrain and redeploy them. Problematic staff can be reassigned to positions where they will cause the least harm and in time be offered early retirement or attractive severance packages to leave voluntarily.

- Transparency regarding the basis and methods for downsizing as well as measures that ensure work is redistributed equitably are central to maintaining morale and productivity.

9. Invest in training

- Increasing the capacity of existing staff to perform in line with state functions is a priority. This should be done through a combination of methods that ensure the participation of as many personnel as possible, while using content applicable to the local context.

- Donors are often willing to provide funding for external technical staff to train or mentor civil servants on the job. Individual personnel might be accompanied by such experts for one to three years, with their workload gradually increasing until they are able to take full charge.

- Group training is also important. The reform unit should work with relevant personnel and external experts to develop training programmes based on the audit findings and the problems and solutions identified by interdepartmental teams through facilitated processes such as PDIA.

- Rolling in-house training is preferable, as it generates camaraderie and promotes cooperation among personnel in addition to building capacity.

- Some governments develop relationships with local universities to deliver tailored training to personnel, while others invest in dedicated civil service colleges, especially for leadership positions.

- Online training is a viable option, especially as it tends to be less expensive than formal courses at brick-and-mortar institutions. However, it requires personnel to have or receive reliable internet access.

- Senior personnel may prefer to attend trainings or courses abroad. These should be carefully vetted for quality, cost and applicability.

- Where the audit reveals individuals or areas of excellence or effective practice, the staff should be officially acknowledged and encouraged to share their experience with the reform unit and other personnel. This reinforces their commitment, signals what kind of work is valued within the civil service and helps create a culture of learning through knowledge exchange and cooperation.

- Beyond the transfer of new skills, training programmes also present an opportunity to inculcate the civil service's updated code of ethics/conduct and promote a sense of civic duty among all civil servants.

Acknowledgments

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