

KEYNOTE LECTURE – 28. 11. 2019, 9:00-10:00

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African Public Services: Reformers from the Outside, Reformers from the Inside, and the Crisis of Democracy

While each African country has a very specific pre-colonial and post-colonial history, the public services of African countries have a certain family resemblance. Coping strategies, deprivation, clientelism, favoritism, contempt for the anonymous user, absenteeism, brain drain, corruption are characteristics (among others) that can be found almost everywhere. The same colonial past, the same dependence on development aid and the same predatory behavior of the elites are the three main causes of these similarities. All African bureaucracies are particularly heterogeneous. Not only do they cumulate successive layers of different bureaucratic models that coexist today (colonial bureaucracy, classical bureaucracy, communist bureaucracy, managerial bureaucracy, development bureaucracy) but also the behaviors of public officials often deviate from explicit official norms and are regulated by tacit "practical norms". The result is a general dissatisfaction of citizen with the poor quality of public services, and a strong demand for reforms. But the main reforms come from outside (international institutions, cooperation agencies, NGOs) and disseminate a standardized social engineering ("travelling models") that is not adapted to local contexts. Hence the "revenge of the contexts" and the resilience of local social norms and practical norms. Dependency on aid has perverse effects and creates great frustration among populations. This situation leads to a crisis of current political systems, a crisis of democracy in Africa, which is expressed by nostalgia for strong regimes, but also by the progress of fundamentalist religious ideologies. Hope can only come from the reformers from within. They exist, they are admirable exceptions, but they are most often isolated, not very visible, not listened to. An important task of the social sciences is to research and document these reformers from within.