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Critical Perspectives on Public Sector Reforms: An Introduction

Richard I.C. Tambulasi

This publication is a memorial to the late Professor Guy Mhone, whose rare academic stamina and rigour shaped the research subfield of public sector reforms and developmentalism in Africa. We argue in this publication that the neoliberal new public management-based public sector reforms that Malawi, like most African countries, adopted under the influence of donor institutions have not led to the promised efficiency and effectiveness in the running of the public sector. At best, these reforms have been poorly implemented, as the necessary institutional infrastructure for their effective implementation has been absent. As a result, some of these reforms have either been abandoned (for example, performance contracting, as discussed in chapter four) or face massive challenges in implementation with little prospect of achieving their goals (for example decentralisation and public-private-partnerships, as discussed in chapters two and three).

The underlying problems are that donors have dominated the reform processes and, under their influence, the state has withdrawn from its developmental mission. The reforms themselves have further eroded the capacity of the state to participate in viable developmental projects. The situation reaffirms the prediction by Polidano (1998:285) that 'public sector reforms in developing countries will resemble a landscape dotted with ruined edifices and abandoned skeletal structures'. Nevertheless, this publication sees some rays of hope in the return of the developmental state in Malawi (see chapter five). Malawi's overwhelming success in its 2005/6 fertiliser subsidy programme, which the government embarked on singlehandedly despite donors' unwillingness to support, demonstrates the developmental potential the state has so that, if replicated in other sectors of the economy, can lead to higher levels of development.

Contextual Background

Malawi, like many African countries, has been subjected to a plethora of public sector reforms. In fact, Africa contains perhaps the most over-reformed states in the world, despite their mostly recent origins. External actors have dominated the African reform platform, and the reform podium has been characterised by coercive policy reform transfers rather than country-initiated rational learning (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Common 2001; Evans 2004). For instance, Therkildesen (2001:3) observes that the reforms initiated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Africa in the 1980s were twice as many as those in the rest of the developing world. Since then, donor involvement has only increased.

These externally imposed public sector reforms can be traced to the period after decolonisation, when the departing colonial masters left their institutional infrastructures for the operation of the former colonies. Malawi and other former British colonies inherited the Westminster–Whitehall model based on the 'parliamentary system, electoral competition, a neutral civil service, decentralisation, the rule of the Western-style law and the protection of civil and political rights' (Minogue 2002:122). However, most of these reforms were adopted mainly as a way of facilitating the independence negotiations. What was in the minds of many African leaders at the time was the question of how the post-colonial state could be instrumental in social and economic development. The argument was that the colonial state had merely been an exploitative instrument for the achievement of colonial interests rather than national development. In the colonial state, any development projects that were embarked on were mainly intended to facilitate colonial reign rather than holistic national development.

The key post-independence goal, therefore, was to develop and deploy the state machinery for higher levels of development. This goal was supported by the 'emergence of the activist and interventionist model of the state, based on the assumed superiority of the bureaucratic model of large-scale organisations' (Minogue 2002:133). This, in turn, led to the formation of 'new but poor states committed to economic betterment: the developmental state' (Minogue 2002:133). In the case of Malawi, Mhone (1992:11) tells us that the 'economic landscape has been drastically and, in many ways, irreversibly transformed by the purposeful intervention of the state', while Minogue (2002:133) notes that the central assumption behind the activist state model 'was that a crucial role of the state was to make good the deficiencies of the private market'. Some states, such as Botswana, were successful with this model, owing to their visionary and developmentally-minded leadership. In other cases, the state became predatory and riddled with corruption, as happened in Zaire (Mkandawire 2001; Evans 1989), or dictatorial and totalitarian, as in Malawi (Mhone 1992). As Mhone illustrates, the Malawi case consisted of 'mutually determining and reinforcing political apparatuses of authoritarianism, paternalism and repression, and economic relations of dominion and exploitation' (Mhone 1992:1). Such negative examples, together with the general failure of government interventions elsewhere, made donor institutions rethink the role of the state in development and emphasise the use of the market.

The dismantling of the developmental state in Africa began when the ideological support basis for state intervention was swept away with the end of the Cold War, and "free market' capitalism, multiparty democratic and 'good governance' came to be seen as universal virtues. As a result, developing countries were required by the World Bank and the IMF to adopt neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). In the realm of public administration, governments worldwide began replacing their bureaucratic and state-driven public services with the market-oriented new public management (NPM) model. The NPM has its basis in the neo-liberal economic theory that 'combined an attack on the inefficiency of public bureaucracies with strictness on the flawed nature of the activist state' (Minogue 2002:134). Alongside SAPs, donor institutions begun to push for the implementation of NPM reforms within wider good governance programmes as conditions for aid in developing countries. NPM required a major transformation of the public sector in developing countries.

The New Public Management

Public sector reforms are commonplace. They are 'planned systematic changes to the structure, processes and operation of the public sector' (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007a:335) which are 'sanctioned as the means to bring about the desired changes' (Turner and Hulme 1997:106). The NPM paradigm has been the main public sector reform model in many countries for the past decade. NPM is now so popular that if one mentions the 'words public sector reform… many listeners will take it for granted that you are talking about the new public management' (Polidano 1998:773). With the introduction of the new public management, traditional public administration which is synonymous with bureaucracy, is 'slowly trekking to the grave' (Tambulasi 2007:303). In fact, NPM aims to change and replace traditional public administration entirely (Batley and Larbi 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Hughes 1998; Tambulasi 2007).

Many authors have come up with different conceptions of NPM, but as an 'evolutionally and continuously developing concept' (Hoque 2005:4), NPM's constitutive components are highly debatable. What is central to all NPM arguments is the implementation of market-based principles in the running of the public sector. According to Lane (1997:5), NPM entails 'competitive government, injecting competition into service delivery; enterprising government, earning rather than spending; and market oriented government, leveraging change through the market'. The rationale is that the private sector is efficient due to effective management practices. Therefore, in order to make the public sector equally efficient, the same market principles have to be applied. The argument is that 'organizations need to be efficient, effective and to provide value for money' (Turner and Hulme 1997:106). A comprehensive attempt to define the basic components of NPM can be found in Christopher Hood (1991). Hood's account of NPM's 'doctrinal' components can be summarised as 'disaggregation + competition + incentivisation' (Dunleavy and Margetts 2000:13). The case studies presented in this book are organised around these themes. In essence, disaggregation is mostly represented by decentralization, competition is exemplified by public-private partnerships, and incentivisation is akin to performance contracting.

Disaggregation and Decentralisation

Decentralisation is 'one of the principal themes of NPM' (Mimba, Helden and Tillema 2007:198) as NPM champions a shift to 'disaggregation of units in the public sector' (Hood 1991:5). This means the devolution of management control with improved reporting and monitoring mechanisms (Hope and Chikulo 2000:27). It emphasises the breaking up of 'monolithic' (Hood 1991) public sector machinery into small manageable units. This entails decentralisation. In this case 'decentralisation is generally prescribed as a means of liberating potential shackles by bureaucratic restrictions' (Metcalfe and Richards 1990:77). Decentralisation is generally understood as the 'transfer of power from the centre to the periphery' (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007b:164). Similarly, Steunenburg and Mol (1997:234) capture decentralisation as 'public sector reform conceived as changes in the distribution of tasks between different levels of government'. A more encompassing definition is provided by Rondinelli (2006:433), who looks at decentralisation as the 'transfer of responsibilities and authority to lower levels within the central government (deconcentration), or from the centre to local government units (devolution) and nongovernmental organisations (delegation), or from government to the private sector (deregulation and privatisation)'. The value of Rondinelli's definition is that it spells out the variations of decentralisation – deconcentration, devolution, delegation, deregulation and privatisation. These variations are further explored by Chiweza in the second chapter of this book.

Bangura and Larbi (2006:8) observe that 'among NPM reforms, decentralised management has been one of the key trends in developing countries and has taken different forms'. These forms include administrative, institutional, political and fiscal dimensions. Administratively, decentralisation has meant the transfer of managerial authority and responsibility vertically from higher levels to lower levels of management (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007b). Institutional decentralisation is a variant of administrative decentralisation. It refers to the 'administrative bodies, systems and mechanisms, both local and intergovernmental, which help to manage and support decentralisation' (Smoke 2003:10). At the political level, decentralisation is regarded as the 'creation of bodies separated by law from the nation centre in which local (elected) representatives are given formal power to decide on a range of public matters' (Mawhood 1993:2). Local elections and greater civic participation are the hallmarks of political decentralisation. It is for this reason that this variant of decentralisation has usually been linked to democracy and good governance, formulating what is commonly referred to as 'democratic decentralisation'. Fiscal decentralisation is the engine that drives the whole decentralisation process; without well defined fiscal decentralisation, the other dimensions of decentralisation would have little impact (Smoke 2003:10). Fiscal decentralisation can either be political or administrative or both, but its distinctive feature is that it has a financial responsibility and authority component (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007b). Smoke (2003), however, advises the adoption of a broader economic view that goes beyond finance. In this view, fiscal decentralisation should be understood as the 'assignment of responsibilities, including sectoral functions, as well as the assignment of own-source revenues to sub-national governments' (Smoke 2003:10).

Decentralisation reforms have been widespread in developing countries. Mimba, Helden and Tillema (2007:198) claim that '63 of the 75 developing countries with a population of more than five million are actively employing decentralisation'. The goal of decentralisation is to increase effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery, as local authorities are 'closer to the people and therefore likely to respond better to their preferences' (Bangura and Larbi 2006:16). In this regard, decentralisation has been a 'major reform strategy for handling complexity in the public sector' (Lane 1997:9). In addition, decentralisation is seen as a mechanism for reducing the costs of bureaucratic control, and thereby increasing the effectiveness of central government policy-making (Steunenburg and Mol 1997:234). Mimba, Helden and Tillema (2007:198) observe that, in some cases, decentralisation has been championed to increase participation in government and improve the mobilisation and use of resources. Within the context of NPM, decentralisation is seen as the means of separating the 'core policy-making and regulatory functions of ministries from those dealing with implementation (Bangura and Larbi 2006:8). The expected results are that:

- governments are able to provide high-quality services that citizens value;
- there is increased managerial autonomy, particularly by reducing central administrative controls;
- there is a mechanism for demanding, measuring and rewarding both organisational and individual performance;
- managers acquire human and technological resources to meet performance targets;

- there is receptiveness to competition and open-mindedness about which public purposes should be performed by public servants as opposed to the private sector;
- there is improved economic and managerial efficiency or effectiveness;
- there is better governance (Hope and Chikulo 2000:29).

The actual results of decentralised systems in Africa are a mixed bag. While there are a few patches of success, decentralisation in most African countries has either failed (Olowu 1990), led to unintended consequences (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007b) or is struggling with a plethora of challenges (Chiweza in this book). These are the issues that Chiweza discusses in the next chapter of this book. She argues that the critical premise of local government has not significantly changed and that institutions are still fragile, making local government appear to be an extension of the central government. As Hussein (2003:271) observes, the failure of decentralisation in Malawi has been a result of 'little clarity on how community-based institutions are integrated into the local government system' and inadequate institutional, political, socio-economic and administrative frameworks to support the decentralisation drive. Additionally, in Malawi, as in many African countries, there are 'widespread self-seeking tendencies' (Chinsinga 2005:529) in the decentralised system, which have led the whole decentralisation process to 'open a new window for corruption' (Tambulasi and Kayuni 2007b:168). This leads us to the doubts that Dauda (2006:291) has about the 'viability' of decentralisation as a vehicle for development in sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, Africa in general and Malawi in particular have not attained the decentralisation dream they intended to achieve when they 'passed new constitutions and laws' (Smoke 2003:12).

Competition and Public-private Partnerships

NPM champions the adoption of private-sector styles of management in the public sector with the aim of attaining effectiveness, efficiency and improved service delivery. To achieve these goals, NPM demands a 'shift to greater competition in the public sector' (Hood 1991:5), since 'rivalry between diverse producers can be used to lower costs and improve standards' (Olowu 1990:4). Competition is thus one of the dominant themes in NPM literature. Instruments for attaining greater competition include privatisation, commercialisation and market testing (Olowu 1990:4) along with the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs). In general, PPPs are 'increasingly heralded as an innovative policy tool for remedying the lack of dynamism in traditional public service delivery' (Jamali 2004:103). In particular, Tambulasi (2007:205) emphasises that NPM 'considers the use of public-private partnerships as one of the tools for management to achieve effective outcomes'. PPPs are seen as a means of obtaining 'greater discipline and parsimony in resource use' with the aim of 'doing more with fewer resources' (Hood 1991:5). It is against this backdrop that the key phrases in this realm include 'value for money' and 'better services at less cost' (Lane 1997:10). At the centre of PPPs are the use of shared authority and responsibility, shared liabilities and risks, joint investment and shared reward/mutual benefit (Tambulasi 2007:305). According to Grouts (1997:54), the central feature of PPP projects is as follows:

> [T]he private sector funds and builds the asset, and it is the flow of services from the asset that is sold to the public sector; that is, the obligation on the part of the government is to purchase, directly or indirectly, a flow of services over time rather than the capital asset that provides the services.

The aim is to 'drive a wedge between public services and their delivery, creating a category of services that are still public services but which are privately delivered' (Ontario Federation of Labour 2005:2). In this case, PPPs 'expand public services and reduce the size of the public sector at the same time' (Ontario Federation of Labour 2005:1). PPPs have had massive publicity due to the negative experiences with privatisation in many developing countries. In this regard, PPPs have been regarded as a means of introducing supervised services from the private sector into the public realm. Lane (1997:10) emphasises this point by adding that PPPs are an 'insertion of [market-based] decision mechanisms into the public sector without resorting to privatisation'. They are a form of 'structured cooperation between public and private parties in the planning, construction and/or exploitation of infrastructural facilities in which they share or reallocate risks, costs, benefits, resources and responsibilities' (Koppenjan 2005:137). It must be noted, however, that the PPP process is not simply a charitable involvement of the private sector under the philanthropic themes of social responsibility. It is about securing better value for money in the delivery of clearly specified outputs (Tambulasi 2007:313-314). Thus any 'subsidy relationships where government does not share the risk in a private project' (Koppenjan 2005:137) does not constitute a PPP.

While the literature of PPPs is full of invigorating language and promises of efficiency, the reality in many developing countries has been very disappointing. The implementation of PPPs in African countries, including Malawi, has encountered many serious challenges to the achievement of competition and efficiency goals. These challenges are thoroughly discussed by Happy Kayuni in relation to PPPs at the Malawian local government level in the third chapter of this book. Kayuni argues that the Malawi local assemblies are not fully prepared to efficiently and effectively embark on PPPs, as they do not posses key success factors and attributes. To be effective, PPPs require specific conducive environments that most African states do not possess, such as favourable investment environments, strong private consortiums, appropriate risk allocation, available financial markets, economic viability, effective procurement, project implementability, reliable contractual arrangements, government guarantee and favourable overall economic conditions (Li et al. 2005; Jamali 2004; Zhang 2005). In addition, PPPs may simply not be viable in developing countries, where there tend to be high cost restraints on innovation and differing or conflicting objectives among stakeholders, not to mention the high tendering costs and time-consuming, complex negotiations required in establishing PPPs (Li et al. 2005:459).

Apart from these critical factors, the implementation of PPPs in Africa has also been problematic due the flaws inherent in PPPs themselves, which make PPPs 'not suitable for all policy areas' (Flinders 2005:225). In the first place, PPPs are very risky, and, as Shaoul argues, 'far from transferring risk to the private sector, PPP transfers the risk to the government, workforce and the public as users and taxpayers' (cited in Flinders 2005:226). The claims of cost reduction and greater efficiency are also questionable. Transaction costs tend to increase in a PPP arrangement because of the multiplicity of actors and the hybridism of the organisational forms, with 'secondary quasi-autonomous organisations [that are] created to oversee and regulate the activities of these PPP' (Flinders 2005:227). Moreover, conflicts of interests are also common in PPPs (Jamali 2004:108). The private-sector actors are, in most instances, profit-driven, while the public-sector actors are motivated by social considerations. This picture is further complicated when the public actors engage in self-seeking activities and corrupt deals with the private actors. Koppenjan (2005:136) observes that these conflicting interests lead to a 'hesitancy on the part of those engaged in public-private interactions, leading to unilateral public planning followed by difficult contract negotiations'. As a result, PPPs 'may in practice involve little close cooperation' (Jamali 2004:108). According to Flinders (2005:228), PPPs 'disrupt traditional accountability structures' and open avenues to corruption. Thus, the real risks associated with PPPs are not commercial but governance-related, involing neglect of 'traditional checks and balances afforded to major projects' (Hodge 2004:47). Moreover, PPPs 'achieve cost reduction at the expense of democracy and equity' (Jamali 2004:108).

Incentivisation and Performance Contracting

Incentivisation is another dominant practice preached by the NPM movement. The aim is to bring incentives to public sector managers so that they carry out market-based private sector practices and remain competitive. At the hub of incentivisation is the practice of performance contracting. Performance contracting requires managerial positions to be 'contractualised' (Oluwo 2002:3); public managers work according to performance contracts that stipulate specific targets, and managerial performance is measured according to the extent these targets are attained (Tambulasi 2007:303). The principle here is the establishment of a reciprocal relationship in which managers 'undertake to meet explicit targets or carry out specific activities. In return, government commits itself to provide various resource inputs and to give managers more authority over operations, including budgeting, purchasing and personnel' (Therkildsen 2001:27). In this regard, 'failure to fulfil the performance contract would then entail that the employment contract has been invalidated' (Lane 1999:184). To be feasible, performance contracts require the establishment of 'explicit standards of measures of performance' with a clear 'definition of goals, targets, indicators of success, preferably expressed in quantitative terms, especially for professional services' (Hood 1991:4). Consequently, performance contracting calls for 'hands on professional management in the public sector ... [and] active, visible, discretionary control of organisations from named persons at the top [who are] free to manage' (Hood 1991:5). The catch phrase here is 'let managers manage' (Olowu 1990:3). According to Tambulasi (2007:302), this arrangement ensures that managers effectively and efficiently deliver the goods and services the public expects them to deliver. In addition, it enhances accountability and efficiency mechanisms because accountability requires 'clear assignment of responsibility for action' and 'statement of goals', while efficiency 'requires a hard look at objectives' (Hood 1991:4).

In general, African countries have experimented with performance contracting with much difficulty. The practice has encountered challenges that have led either to undesirable consequences or the practice being abandoned altogether. In in the case of Malawi, Tambulasi argues (chapter four) that performance contracting failed and was consequently abandoned because, like other NPM tools, its successful implementation depends on favourable country-specific institutional contexts and conducive environments which Malawi, like many developing countries, does not possess. This is in line with Larbi's observation (2006:39) that the implementation of performance contracting has 'been problematic, mainly because a number of critical institutional preconditions are often absent to make the system work as expected'. This is true even for some developed countries. In a Norwegian study, for instance, Christensen and Laegreid (2001:79) found that performance contracts have 'cultural problems with getting adapted in Norway'. For developing countries, the situation is even worse. As Therkildsen (2001:32) notes, the application of performance management in South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe 'appears to be unrealistic'. Experience in these countries has shown that performance contracts 'rarely improve incentives and may do more harm than good' to already poor incentive structures (Therkildsen 2000:31). In addition, Mimba, Helden and Tillema (2007:199) observe that performance management in many African countries has increased corruption; the system's 'high informality … gives managers much more discretion to hire employees and spend money as they wish, which provides them with more opportunities for corruption'. Moreover, there are also performance measurement problems that exacerbate the situation. Performance measurement is 'complex and controversial', as measurement standards are often based on 'assumptions not generally met under prevailing conditions' (Therkildsen 2001:31). In most cases, there is an 'absence of a common and broadly accepted framework for defining what good performance means' (Therkildsen 2001:31).

Accounting for the Dismal Performance of the Reforms

The forgoing discussion along with the next three papers presented in this volume highlight the fact that NPM has not found a comfortable home in developing countries. As the specific studies on Malawi will show, the challenges have been massive and, in some cases, the reforms have been abandoned altogether. The critical aspects of the NPM reforms that have made their implementation problematic include the influential role of donors, the appropriateness of the NPM reforms and the divorcing the state from development. The following sections of this paper discuss each of these aspects in turn.

The Role of Donors

The study of public sector reforms in any African country would be incomplete if the role of donor countries, institutions and agencies were not highlighted. This is because, behind almost each and every reform effort in African countries, there have been donors acting either explicitly or implicitly. As Batley (1999) observes, 'there are cases where reforms have been advanced in the absence of real local support, but none where international agencies have been absent' (cited in Therkildesen 2001:3). Similarly, Polidano (2001) points out that the 'power of the purse, plus some quite definite ideas regarding what sort of reforms are desirable, has led donor agencies to take centre stage in the design of reform initiatives'. The NPM reforms are no exception. The NPM tools have 'tended to be applied through powerful international donor agencies and financial institutions' (Larbi 2006:31), to such an extent that some scholars see the NPM reforms in developing countries as 'donor conditionality' and 'imposition' (Mxakato-Diseko 2008:1; Common 1998:442) leading to the 'export of managerial reforms in low income countries' (Bangura and Larbi 2006:20). Moreover in most African countries 'donors are *de facto* an integrated part of both the policy making and the budgetary processes' (Therkildesen 2001:8).

To make matters worse, donors have transferred the NPM reforms wholesale in a one-size-fits-all fashion without considering the specific social, political, economic and institutional environments within which the reforms are to be implemented. The reasoning has been that reforms that have worked well elsewhere will work well everywhere. However, as Tambulasi (chapter four) argues, in public sector reforms there is no such a thing as a magic key that opens every door. Specific reforms are applicable for specific problems in particular countries' environmental contexts. In addition, donors mostly carry on with reform initiatives even when there are clear indications that the country concerned does not want them. For instance, Hirschmann (1993:126) observes that, in Malawi, 'donors are mostly set on continuing with their programmes whether or not the Malawians show evidence of, or even concern for, maintaining them'.

Moreover, there is huge competition among donors for aid markets. This competition sees a multiplicity of donors in a country all financing the same projects, thus creating coordination problems. For instance, in Malawi, as of June 1996, seven donor institutions – IMF, UNDP, UK/ODA, USAID, European Union, CIDA, and the World Bank – were providing assistance in the area of civil service reform alone (Ademolekun, Kulemeka and Laleye 1997:218). Such competition leads to both 'reform overload' (Therkildesen 2001:8) and 'capacity overload' (Ademolekun, Kulemeka and Laleye 1997:218) and 'further slows down the implementation of development projects and programmes' (Ademolekun, Kulemeka and Laleye 1997:218).

The recipient African countries have little choice but to take up the reforms pushed by donors, even though they may be well aware of their inappropriateness and likely undesirable consequences. The cost of refusing donor-driven reforms is much-needed foreign aid and loans that most developing countries cannot afford to lose. As a result, there has been an enculturation of what we might call the 'do-not-refuse-donor-money syndrome' in the entire civil service. NPM reforms have thus been taken up 'without any questions being asked regarding their suitability for meeting the needs of the continent in a sustained manner' (Mxakato-Diseko 2008:1). For instance, in a study on Malawi, Hirschmann (1993:126) observed that the 'culture of the civil service requires that nobody be seen as a person who is blocking aid', making local officials unable to 'question seriously the continued flow of resources, opportunities and their accompanying evaluations and recommendations'. Against the backdrop of this baleful donor influence, the poor performance of reforms in developing countries is hardly surprising.

Appropriateness of the Reforms

Donor institutions and all the other bearers of the NPM gospel have preached it as a magic bullet that can rectify all public-sector problems regardless of country-specific conditions. NPM is regarded as 'public management for all seasons' (Hood 1991) and as an 'example of globalization at work' (United Nations 2001). However, as Asiyati Chiweza, Happy Kayuni and Richard Tambulasi illustrate in this volume, the NPM is 'not a panacea for all the problems in the public sector' (Larbi 2006:47). The reality is that, in most cases, 'public sector reform realities may be quite a different matter, as there tends to be a huge distance between lofty theory and down-to-earth practice' (Lane 1997:1). For most developing countries, NPM instruments are simply not appropriate for the prevailing social, cultural, political, administrative, institutional and economic environments. It is in this vein that Minogue (2002:134) alludes to the 'difficulty of making such policy transfers across different political and bureaucratic cultures'. As a result, in most developing countries, the 'conditions on which new management practices are premised may not be present' (Bangura and Larbi 2006:11), resulting in numerous suitability and sustainability hiccups. The effects of context in the applicability of NPM are well illustrated by Larbi (2006:26):

> Context does matter in the application of the NPM reforms. Specific NPM approaches may work better in some contexts than others. It is important to bear these differences in mind because they increase or decrease the chances of NPM being a good fit in developing countries. Countries also differ in their capacities to adopt particular NPM techniques

Apart from context of application, there are issues about the contents of NPM attributes themselves. In this regard, the NPM instruments have been seen to be problematic in effectively delivering on efficiency promises. In most cases, the private sector principles of NPM have not been compatible with public-sector values. As a result, these NPM principles have failed to perform as a magic medicine to cure the public-sector ills and deficiencies. As Larbi (1999:33) observes, the 'assumption that involving the private sector makes for higher levels of performance is given only a partial support by evidence'. In most cases, it is 'doubtful whether these private sector management concepts can easily be transposed into, let alone simply imitated by, the public sector' (Kickert 1997:183). Moreover, there are now many new sets of challenges due to issues related to contemporary market-driven public sector reforms (Haque 2001:71). Thus, although the performance of 'our public service pre-NPM left a lot to be desired, an examination of the solution offered by the NPM reveals tendencies that may have deleterious effects on building a coherent professionalism' (Mxakato-Diseko 2008:12). For instance, research has unveiled unintended consequences that arise in the areas of accountability (Haque 2001:71; Lane 1997:12), democratic ideals (Tambulasi 2007), national unity and equality (Larbi 2006:45). These findings lend weight to Halligan's (1997:39) observation that the NPM 'framework was a precondition for long-term reform but was insufficient as a comprehensive solution to complex pressures of the public sector'.

Divorcing the State from Development

The dismal performance of NPM tools can also be explained as a result of divorcing the state from developmental interventions and by letting private-sector governance tools dictate events through quasi-markets. NPM reforms are designed to reduce the role of the public sector to that of 'steering rather than rowing' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), making it 'hands-tied' (Mhone 2003:4) so that it only plays the role of 'night watchman' (Mkandawire 2001:292). Haque (2001:70) attests that, in the United States, the 'whole idea of reinventing government was to assign public services with a catalyzing or facilitating role, to reinforce the leading role of the private sector, and to ask the public sector to 'steer' rather than 'row'. The same principles have been applied to developing countries. As Mxakato-Diseko (2008:1) observes, through NPM reforms, the 'World Bank and the IMF sought to solve what they perceived as the problem of too much state as a key factor iinhibiting development'.

The irony, however, is that the state is required to facilitate its own replacement by the private sector by providing conducive environments for the NPM reforms. Not surprisingly, there have been complaints about lack of ownership and commitment of the local political leaders. For example, in the case of Malawi, Ademolekun, Kulemeka and Laleye (1997:220) observe that there was 'no champion for reform at the political level result[ing] into a rather unfocused and uncoordinated approach to both the formulation and implementation or reform measures'. However, by underplaying the role of the state, the NPM reforms 'entirely miss the point that such virtues can only be instituted and sustained by politics' (Leftwich 1995:421). In addition, the state machinery has been blamed for not having the capacity to implement NPM reforms when the reforms entail more emphasis on market capacities rather than bureaucratic ones; yet, paradoxically, the essential capacity of the state critical to the implementation of the reforms is being eroded by the same reforms (Mkandawire 2001). According to Haque (2001:70), the capacity of the public sector 'has been diminished due to the restructuring of its financial and human resources under the recent market driven reforms'.

Capacity problems with NPM also arise when the state in developing countries is dismantled too soon, before it effectively builds the prerequisite administrative stamina that lays a solid foundation for market interventions. As a result, NPM has been created on an 'empty managerial shell' (Bangura and Larbi 2006:21). It is against this backdrop that there is a dire need for 'ascertaining the publicness' (Haque 2001:69) of the public sector. As Mhone argues, a mode of administration needs to be adopted 'that allows for highly coordinated' [interventions] … along developmentalist lines', as the 'present forms are such that one hand does not know what the other is doing' (Mhone 2003:18). This reformulation is very important because, as we have highlighted in terms of NPM, reforms that 'ignore the core developmental missions of states may not only yield poor results but also undermine political settlements and make it difficult to reconstruct failing states, institutions and economies' (Bangura and Larbi 2006:3). This brings us to the u-turn that Blessings Chinsinga proposes in chapter five of this volume. His proposal is for the resurrection of the developmental state, an option we discuss in more detail below.

Re-enter the Developmental State

The casualties of neo-liberal reforms in state governance highlighted above have prompted many stakeholders, both at the international and national level, to consider the reintroduction of the state into the mainstream running of public affairs. Due to the unpleasant consequences of divorcing the state from development, the developmental state option is once again being proposed as a viable trajectory for socio-economic development and poverty reduction in developing countries. As Leftwich (1995:422) argues, NPM tools amount to 'narrow administrative models of development [that] simply evacuate politics from developmental processes'. It is therefore time, Leftwich argues 'to bring politics firmly back in to the analysis and promotion of development' (1995:422). Fritz and Menocal (2007:53) note that the 'developmental state is back at the centre of the international policy debate', with Clare Short, the former United Kingdom Secretary of State for International Development, declaring that the importance of 'strong and effective states' has been recognised and that the 'era of complete enmity to the public sector in general and to state provision in particular is coming to an end' (Short, cited in Larbi 2006:47). This is the argument that Blessings Chinsinga advances in the final chapter of this book. Based on the successful state-funded fertilizer subsidy programme in Malawi in 2005/2006 – which donors were unwilling to support – Chinsinga argues that Malawi acted developmentally and provided a model for state leadership this could be used as the basis for a viable framework for a successful developmental state in Malawi.

Debates on the developmental state have attracted much scholarly attention over the years, with overwhelming agreement that the 'Asian Tigers', along with some of the immediate post-colonial African regimes (Mkandawire 2001; Mhone 2003), can be regarded as exemplary models of developmental states. The core of the developmental state formulation is the pivotal role of the state in development. The developmental state recognises the 'cardinal role of the state as agent of planned growth and transformation' (White and Wade 1988:3). Therefore, the developmental state exists 'when the state possesses the vision, leadership and capacity to bring about a positive transformation of society within a condensed period of time' (Fritz and Menocal 2007:533). Leftwich's definition of developmental states is useful here:

> [T]hose states whose successful economic and social development performance illustrates how their political purposes and institutional structures (especially their bureaucracies) have been developmentally-driven, while their developmental objectives have been politically-driven (2007:12).

Rather than leaving everything to the mercy of the market, the developmental state plays a critical role in 'altering market incentives, reducing risks, offering entrepreneurial visions, and managing conflicts' (Johnson 1999:48). The economy is not left to operate under impersonal and invisible market forces. Rather, the market is 'guided by the conception of a long term national rationality of investment formulated by government officials' (White and Wade 1988:7). For this to obtain, the developmental state needs to have a 'determined developmental elite' (Leftwich 1995:401) who have the vision and stamina to put the country on a developmental path. The developmental elite needs to embrace a 'developmentalist ideology' (Mkandawire 2001) with 'revolutionary social transformation' (Woo-Cumings 1999:7) as its goal and a 'mission … of ensuring economic development' (Mkandawire 2001:290) and 'larger social objectives' (Huff, Dewitt and Oughton 2001:712).

In addition, the developmental state needs to have some 'relative autonomy' (Leftwich 1995:401) to enable it to adequately carry out the developmentalist mandate. The state must either be from constraining 'social forces' (Mkandawire 2001:290) or, as in the case of developing countries, from donor-stringent conditionalities that would otherwise prevent the state from achieving its developmental mission. The success arising from the latter type of autonomy is what Blessings Chinsinga demonstrates in chapter five in reference to the fertiliser subsidy programme in Malawi. In either case, autonomy enables the state to 'devise long term economic policies unencumbered by the claims of myopic private interests' (Mkandawire 2001:290). Moreover, in order to effectively realise the developmental vision, the developmental state needs a 'powerful, competent and insulated economic bureaucracy' (Leftwich 1995:40) with the capacity to implement policies 'sagaciously and effectively' (Mkandawire 2001:290). The bureaucrats in charge must have a sense of mission, identify themselves with national goals and have position of leadership in society (Onis 1991:114).

While the developmental state may be the necessary path for developing countries to replace the neo-liberal NPM reforms that have failed, the developmental state is not without its problems. There are costs associated with the developmental state that, if not well considered, may lead to disastrous results. As Chang (1999:198) argues, 'making a case for the developmental state does not necessarily mean ignoring the cost associated with active interventionist policies'. The problem with developmental states is that the state elite can 'structure market incentives… to enrich itself and its friends at the expense of customers, good jobs, and development' (Johnson 1999:48). In this way, the developmental state can open the floodgates to corruption, as in Japan and South Korea, for example, where the developmental state model led to 'profound structural corruption with cash flowing from state to business and from business to politicians in truly floodtide dimensions' (Woo-Cumings 1999:10). In South Korea, there were cases of corruption involving 'astronomical sums' of money, $900 million in the case of one former president and $650 million in another (Woo-Cumings 1999:11). Moreover, the developmental state can lead to undemocratic tendencies. In their quest to achieve the developmentalist mission, the developmental elite may be tempted to employ autocratic instruments. As Kwon argues (2005:483), the developmental state has 'shown an affinity with authoritarian politics'. This affinity arises from the fact that 'legitimation occurs from the state's achievement, not from the way it came to power' (Johnson 1999:53). Woo-Cumings (1999:20) gives examples of the 'ugly reality of authoritarianism' in several East Asian states (Woo-Cumings 1999:20).

In addition, the legitimacy issues in developmental states can lead to instability and 'severe crises, such as after Japan's defeat in World War II or the Korean revolution of 1987' (Johnson 1999:53). Moreover, if not well formulated, the developmental state can lead to a widening inequality gap, as the economic growth gained by state interventions may not easily be translated into meaningful transformations of everyday life. For instance, the developmental state in Japan 'strengthened the abstract entity called Japan but has not done much to enrich the lives of Japanese consumers and city dwellers' (Johnson 1999:50). Other arguments against the developmental state include problems of human capital, the possibility of the state crowding out private investment, economies of scale and market imperfections and failures (Mkandawire 2001:292).

The observations highlighted above are important for any developing country seeking to take the developmental state route; they are critical issues that must be taken into consideration if this route is to be a success. Although desirable, the developmental state is 'not an easy combination to put together' (Johnson 1999:60); it is 'impossible to manufacture and not susceptible to any of the more obvious forms of promotion' (Fritz and Menacal 2007:533). In this respect, there are some specific structural and institutional issues in developing countries that may militate against the emergence of the developmental state and hence require a thorough checking. These include dependence and fragmented aid, bribery by foreign companies, lack of coherent ideology, existing neopatrimonial structures, clientelism, the 'softness' of the state and its vulnerability to capture by special interest groups and lack of technical and analytical capacity (Mkandawire 2001:294; Fritz and Menacal 2007:533). It is important that these issues be addressed before embarking on a developmental state model, because 'when [the developmental state] is done properly, it can produce miracles of economic development' (Johnson 1999:60).

Structure of this Volume

The aim of this volume is threefold. The first aim is to provide analytical case-studies on particular public-sector reforms in Malawi. The second is to contribute to the theoretical debates that shape the particular reform components being studied. The third aim, through this combination of practical Malawian case study insights and the theoretical frameworks that flow from them, is to develop generalization about public-sector reform dynamics in developing countries in general, and in Africa in particular. We therefore present four papers that put the theoretical issues we have discussed in this introduction into practical case-study contexts. Each paper analyses a specific reform in the Malawian public sector in line with the core theoretical debates discussed above regarding decentralisation, public-private partnerships, performance contracting and the developmental state.

In chapter two, Asiyati Chiweza presents an analysis of decentralisation dynamics. Her argument is that decentralisation is mainly implemented as a vehicle for achieving greater accountability, efficiency, government responsiveness, participation, sustainable results and democratic ends. For Malawi, Chiweza highlights the fact that the decentralisation programme is aimed at promoting participatory planning, and representative democracy through the election of councillors to the district assemblies. This, in turn, is assumed to lead to more efficient service delivery, accountability, effectiveness and good governance. But for these outcomes to materialise, the Malawian central government was required to devolve functional powers, responsibilities and resources to the local government, while maintaining responsibility for national projects, general policy guidance, monitoring and inspection of local government activities. However, Chiweza reveals that these decentralisation goals are far from being reached. The decentralisation reforms in Malawi have met several challenges that have threatened their effective implementation. For instance, the central government has not been willing in devolve power and responsibilities to the local assemblies. Moreover, those sectors that are said to have been devolved actually exhibit deconcentration than devolution, leading to coordination difficulties. In addition, the government has done very little to ensure a sustainable financial base for the effective functioning of the decentralised structures. Moreover, there is limited accountability and little culture of democratisation; decisions made are not legally binding, and there are few checks and balances. In conclusion, Chiweza highlights the problems of having a multiplicity of objectives that emphasise technocratic ability while leaving out political and social imperatives. She argues that the critical premises of local government have not significantly changed and that the institutions are still fragile, making local government appear to be only an extension of the central government.

Chapter three presents Happy Kayuni's analysis of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Malawian local assemblies. Kayuni argues that the rationale behind the implementation of PPPs as a component of public-sector reform is to ensure better service delivery, cut service-delivery costs, increase public participation in service delivery and achieve greater accountability and transparency. However for these objectives to be met, certain preconditions have to prevail. These conditions include predictability in the legal and regulatory environment, open and competitive procurement processes, well-researched and prepared transactions, government commitment, a mature financial sector and stakeholder support. However, in Malawi, these preconditions are not yet present and, as a result, the PPPs do not achieve the intended outcomes. In particular, there is a lack of coordination, leading to duplication of tasks and overconcentration of PPPs in a few assemblies. Kayuni observes that misunderstandings abound concerning the role of PPPs. In addition, due to capacity problems at the local government level, many NGOs that are supposed to form partnerships with local assemblies tend to circumvent the decentralised planning framework, thereby crippling the partnerships. This problem is exacerbated by the perception that assemblies are risky partners due to their poor financial base, administrative constraints, inadequate supervision of partners' programmes and political interference and corruption. Kayuni further finds that the Malawian business environment is not equipped to provide effective PPP partners. In conclusion, Kayuni underscores the importance of solid institutional frameworks to support PPPs. In his analysis, Malawian local assemblies do not currently possess such frameworks.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Richard Tambulasi in chapter four, where he analyses the dynamics of NPM performance contracting in Malawi. Tambulasi notes that NPM-based performance contract measures were put in place in order to create staffing structures and management systems that would enable ministries and departments to achieve their objectives effectively and efficiently. However, like all NPM tools, performance-based contracting is context-specific, and Tambulasi argues that Malawi does not have a conducive environment for the effective implementation of performance contracting, hence the failure of the system and its abandonment seven years after implementation. According to Tambulasi, the problems that led to the failure of performance contracting in Malawi include its swift adoption before putting in place the necessary institutional frameworks, lack of clear performance targets and lack of financial resources to sustain the system. It appears the government was not committed, as managers lacked sufficient control and promotions were based on long-term service and political allegiance rather than merit. Due the increased financial remunerations of staff on contract, the scheme was used as a political instrument for patronage to manipulate the bureaucracy for political gain rather than as a system for achieving greater efficiency. Tambulasi concludes that performance-based contracting is not a magic key that solves all performance problems regardless of country-specific situations.

In the final chapter, Blessings Chinsinga introduces the developmental state as a possible cure for the problems brought about by donor-driven neo-liberal reforms. Using the overwhelmingly successful 2005/2006 fertiliser subsidy programme in Malawi, which the government embarked on despite donors' unwillingness to support, as a case study, Chinsinga demonstrates that the developmental potential of the Malawian state can lead to higher levels of developmental goals if replicated in other sectors of the economy. Malawi implemented the fertiliser subsidy programme despite lack of support from the international donor community. However, the success of the programme made the donors change their anti-subsidy orientation and follow the government line, commissioning studies to draw lessons from the experience and later giving their support for the government-initiated subsidy programme. Donor agencies rose above their often ideologically driven policy narratives for a meaningful trade-off with the prevailing realities of the Malawian context. In his analysis, Chinsinga shows that the positive results of the programme demonstrate the positive developmental consequences of state autonomy from donors and public legitimacy. In conclusion, Chinsinga recommends that, for the lessons from the fertiliser subsidy to be replicated to other sectors, the political elites have to get developmental politics right while, at the same time, building policy-making technical capacity.

Future Perspectives on the Study of Public-sector Reforms in Africa

To conclude, this paper seeks to make some suggestions on future research perspectives on public-sector reforms in Africa in general. This is in no way designed to serve as an exhaustive prescription for how public-sector reforms in Africa should be studied but only as a suggestion on some pertinent methodological and theoretical issues that may be taken into account in the analysis of the dynamics of public-sector reforms in the future. In this way, I hope to create new research grounds for further analysis of public sector reform.

The literature on public-sector reforms in Africa is diverse and multidisciplinary. The richness of this research is that it brings out various case studies that provide rich information and insights on the nature and dynamics of public sector reforms. On the other hand, the major weakness of the literature is that it does not have a unified theoretical and methodological ground from which further research questions can be formulated, and lessons and hypotheses drawn. Most of the current literature merely tells stories about public-sector reforms in Africa without making an attempt towards theory building. The analytical and causal accounts of public-sector reforms in Africa are still focused on the ideological, doctrinal and rhetorical aspects of the reforms. Although such accounts are helpful in understanding the dynamics of public-sector reform in Africa, they do not fully bring out its intricacies. There is need to go beyond narrative to explore the institutional, political and organisational dynamics that shape public-sector reforms and that result in unsustainable outcomes. Alternative theoretical and analytical frameworks that can help to achieve this deeper analysis are available. These include the use of new-institutionalism theories, organisational theories, international relations theories, political theories and related theoretical frameworks. For practical reasons, it is not possible in this article to illustrate how all of these theories might shape the study of public-sector reforms in Africa. Such an exercise would require another publication of its own. I will therefore focus here on only one theoretical perspective – the new institutionalism – for the further study of public sector reforms in Africa. The new institutionalism is particularly important, as 'institutions have always been regarded as the basic building blocks of social and political life' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:3).

The New Institutionalism:Theoretical Perspective

New institutionalism can provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of public-sector reforms in Africa that can create new grounds for formulating research questions and drawing hypotheses. From this perspective, institutions are crucial for understanding the dynamics of public-sector reform processes in Africa. By institution, I do not refer to organisations, as implied in some public-sector reform literature (see, for instance, Economic Commission for Africa 2005). Rather I mean all the formal and informal 'rules of the game' or, as North puts it (1990:3), the 'humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction'. Institutions in this sense must be distinguished from organisations. While institutions are the 'rules of the game', organisations are the players (North 1990:4). The focal pillars of new-institutionalist explanations are actors' preferences and institutions. Institutions not only shape actors' strategies but their goals as well. By mediating their relations of cooperation and conflict, institutions structure political situations and leave their own imprint on political and public- sector reform outcomes (Bulmer 1994:425). Institutional explanations of public-sector reforms examine the ways in which institutions structure 'incentives, instantiate norms, define roles, prescribe or proscribe behaviour, or procedurally channel politics so as to alter political outcomes relative to what would have occurred in the absence of (or under alternative) institutions' (Jupille and Caporaso 1999:431). The new institutionalism literature is divided into five main orientations:sociological, historical, empirical, rational choice and international (see Peters 2005). Any of these 'schools' of institutionalism could be used in the analysis of public-sector reforms, but, for practical purposes, I will focus on how the sociological and the historical versions of new institutionalism offer a possible theoretical framework for analyzing public-sector reforms in Africa.

Sociological Institutionalism: Institutional Isomorphism

Sociological institutionalism can be used to analyse and understand the mechanisms and forces that make African countries adopt reforms from donor organisations or other countries. In particular, the institutional isomorphism variant of sociological institutionalism (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991) can be used to analyse the mechanisms that trigger public-sector reforms in Africa. The institutional isomorphism perspective focuses on 'forces pressing communities towards accommodation with the outside world' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:66). The institutional isomorphic mechanisms include 'coercive', 'mimetic' and 'normative' pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:67). Coercive isomorphic pressures are caused by both 'formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:67). In most instances, with coercive pressures, public-sector reforms become a condition of 'economic resources' (Radaelli 2000:29) or 'approval for lower level jurisdiction' (Roy and Seguin 2000). Coercive isomorphic pressures could therefore explain the role of donors in many public-sector reform initiatives in Africa. For example, the use of financial conditionalities is clearly a coercive isomorphic pressure.

Mimetic isomorphic processes result from imitation due to uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:69). Through this mechanism, owing to uncertainty in the environment, countries tend to model their reforms on those countries that are seen to be more successful or legitimate in achieving policy objectives. From this perspective, one could explore uncertainties in the political, economical, technological and sociological environments that lead to public-sector reforms and the characteristics of the countries on which the reforms are modelled. Lastly, with normative isomorphic pressures, public-sector reforms are thought to occur due to an 'increased consensus among an increasingly unified policy community on the appropriateness of particular ways of working' (Lodge 2002:48). This perspective emphasises the role of policy networks and epistemic communities in public-sector reform processes. An epistemic community is a 'network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue' (Haas 1992:3). Such communities are instrumental in giving public-sector reform advice to countries, as they are producers of policy-reform knowledge that can be transferred. On the other hand, policy networks are non-hierarchical and interdependent relationships that link a variety of actors who have common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests (Borzel 1998:254). These policy networks are institutionalised contacts that exist at national and international level. Epistemic communities and policy networks can operate at both the national or international level. However, owing to globalisation processes, most national-level epistemic communities and policy networks have membership or affiliation at the international level and vice versa.

Historical Institutionalism

Along with sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism can be used in the analysis of reform processes at national level, either through the use of single case studies or comparative studies. Specifically, historical institutionalism can be used to understand how country-specific institutional dynamics shape public-sector reform processes and outcomes over time. This perspective is historical because it recognises that public-sector reform 'must be understood as a process that unfolds over time' (Pierson 1996:126). An important aspect of historical institutionalism is that it has a 'particularly encompassing interpretation of the role of institutions' (Bulmer 1998:370) in public-sector reform processes. For instance, historical institutionalism can be used to analyse how public-sector reforms are constrained or facilitated by existing institutional frameworks. In this regard, historical institutionalism contributes to the understanding of why reforms have different consequences given the same institutional framework (for single case studies) or different institutional frameworks (for comparative case studies). The aim is to use historical institutionalism to examine whether public-sector reforms have resulted in the planned results or in unintended consequences. Historical institutionalism tells us that 'unintended consequences are likely and widespread' (Pierson 1996:136) in reform processes. Historical institutionalism argues that reforms are path-dependent; it 'rejects the traditional postulate that the same operative forces will generate the same results everywhere in favour of the view that the effect of such forces will be mediated by the contextual features of a given situation often inherited from the past' (Hall and Taylor 1996:941). Moreover, organisations are 'recalcitrant tools, and efforts to direct them yield unanticipated consequences beyond anyone's control' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:14). Path dependence 'means that history matters' (North 1990:102). It implies that historical institutionalism is 'more sensitive to historical legacies, cultural contexts, with the relations of power, with the 'stickiness' of institutions or their path dependent proclivity' (Leftwich 2007:46). In terms of public-sector reform processes, path dependence could help in understanding why some reform projects fail. According to Peters (2005:20), reforms are 'path dependent and once launched on that path they will persist in that pattern until some significant force intervenes to divert them from the established direction'. Reforms fail because old ways of operating 'can become so institutionalised and historically embedded that it becomes nearly impossible to break free from the established path' (Greener 2002:164). In this regard, path dependence could explain why public-sector reforms based on the neo-liberal formula in Africa fail and why there are calls for the return of the developmental state. This operational path can, of course, be changed but only with much difficulty. It would require a 'good deal of political pressure to produce that change' (Peters 2005:71). What is central in this perspective, therefore, is understanding the 'logic of appropriateness that shapes individuals' actions within institutions (Bulmer 1998:375), thereby informing reform outcomes. The vitality of the logic of appropriateness in explaining public-sector reforms lies in the selectivity of country-specific institutions in adopting particular reform options. The argument is that institutional imperatives embedded in the 'logic of appropriateness …constrain the limits of acceptable action of government' (Peters 2005:75).

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