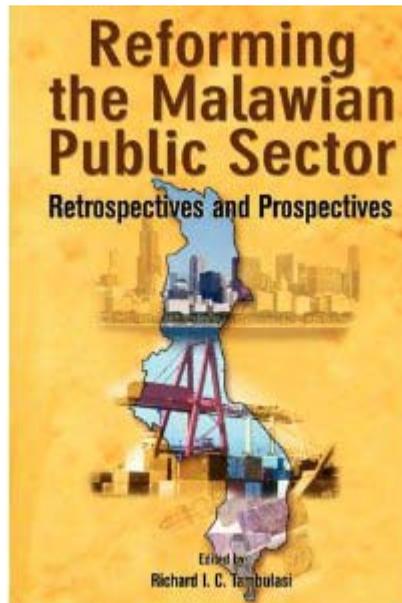


**BOOK REVIEW: *Reforming the Malawian Public Sector: Retrospectives and Perspectives - Codesria Book Series* (Richard Tambulasi, ed.)**

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If there is one scholar in Africa that devoted much time to the study of Africa's public sector, it is Professor Guy Mhone. Hence, the edited book, under review, is dedicated to his memory. As the editor, Richard Tambulasi, states (p. 1): *"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."*

Against this background, the book focuses on public sector reforms in Malawi. Indeed, it is a compilation of well researched chapters across one hundred and ten pages, on various cases, which reflect the title of the book. In all, there are five chapters. Here, it is instructive to note, that while the first chapter laid the theoretical foundations, the remaining four chapters delve into various issues in the Malawian reform experience. Although, the editor does not provide any reason for the configuration, we reason that a work of this nature is best approached through such a method.

The first chapter titled “Critical Perspectives on Public Sector Reforms: An Introduction” by the editor, Richard C. Tambulasi, is a lucid attempt at providing the thesis that determines the direction of the arguments in the book. He presents the thesis thus: *“the neoliberal New Public Management – based public sector reforms that Malawi, like most Africa countries, adopted under the influence of donor institutions have not led to the promised efficiency and effectiveness in the running of the public sector”*.

Having presented his thesis, the editor then presents the contextual background of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, which according to him, has shaped the neoliberal agenda in Malawi. Although, he admits that NPM, as a concept, is nebulous he does suggest, (3–4) that *“it entails competitive government, injecting competition into service delivery, enterprising government, earning rather than spending; and market oriented government, leveraging change through the market.”* In the remaining sections of the chapter, Tambulasi dissects the component parts of the NPM model as follows: disaggregation, decentralization, competition, public-private partnership, incentivisation, performance contracting. He then discusses factors responsible for the dismal performance of reform in Malawi (10–16). In the concluding part of the chapter, the editor undertakes two tasks. First, he summarizes the major contentions of

the contributors in the volume (16–20). Second, he elucidates ‘new institutionalism,’ a theoretical perspective, which he considers to be ideal for analyzing public sector reform in Africa (20–23).

If the first chapter of the book is theoretically coloured, the second chapter titled “Public Sector Reforms and Decentralisation of Public Services? Lessons from Malawi (1994 – 2006)” is an exercise in meta- narratives. In this chapter, Asiyati, L. Chiweza narrates the Malawian experience with public sector reform via decentralization. However, she is quick to state that the way decentralization is conceptualized and understood has bearing on the nature of reform. To this end, she identifies three perspectives to decentralization, *viz*, liberalism, monetarism and communitarism (democratic decentralization). At this juncture, she contends that liberalism and monetarism have influenced the contour of reform in Malawi but in the post-adjustment era, discourses on public sector reforms have been shaped by democratic and governance perspectives. Here (p. 35) she conceptualizes democratic centralization as *“meaningful authority developed to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty.”*

Having lain to rest the conceptual chaos surrounding decentralization, she now sets out to historicize Malawian efforts at decentralization since 1891. To this end, she identifies four historical epochs: 1891–1961; 1961–1965; 1965–1993; and 1994–2006. However, she is quick to aver that only during the last epoch (1994 – 2006) was any real effort, towards democratic decentralization, made. In fact, she opines (41): *“Decentralisation, featured prominently in the 1994 Malawi constitution, and the language employed in this document in effect linked the agenda of decentralization with democratization, development and effective public management.”* With the legal and institutional structures put in place, she contends that expectations were high and that the era

of fruitful decentralization beckoned but it was not too long before realities on the ground suggested otherwise.

In the concluding the chapter, she submits that although there have been efforts at implementing decentralization of public services in Malawi, genuine decentralization has not yet taken place. This is because decentralization has been employed to further the interests of the ruling elites and to consolidate the state (51).

Chapter three titled “Public Private Partnership in the Malawian Local Assemblies: A Failed Reform Package?” authored by Happy M. Kayuni is an attempt to critique public-private partnerships at the local level in Malawi. He begins his exploration with a definition of PPP. According to him: “*public private partnership refers to a contractual agreement formed, between a public institution and private sector entity, to allow for greater private sector participation, in the delivery of public services*” (57). However, he is quick to point out that the term ‘private sector’ refers not only to the MNCs but also to small businesses, local entrepreneurs, NGOs, CBOs and other civic bodies.

Having clarified the concept of public-private partnership, the author, before examining the challenges of PPP at the local level in Malawi, discusses the conditions for a successful PPP. Drawing on the work of Hlahla (2001: 165–166), he identifies six requirements: predictability in the legal and regulatory environment; open and competitive procurement processes; well researched and prepared transactions; government commitment; stakeholder support; and a matured financial sector (58). These requirements, according to him, are broadly lacking in the reform process at the local level in Malawi and this explains why the PPP agenda has not yet achieved the desired result at that level. In the concluding chapter, he submits (p. 66): “*PPPs are vital for sustainable local development but the current*

*framework of local assemblies in Malawi cannot support viable partnerships either with NGOs and CBOs or with small business."*

Chapter four of the book, entitled "No Key Opens Every Door: The Failure of NPM – Based Performance Contracting in Malawi," again written by the editor, Richard Tambulasi, is a lucid attempt at navigating the dimensions of public sector contracting in Malawi. However, before setting out on his navigation, he is quick to clarify the concept of performance based contracting. To achieve this, he draws on the works of notable authorities in the area, notably the duo of Turner and Hulmer, who he quotes (70) as stating: "*performance contracting aims at giving management greater autonomy over the operation of the public sector and holding managers accountable by negotiating targets, monitoring and evaluating results and rewarding managers and staff on the basis of performance.*" Further in the course of his navigation, he identifies the year when a performance subcontracting agenda took hold in Malawi, i.e. in the year 2000, following the publication of the Performance Management Handbook for the Malawi Civil Service.

However, from his evaluation of performance contracting, using the criteria spelled out in the Handbook (73–75), he does not waste much time in suggesting that it has proven to be a failed experiment. According to him, the agenda failed because of enormous problems which he identifies as: (1) hasty implementation; (2) lack of skilled personnel; (3) the sustainability of the performance – contract system; (4) political interest; and (5) public official resentment.

In the concluding chapter, the editor submits that the Malawian experience has shown that there is no such thing as a master key that opens every door in performance management.

Blessing Chinsinga's contribution, in the concluding chapter, entitled "Resurrecting the Developmental State in Malawi: Reflections and

Lessons from the 2005/2006 Fertilizer Subsidy Programme," is an attempt at examining two issues. First, revisiting the debate on the developmental state in Africa and second, the prospect of its resurrection. Thus, the first assignment by the author was to put the developmental state in Africa in a clearer perspective. Here, the author avers that many of the arguments against the institutionalization of the developmental state in Africa have been from market-oriented institutions, notably the World Bank, which in a desperate attempt to impose SAP on African countries, pushed for the policy of rolling back the state. However, with the admission of the apparent failure of the market oriented reforms, the debate about the development state was rekindled, contends, the author. As the debate was rekindled, Malawi became one of the countries that attempted to resurrect the state as an active participant in the development process.

But before narrating the Malawian experience in recent times through to the 2005/2006 fertilizer subsidy programme, Malawi's experience with the developmental state in historical perspective is discussed. The verdict is that the regimes of Banda and Muluzi both failed in this regard. According to the author, it was President Mutharika who, after so much politicking and bickering, eventually succeeded in making the Malawian state a major actor in agricultural development. The author describes the situation as follows: "*The donors' change from their initial positions was inevitable when it became evident that the Malawian government was unwilling and politically unable to be compliant and accept their demands*" (102).

At the end of the conclusion, the author asks a fundamental question: "Does the success of the fertilizer subsidy programme portend the re-emergence of a developmental state in Malawi?" (103). He submits that, compared to the subsidy programmes of the previous two regimes, it did succeed in bringing the state back. Thus,

the programme it initiated could serve as a useful starting point for resurrecting the developmental state in Malawi.

There is no doubt that the book, *Reforming the Malawian Public Sector*, is a valuable contribution to an increasing dearth of literature on public sector reforms in Africa. It has also enhanced our understanding of the subject. However, some lacunas were observed. Firstly, we believe that the first chapter should have been dedicated to presenting the positions of the contributors. Secondly, an appendix should have been provided for a list of abbreviations. Thirdly, in a book like this, there ought to have been a bibliography. These observations notwithstanding, the book is highly recommended to scholars and researchers of public administration, especially to those who are concerned with public sector reforms in Africa.