

INTRODUCING CONTEXT-BASED REFORMS: ADAPTATION OF MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT TOOL IN SOUTH AFRICA AND UGANDA

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INTRODUCTION

Agenda for institutional reform in developing countries have come to be dominated by methods and approaches that advocate for the adaptation of international best practices, usually emerging from developed countries, without a context-driven analysis of the needs of developing countries (Grindle, 2007). These externally funded and designed reforms have proven to produce uneven and varied results in addressing the complex developmental problems in these countries. This study explores the nature of the adaptation process of management performance reforms in South Africa, and in Uganda, using the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) model advanced by Andrews (2013).

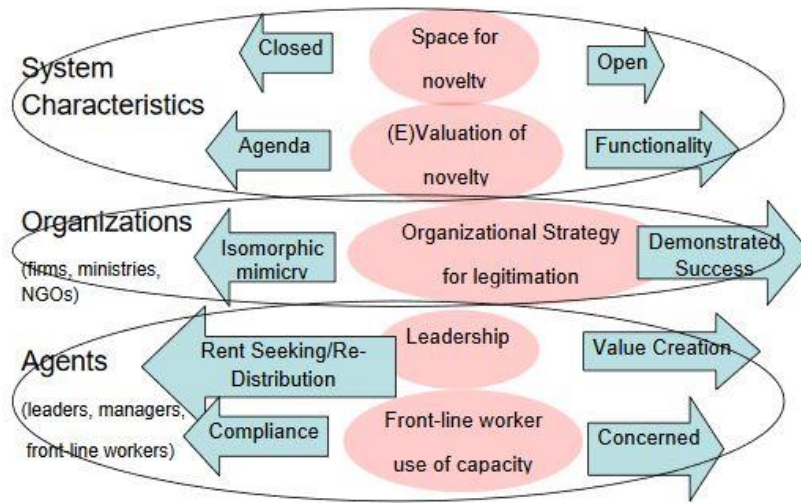
This brief argues that reforms implemented in these countries have not yielded optimal results because they have not been contextualised to fit local country settings. Using the PDIA model, the study analysed the adaptation process of a specific institutional reform intervention in South Africa and Uganda - MPAT - to further explore the conditions of adaptation and test this proposition.

STATE CAPABILITY CHALLENGES AND THE PDIA MODEL

Public sector reforms are usually designed as a response to capability challenges within governments. Reform recipient institutions have tended to change in *form* and not in *function*, such that after a series of reform interventions, a department of education would have a legislative framework that looks like it should deliver quality basic education when in fact, the quality of basic education is not improving despite heavy investments in reform. Andrews (2011) describes this phenomenon as the capability trap.

Government institutions tend to remain stuck in the capability trap because the ecosystem that institutions operate in are closed off to novelty, penalise innovation, and reward survivalist tendencies. According to Andrews (2011), reforms tend to be successful because they attempt to intervene at one level, whereby, introducing a new management performance system at the institution level. Andrews (2011) advances the PDIA model as a possible alternative to traditional

reform approaches in dealing with the capability trap that many developing countries find themselves in.



Source: Capability Traps: The Mechanisms of Persistent Implementation Failure

PDIA dispenses with this idea of merely copying form while not focusing on how the innovation that proved successful - it works to address the problems at hand¹. PDIA keeps the problem at the centre of the reform process such that with every test, iteration and adaptation, the reform designers revisit the problem and the wider context to keep the intervention focused. Reform designers tend to craft a solution by defining what the problem looks like when solved, and with every test and iteration measures the extent to which the problem is being solved before adapting it broadly. This approach has implications for how reform designers understand the;

- Context of the reform
- Content of the reform
- Agency engagement
- Value of the reform

These are discussed in relation to Uganda and South Africa below.

CONTEXT OF THE REFORM: UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT WHEN IMPLEMENTING REFORMS

In adapting MPAT in South Africa and Uganda, context was often overlooked due to a number of reasons. Below are some examples of how context was overlooked in the two countries.

- **Over reliance on external models** - MPAT adaptation in South Africa relied on and was by influenced by international models and best practices. One of the effects of this kind of framing was that the reform design and implementation was rules-bound, focusing heavily on monitoring the regulative aspects of management performance and ignoring the normative and cultural cognitive expressions emerging from the process.
- **Alignment of MPAT with existing institutional structures** - South Africa adapted the MPAT with the centralised character unique to Canada, overlooking the decentralised nature of

¹ Matt Andrews giving a lecture at the Danida Seminar: Capability Traps and Collective Action Problems -- New Perspectives on Capacity Development and Reform Challenges. Website: <http://goo.gl/xVGLxd>

the South African institutional framework. In Uganda, it seems the approach is to introduce the MPAT in a decentralised manner and to incorporate novel aspects of the MPAT into existing systems such as the GAPR.

- The content of the MPAT in Uganda seems to have borrowed significantly from the South African experience - despite the vast differences in the content and characters of their public services
- **Inadequate problem focusing** - In Uganda, with the MPAT design process still underway at the time of writing this brief, problem identification and focusing seems to have mirrored the South African experience. In Uganda, service delivery challenges remain important in the overall scheme of things, the problems around management of public service, corrosion of public service ethos and the high level of political interference come to the fore as more significant issues to contend with. These problems are a unique feature of the Ugandan context that should be further interrogated to craft a more accurate hierarchy of problems in the design and implementation of the MPAT.

REFORM CONTENT: IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE CONTENT DESIGN IN A CONTEXTUALLY RELEVANT REFORM

When adapting international best practices, the actual problems that need solving are often buried under the weight of highly specific and dense content coming from countries where institutional contexts and their regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive mechanisms are well developed. This has implications for the content of MPAT in the two countries.

- MPAT assesses only regulative elements and omits normative and cultural-cognitive elements of institutions.
- Reform fatigue emerging as a result of isomorphic mimicry tendencies. This should be considered by reform designers in Uganda as a contextual constraint that is linked to the reform fatigue evident in some circles of the public service.

REFORM AGENCY: BROAD AGENCY ENGAGEMENT IN ADAPTATION OF REFORMS TO CONTEXT

- In South Africa, there was a natural inclination among reform drivers to undertake broad engagement given the apartheid legacy of centralised decision-making and exclusion
- Resource constraints and a pragmatic approach by reform designers considering institutional and political dynamics has restricted broader engagement in Uganda
- Political championship of a reform could be a double-edged sword; as can large-scale consultation
- There are vast differences in the political conditions, administrative capabilities and resources which have implications on the approach taken by the reform designers to introduce MPAT in Uganda.

VALUE OF THE REFORM: DEFINING OUTCOMES OF THE REFORM INTRODUCTION PROCESS

As emphasised in the PDIA approach, the iterative nature of the reform implementation should derive solutions that are politically acceptable and practically possible (Andrews, 2013). Iteration in the MPAT process was restricted to certain technical aspects of the reforms and was not responsive to broader shifting contextualities. As a result, relevant solutions to pertinent issues emerging as the reform was being implemented were not being derived.

- Highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining political acceptability (and co-ownership) of reforms within central powers and gatekeepers
- Muddling through as a form of adaptation - Positive results emerged in the course of implementation of the MPAT in South Africa when reform designers muddled through changing contextual constraints.
- Gaps in content design and the lack of responsiveness to contextualities affects the value of the reform

CONCLUSION

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore the conditions under which specific institutional reforms are introduced in South Africa and Uganda through the case of the Management Performance Adaptation Tool (MPAT). In both countries, there were/are genuine attempts to contextualise reform efforts in the delivery of MPAT however, in South Africa, these were often curtailed by the degree of responsiveness to dynamic political shifts that compromised the political acceptability of the process. In Uganda, where the process is underway at the time of this writing, the main problem is around how to scale-down and domesticate the content and approach to delivery of the MPAT to fit the administrative capabilities and political realities on the ground. Despite these issues, the proponents of context-based approaches to reforms; such as the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation; continue to emphasise that all outcomes, good or bad remain relevant, and they present as pre-existing institutions for iteration, learning and adaptation.