

Original Research Article

Devolution of State Personnel Management in Cameroon: An Analysis of the Impact of new Information Technologies on the Quality of Public Services

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to study the impact of new technologies on the quality of public services within the Cameroon Public Administration, a system put in place through the project of devolution of the management of State personnel and payroll, of which SIGIPES constitutes its IT base. To carry out this study, we used the qualitative method of analysis of the sociology of organisations and in particular the strategic analysis of Crozier (1979) through the theory of the strategic actor. An interview guide was administered to the various stakeholders, i.e. staff and users. The results of this work show that, although the speed of files processing has increased substantially, the technology has not fundamentally improved the quality of public services within the Cameroon Public Administration. It is no less cumbersome, burdensome, inefficient and corrupt. It continues to be plagued by ills that undermine it and prevent it from increasing its performance and providing quality services. It is a reflection of its public officials who develop behaviours resistant to change and strategies aimed at preserving their particular interests at the expense of the general interest.

Keywords: Devolution - Personnel management - User - Quality - State - Performance - Reform - Public administration - Modernization - Ministry - Public services.

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INTRODUCTION

Administrations that want to perform well are bound by two obligations that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s: an imperative of efficiency in public management and an imperative of quality of service. Thus, the Cameroon Public Administration, according to the evolution of its environment and given the problems it faces on a daily basis, is compelled to review its policies and operating methods. In this sense, it must constantly reform and adapt itself, lest it be cut off from its populations who constitute its *raison d'être*. More than in the past, decentralising, devolving, delegating and even externalising some tasks previously carried out by the central government have become current concepts.

Administrative governance therefore refers to this administration which constantly seeks stability and political, administrative and social equity, in order to contribute to strengthening national security and improving the living conditions of the population. This

administration must function effectively and efficiently within itself and in relation to its environment (Aglietta, 1999). To do this, it must capitalise on the progression observed in the telecommunications sector through the new technologies involved. Within the public administration, the search for improvement in the quality of public services was carried out within the framework of the project to devolve the management of State personnel and payroll through the SIGIPES (Computerized System for the Integrated Management of State Personnel and the Payroll) computer software. Its deployment was aimed at curing the ills from which it suffers notably the slowness and heaviness in the processing of files, corruption and many hassles it faces on a daily basis.

METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out this study, it seemed useful to define the analysis grid and the data collection method.

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Our work was largely based on methods of analysis of the sociology of organisations and in particular the strategic analysis of Crozier (1979) through the theory of the strategic actor. Strategic analysis enabled us to understand that actors act to improve their capacity for action and/or to create room for manoeuvre; that actors' projects are rarely clear and coherent, but behaviour is never absurd; that there is a big difference between objectives of the organisation and those of individuals. Actors often deviate significantly from the role they should play. To understand this behaviour, we need to bring in the notion of areas of doubts. These areas correspond to loopholes in the rules, technical loopholes and economic pressures that prevent the organisation objectives from being achieved.

In order to better appreciate the role that devolution of State personnel management plays in improving the quality of services to users, we administered an interview guide to 10 (ten) users and 5 (five) professional staff of the Ministry of the Public Service and Administrative Reform (MINFOPRA). We also administered an interview guide to 20 (twenty) professional staff from the 3 (three) devolved administrations. Generally, this has helped us to know the point of view of various actors on: the computerisation of the management of State personnel; the quality of services to users; the speed of files processing; the fight against corruption in relation to devolution and the SIGIPES tool.

The literature search also forms the basis for the theoretical framework of our work. The first data collected on the existing literature on the devolution of State personnel management and the improvement of the quality of services to users in Cameroon were based on general and specialised works, legislative and regulatory texts, reports, reviews, articles and newspapers, the use of which was of paramount importance for a better understanding of the theme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem posed in the framework of this research work, namely how the devolution of the management of State personnel in Cameroon, through the SIGIPES software, improves the quality of services rendered to the user, will be dealt with within the framework of the sociology of organisations. Several authors have developed theories in this regard.

Firstly, we shall mention the work of Woodward (1965) who made technology an object of in-depth investigation by studying its influence on organisational structures and on the performance of companies. His study reveals statistical correlations between the types of technology and organisational structures of the firms studied. The conclusion is clear: technology increases the performance of firms and those in the sample that are not successful, in other

words, that have a profitability rate below the average of their technological category, are also those whose structural characteristics are the least typical and vice versa. According to him, firm performance is therefore a function of the technological variable.

In the same vein as Woodward, Perrow (1970) also analyses the influence of technology on the performance of firms. Starting from a more properly sociological conceptualisation of technology, he proposed a comparative framework for the study of organisations, based on a typology of links between production techniques in the broadest sense and the structures and operating modes of organisations.

In his approach, the technology/ies used in a given organisation can be conceptualised as processes in which various "inputs" (raw materials, whether material as in an industrial enterprise, or human as in the case of schools or psychiatric hospitals or the like) are transformed by appropriate processing to be sought by members of the organisation. Two key variables therefore define the nature of a technology. The first relates to the nature of the raw material itself, essentially its variability, which can be operationalised in terms of the number and frequency of exceptions that the organisation - or the individual in charge of the operation - must expect. The second is the nature of the search that members of an organisation must undertake to find an appropriate solution to the problems posed by the transformation of the raw material. By crossing these two variables Perrow obtains 4 (four) main types of technology which have very specific consequences on 4 (four) main organisational dimensions: the room for manoeuvre left to each of the two groups; their power; the co-ordination processes used within them; their degree of interdependence. This supports the view that technology can play a major role in improving the quality of public services. The importance of technology in improving the quality of services is also shared by Gerbod (2001:58), who expresses it in these terms: "The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a tool to achieve better quality administration is a major concern in all developed countries. As a guarantee of better services for users of the administration and of greater efficiency at a much lower overall cost, e-government is as much an opportunity as a necessity. The recent developments in technologies, the appropriation of ICT tools by public officials and political decision-makers, the expectation of administration users for real streamlining of administrative procedures and the budgetary constraints weighing on administrations constitute a tremendous opportunity to embark on a vast e-government project".

However, the author qualifies this by setting out a number of preconditions for successful reform through technology. "ICTs can therefore bring about dramatic improvements in the quality of public administrations and services: but these can only be

achieved through a comprehensive reinvention of the organisation, procedures and activities of administrations. Therefore, the political responsibilities for reforming the State and for implementing e-government should not be separated. The conversion of the public administration to a new model based on performance - through the new technologies - cannot be achieved without a real cultural revolution in which new objectives of: rewards for professionalism and merit; satisfaction of the citizen-user; promotion, encouragement and stimulation of citizens and companies; technological and organisational innovation; streamlining (elimination of unnecessary administrative constraints)” (Gerbod, 2001: 58).

In parallel, we can quote the work of Crozier (1979) through strategic analysis and that of Mintzberg (1994) through the contingency approach which, to some extent, put a damper on conclusions of the above authors. For Crozier (1979), public administration, which is made up of civil servants, is a complex and stratified world which maintains the same model of centralisation and stratification in all its parts, with great persistence, and imposes its consequences on the whole of society. And, in order to change the administration, one must not use administrative means because one cannot change society by decree. Thus, devolution measures and public relations efforts only irritate and complicate the situation further. For Crozier (1979:91), information technology “is all too often regarded as a kind of *deus ex machina* which will enable complexity to be mastered overnight without much effort. This is, of course, an illusion. Sectoral successes, which are very relative, should not be misleading. To succeed, to be profitable, IT requires a degree of transparency that is completely unknown in the administrative game. It pushes for the removal of intermediaries and networks of influence that have developed around and from the old communication nodes. Modernising management with the help of information technology is simply a matter of clarifying, saving time and effort, but it is also a matter of revealing the truth and forcing everyone to take responsibility for their real performance. If people are not capable of inventing new protections and tolerances, the system becomes unbearable”.

This is because arguments presented in debates on reforms are theoretical arguments concerning the principles and conditions of good administration. The way in which citizens and civil servants experience change is never discussed, it is not known, and it is not wanted. The various actors, through their strategic behaviour, therefore clearly affect the success of a reform. In order to succeed, an organisation must not only take into account the environment (through systemic reasoning), but also games played by the actors (through strategic reasoning). This is the only way an administrative reform can be successful. However, the new information and communication

technologies have a key role to play in improving the service provided to users in a modern context. This raises the question of dynamics of transformation of the administration with the introduction of ICTs. The various approaches present more or less different corridors and trajectories.

Within the framework of contingency theory, Mintzberg (1994) states that the organisation is correlated to its environment and the goal set by its leaders, hence the need for adjustment to the environment and the need for internal coherence of the system. The organisation, in order to adjust to its environment, must therefore innovate. Although Mintzberg highlighted the environment and the coherence of the system as fundamental elements for the success of an organisation that must constantly innovate to adapt to its environment, he nevertheless neglected the strategic behaviour of the actors.

One could simply conclude with Kim (2005: 113) that: “what can be expected from an intelligent use of technology is the development of disciplines, the opportunity and possibilities to ask more relevant questions and to interrogate information in a more constructive way”, in order to develop in Cameroon an authentic model of administration determined to achieve productive efficiency, group solidarity and individual fulfilment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of results about the impact of new technologies on the quality of public services will be done at the level of SIGIPES users as well as users.

Analysis of the devolution results from the perspective of SIGIPES users

SIGIPES users' point of view differ, both in terms of the devolution of the management of State personnel and the improvement in the quality of services provided to users. Thus, for the Head of the IT division at the Ministry of the Public Service and Administrative Reform: “this system makes it possible to automate the processing of career instruments of State employees. This new way of doing things will substantially reduce the time needed to process files”. This is in line with the point of view of users interviewed, who generally affirm that the devolution of the management of State personnel and payroll facilitates the processing of career instruments.

Users thus emphasise the facilitating role of NICTs in the effective and efficient management of State personnel, which remains a tool for modernising and improving the quality of services (Braibant, 2002). Although on a technical level, SIGIPES makes it possible to reduce file processing times, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that it encounters difficulties with regard to the diligent processing of some career instruments, as noted by a professional

staff, Bureau Head of the Administrative and Financial Personnel at MINFOPRA: "In fact, when the file is complex, SIGIPES has difficulty processing it, simply because some types of instruments were not integrated when the software was designed. Also, it should be noted that the software is very slow, although at the beginning it was fast". The same point of view was echoed by the Promotions Head of MINFOPRA's Department social personnel, who said: "In terms of reliability, we can say that it is 60% reliable, since the software is not complete in terms of both the payroll component and the complexity of processing career instrument. This is why, from time to time, we are forced to process career files outside the SIGIPES software, particularly in Microsoft Word. In terms of maintenance, it should also be noted that it is not good. Each time, we have to call on the computer specialists who sometimes hide the information".

This point of view is supported by another professional staff, who continues to highlight the poor functionality of the software. Indeed, as he notes, "The problem is that the SIGIPES software does not work. Nothing works. Every time there is no network. The IT people constantly let us know that the server is not working. Sometimes you have to leave the first floor to go to the third floor to validate a file, but the IT people don't give you justifications. There are many other elements of malfunction as well. This is why SIGIPES should be updated".

It is safe to say that the SIGIPES software is experiencing difficulties, both in terms of its functionality and the speed at which files are processed. It is subject to several vagaries. This does not make it easy for the professional staff to process files quickly. This state of affairs raises the problem of equipment maintenance. This is of vital importance to ensure that the server functions continuously and perfectly, and thus to facilitate the processing of career-related instruments. The various difficulties mentioned above may be the responsibility of the various actors who sometimes do not fully commit themselves to the success of the project. Indeed, as the Bureau Head of Absorption at MINFOPRA remarks, "The devolution of State Personnel Management is good; but the administration is full of lazy people. In fact, some civil servants who refuse to work must be deflated. These are the civil servants who are delaying the effective deployment of devolution. They refuse to get to work and learn how to use the SIGIPES software. This lack of will is observed at both the political and administrative levels. Today, users are crying for their files to be returned to MINFOPRA. This is because not only do the professional staff of the said ministries refuse to learn the job, but also the MINFOPRA trainers do not transmit all the knowledge and know-how necessary to master SIGIPES. Eventually, we end up with devolved administrations that have not taken the matter in hand and have not appropriated the tool. As a

result, devolution is not yet effective and things are still as they are today".

The sum of the above-mentioned problems does not seem to facilitate the effective fight against corruption and the speedy processing of career-related instruments. The Bureau Head of Promotions of Social Personnel pointed this out so well: "If we wanted SIGIPES to prevent the follow-up of files and therefore corruption, the entire information system would have to work. The website is not working (not updated), the phone box is not working (3 days ago) and SIGIPES itself is down. In such an environment, all quacks become doctors. Today, "middlemen" have their offices in the regions. And users go to meet them so that they can follow up their cases. To say that the profession of "middlemen" is already institutionalised. There are several reasons for this state of affairs in relation to the user: some are afraid, others do not master the procedures for files processing, while others, such as English speakers, do not know French, and others just do not want to get involved in the hassle of following up files. I don't know how to make this scourge go away. The only thing I know is that the "middlemen" have a lot of money, as they are well paid, and the trade is growing".

The proliferation of the profession of "middlemen", both in central and devolved services, shows that the devolution of the management of State personnel and payroll has not achieved its objective in the fight against corruption. The fight against this scourge within the Cameroon public administration through the devolution of the management of State personnel and salaries therefore continues to be an illusion. There is still a lot of pressure on both administrative staff and users through the network of "middlemen" (Ngouo, 2003).

Users' perception of the devolution of State personnel and payroll management

It can be said that since the beginning of the new millennium, Cameroon has embarked on the path of modernity. The public service is no exception. The speed of processing of career instruments offered by SIGIPES leads to the conclusion that devolution opens the way to the modernisation of the Cameroon Public Administration. Indeed, if we are to rely on the words of the following user, holding in her hand her advancement certificate, very moved, she declares: "My brother, it is incredible: I submitted my file just three months ago, and here is my advancement! The SIGIPES case is really great". The same feeling of satisfaction was expressed by one user, who demanded that "everything be done to ensure that each Ministry has an Aquarium". Other users, while welcoming the Aquarium installed at MINFOPRA, which is very popular, would also like to see it replicated elsewhere, with websites allowing consultation of the status of their official instruments, as at MINFOPRA. Many

consider that SIGIPES is revolutionising Cameroon Public Administration, a silent revolution, according to some; a smooth revolution, according to others. A number of them naturally evoke bitter memories, which push even the most stubborn of those who might still have doubts to come to terms with the obvious: “SIGIPES has swept away several decades of obscurantist practices. One remembers the long waits, the tips that had to be reserved at each stage of the progress of one’s file, the hassles of the same order to obtain any administrative instruments whatsoever! No one wants to forget the cross that was imposed on State employees who were called upon to claim their rights to retirement after good and loyal service to the nation. The pension file, from its constitution to its completion, was until then a real ordeal”.

Memories of the opacity that characterised the pre-reform public administration and turned it into an impenetrable mastodon, a cold monster that repulsed the very users it was supposed to serve. While waiting for effects of the payroll to be spontaneously injected into the pay slips, some government staff claims that the system is fast and hassle-free. Administrative instruments are issued in a remarkably short time.

Despite the substantial results in terms of the fulfilment of the administration’s missions and the improvement of the quality of service to the user-client, it must be noted that opinions of those interviewed differ at the current stage of the project on the degree of satisfaction with services provided by MINFOPRA. While some people claim that files are processed quickly, others are sceptical, as demonstrated by the following statement: “I don’t see the advantage that the system offers at the moment. Since 2010, I don’t always have my advancement instrument in my possession, because of the computer”.

This feeling of dissatisfaction on the part of users can be justified by difficulties they encounter in obtaining information on the status of their file. MINFOPRA officials responsible for providing this service generally do not do so diligently. They lack courtesy and politeness towards users. This proves that the user is not yet the *raison d’être* of the administration (Kanter, 1998). The following is the point of view of a user who expresses his dismay: “There is too much slowness and a total absence of courtesy and information for the user. The quality of service at the Public Service is really poor, especially the reception service. I have been standing for several hours waiting for information on my file. Not only do they open the gate at 1.30 pm, but in order to be informed, you have to fight to be among the first. One day I was running to be among the first and I ended up falling. And the gentleman who is in charge of receiving us speaks to us arrogantly, without the slightest courtesy, and above all he is either drunk or angry. In all this mess, I don’t

know what to do. I really don’t know what to do to get my file through”.

In such an environment, it is not surprising that corruption proliferates (Ngouo, 2008). It can therefore be argued that the tense climate created by the reception service could be voluntary, with the aim of getting the user to negotiate. A user commented on this point: “corruption is rampant here. Insofar as the slower the case is processed, the more corruption there is. It is as if people have decided to get rich on the backs of others. In fact, the more we devolve, the more chains multiply and corruption grows. In any case, we will just have to deal with it. The users interviewed on this point confirm that without a contact person, or corruption, it is difficult for a case to be completed within the deadline.

CONCLUSION

In view of these managerial shortcomings and in order to meet challenges it faces, the Cameroon Public Administration has put in place a mechanism to optimise the performance of agents by fighting against inertia, building capacities of personnel, managing human resources rationally and in a forward-looking manner and implementing a technique of performance evaluation based on results; to adapt to the changing needs of the administration and users, modern personnel management techniques, by rationalising and streamlining administrative procedures; to improve the working environment through the introduction of ICTs as working tools; reinforce internal governance by introducing discipline in the management of affairs and personnel in compliance with the principles of ethics and deontology. It is in this perspective that the project of devolution of the management of State personnel and payroll was conceived and implemented in the Cameroon Public Administration through the SIGIPES software. The aim is to give the various Ministries sufficient autonomy to manage their staff and salaries, with a view to controlling the wage bill, guaranteeing efficient control of staffing levels and offering quality service to users.

Operational since 2012 throughout the Cameroon Public Administration, the project to devolve the management of State personnel and salaries through the SIGIPES software has had mixed results. Although substantial progress has been observed in terms of the speed with which files are processed, there are still problems in terms of slowness in the processing of career instruments, poor performance of the service and State employees, inertia, waste of State resources, corruption and fraud, all of which tarnish the image of the Cameroon Public Administration.

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