

## **“Outside and inside of Public Management System reforms in Armenia”**

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*“Public management reform is usually thought of as a means to an end, not an end in itself.”*

*Geert Bouckaert and Christopher Pollitt, 2000.*

### **Introduction**

Armenia, a country of rich history and old traditions, during the last two decades faced a number of challenges. With the separation from the USSR, it has begun its long and thorny way of building a democratic state. The transition process was hindered by the economic crisis that succession had caused and hindered by consequences of the devastating earthquake in 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the economic blockade by neighboring countries of Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, despite all challenges Armenia steadily moves towards democratic development and has succeeded in a number of reforms.

Among them is a reform of public management system, which is a priority of the Armenian Government reflecting on the wave of public sector reformations in Central, Eastern Europe and the CIS in the last 15 years. Although widely supported by external stakeholders, it is advancing with difficulty, failing to produce immediate results.

Reforms involved changing the role of government and establishing an effective civil service by increasing its efficiency, transparency, competence, and quality of provided services.

This paper will present Armenia’s country profile, reveal how public administration reforms proceeded in the country from outsider and insider’s perspectives, and describe future trends in reformation of the system.

### **Country Profile**

The Republic of Armenia is a country in the Southern Caucasus, which borders Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran. Apart from a few small minority communities, the country’s

population is ethnic Armenian. Armenia has a system of semi-presidential rule. In accordance with the Constitution, the President ensures compliance with the Constitution, the normal operation of the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary, and serves as the guarantor of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the Republic.

Armenia has recently celebrated its sixteenth year of independence and can be proud of a number of achievements. Country's progress in macroeconomic stabilization has been relatively successful. The Armenian economy has shown positive signs of macroeconomic change. According to the National Statistical Service (NSS), real GDP grew by 12.1% in January-July 2007 compared to January-July 2006. Fiscal policy remained steady in 2005, with an overall deficit of 2.6% of GDP. Democratic freedom reforms are steadily improving, civil society groups are becoming more active in public life (Freedom House, 2006), although the level of public participation in decision-making is still low.<sup>1</sup> International observers have proclaimed recent parliamentary elections in May 2007 as "largely in accordance with international commitments, although some issues remain unaddressed."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, Armenia faces major drawbacks. Country's democratic development has been exacerbated by the "close links between the country's political and business elites, which have impeded the development of a more transparent political system" (Freedom House report on Armenia, 2006). Corruption remains a substantial obstacle to Armenia's political and economic development. According to Freedom House 2006 report on Armenia, country's rating for corruption remains at 5.75 on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of corruption and 7 the lowest (Freedom House, 2006).

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1 UNDP/Armenia and "Sociometr" Sociological Center. Country-Wide Survey/ Opinion Poll 2006 on Public Perception on Public Services/MDGs at local level (<http://www.undp.am/?page=2007Publications>).

2 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. OESD Official Website at [http://www.osce.org/odihr/item\\_1\\_24421.html](http://www.osce.org/odihr/item_1_24421.html). Retrieved on October 2007.

Poverty is still a very sensitive issue in the country. It remains at high level despite implementation of the long-term poverty reduction strategy elaborated in a document known as a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) aimed at reducing widespread poverty in the country and improving living standards of the population by 2015 in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of a decline tendency in recent years, 39% of population still lives below the poverty level (IMF, 2006).

Despite moderate positive signs the unemployment level also remains high. According to the NSS data, in 2005 country's official registered unemployment rate was 8.2 percent.<sup>4</sup> In reality, unemployment rate is much higher since many of the unemployed are not officially registered.

In the light of the above-mentioned, importance of having a healthy government and efficient and more market orientated public sector underlines a tremendous need for effective and rational public management structure that is an essential prerequisite for good governance.

### **Implementation of reforms – external insight**

#### *Agenda Setting*

Under the Soviet regime, Armenian civil service was in full subordination to the political structures. After gaining independence in 1991, the idea of creation of a professional civil service impartial of politics with the main goal to serve citizens has become crucial. The main drive behind the reforms was to fill the state administration with well-qualified, competent individuals with high moral values who are not dependent on changes in the country's political situation. The

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<sup>3</sup> Millennium Development Goals are developed by the US government's Millennium Challenge Corporation, which will invest almost \$236 into development projects in Armenia in 2006-2010.

<sup>4</sup> Registered unemployment rate is calculated as ratio of the number of officially registered unemployed to the number of economically active population ([www.armstat.am](http://www.armstat.am)).

absence of a stable civil service system and unlawful behavior of state officials has led to arbitrariness in recruitment and promotion and frequent restructuring. The low salary of state officials encouraged corrupt practices to supplement the income and they continued to flourish in the absence of an effective system of checks and balances. Legal framework was lacking and not enough attention was paid to methodologies for effective management and assessment.

### *Creation of Legal and Functional Frameworks*

In each country, selected path and pace of advancement are different. Reformers cannot neglect local specifics that can result in considerable social, moral, and economic loss for the population. Implementation of reforms in the Armenian public administration has stretched over years and could be divided into two periods – from 1999 until 2002 and from 2003 until 2008.

#### Laying the grounds (1999-2002)

The idea of the public administration reforms was to make the public system function like the private sector as main principles of New Public Management (NPM) suggest (Borins, 2000). Since the influence of ideas originating in the Armenian private sector was not significant (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006), the reforms package was drafted mostly based on the best international practices.

The Public Sector Reform Commission (PSRC) created at the early stages of reforms in 1999 by the decree of the Prime Minister is responsible for implementing reforms in Armenia. The Commission is made up of senior public officials from the Presidency, different ministries, the Civil Service Council (CSC), the Public Administration Academy (PAA) and non-governmental organizations.

Reforms were carried out in three directions: structural and functional reforms of public administration system, establishment of civil service, and financial management reform. The first two tasks included restructuring the ministries, departments, territorial administration, and local self-government bodies and were carried out by the PSRC, while the financial management reform was under the auspices of the Ministry of the Finance and Economy (Government of Armenia, 2007).

The Civil Service Law was adopted in the Republic of Armenia in December 2001 as a platform for further reforms that aim to introduce new principles of public service management. The primary intention of the Law was “fighting corruption and political constraint on the spoils of the party in power, rather than improving managerial effectiveness and efficiency” (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006).

The main principles of the civil service are laid down in Article 5 of the Law. The Law recognizes “the supremacy of the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Armenia, the priority of human and citizen’s rights and liberties” (The Law on Civil Service, 2001). It regulates the classification of civil service positions and classification grades of civil service, professionalism and appointment to the civil service position, appropriateness of civil servants to the occupied positions, attestation and training, the legal status of civil servants, and “other relations connected therewith.”

According to the Law, civil servants should not be affected by political changes and should be legally and socially protected. This requirement was a reflection of international practices where “civil servants are viewed as an important component of the political machinery but separate from politicians” (Bekke and van der Meer, 2001, p.51). Article 3.1 of the Law states that civil service is “a professional activity independent from the changes of correlations

between political forces” (The Law on Civil Service, 2001). All citizens entering civil service hold legal equality before the law and entering requirements are uniform for all.

The law also establishes the bodies for management and organization of civil service. The Civil Service Council was set up in 2002 as a supreme independent body responsible for most aspects of the new civil service. It is guided by the Law on Civil Service of the Republic of Armenia. The members of the Council, including the Chairman, are appointed and dismissed by the President of the Republic of Armenia, upon recommendation of the Prime Minister.

It is under the auspices of the Council to “provide a methodological guidance and supervision over the staffing activities of relevant agencies; apply to court, claiming termination of acts that contradict the civil service legislation; submit recommendations on civil service-related issues when relevant agencies are being reorganized or liquidated; ...review proposals, applications, and complaints concerning civil service; conduct official inquiries in the established manner and cases; submit to the President, Government, and Prime Minister for review drafts of legal acts related to civil service; approve the procedure of utilization of the Civil Service Council financial resources”; and other pertinent duties (Civil Service Council webpage, 2007).

As far as the public management reform process “consists of deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them...to run better” (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000), long-lasting structural reforms in Armenia started with the improvement of the machinery of government. The idea was to align performance of the Armenian government to the principles of New Public Management and improve it as an employer. Major impediments that needed to be eliminated were overlaps of functions in governmental agencies. A newly created position of chiefs of staff was introduced in the public sector as the highest civil service position holders. The intention to depoliticize top-level

positions were strong and, in order to protect civil servants from political changes and against arbitrary dismissals, functions of heads of staff were diverged from the head of state body in all ministries. There was an enormous opposition to the civil service system development. None of the top public officials was willing to give up their power “bridles” and were not prepared to accept this “devolution of power” (Hovsepyan and Khudaverdyan, 2006, p. 17).

Among the most important issues were size of public administration system and the quantity and quality of the personnel. Workforce size was minimized. Certain government agencies were merged under aegis of relevant ministries or were subordinated as separate service agencies or inspectorates directly to the Prime Minister’s office. A minimum level of staffing was defined for structural units in the ministries - secretariats, departments and divisions. In 2003, within the first six months more than 1,000 government jobs were cut down because of the restructuring (Freedom House, 2003).

Because of structural reforms, appointments to the new vacant government posts are now done on a competitive basis setting a stand for merit-based recruitment of civil servants.<sup>5</sup> The system does not envisage promotions within the agency and vacant positions are announced publicly. A written test is held at the initial stages and the names of short-listed candidates are presented to the head of the respective administrative body for the interview and final selection.

The process of transforming an old Soviet administrative system into a new market-oriented managerial administration required a re-training of the existing government officials and formation of a new generation of creative civil servants. A compulsory training of all civil servants on public governance and public administration is carried out by the Public Administration Academy, which is a primary provider of the civil service training through a

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<sup>5</sup> First competitions were held in 2002.

variety of educational entities<sup>6</sup>. Besides, attestations of civil servants for professional competency are held every 3 years by the Civil Service Council.

An important part of public management reforms is improving the quality of public services and making them efficient and transparent. Though the Law on Civil Service prompted creation of fixed procedures of attestation, remuneration, and merit-based promotion, it does not outline procedures of performance measurement of public servants. The only indication of service description of civil servants is given in the “official’s passport” with information on assessment of knowledge, practical skills and the service activity results. The assessment shall be based upon the conclusion of the immediate supervisor of the civil servant on the reports produced by the civil servant each quarter regarding the works performed by him in the period after the previous attestation. However, the failure to submit a service report cannot have a negative effect on the civil servant’s attestation results. As a result, public agencies lack legible procedures that would allow measuring the performance and productivity and quality of public personnel performance and the performance appraisal system remains formalistic<sup>7</sup> (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006).

As it was mentioned above, reforms in financial administration were carried out by the Ministry of Finance and Economy. The reforms were directed towards increasing the transparency of the budgetary process, creating an efficient and transparent procurement system, capacity building in audit and financial inspection institutions, rationalization of the internal and external audits system. Reforms also involved civil servants remuneration. To this end, relevant legal framework has been put in place to ensure a transparent system of external and internal

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the PAA, public administration as a subject is currently taught in several higher education institutions such as the American University of Armenia, Yerevan State University, Armenian-Russian (Slavonic) University, and Yerevan State Institute for the National Economy.

<sup>7</sup> In 2002, the only local institution in the country where the performance appraisal system existed and worked in practice was Central Bank of Armenia.

government audits; the legislation on procurement was adopted and a special agency for centralized government procurements was established. The Law on Remuneration of Civil Servants was passed in 2002 putting a consistent system in place “where everything is given in a scheme, where all the steps in each grade are defined by a coefficient to the lowest pay grade that is set every year in the budget law” (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006). According to the World Bank 2005 report, the Law on Remuneration of Civil Servants was considered as a “centerpiece of the civil service reform process in Armenia” (World Bank, 2005, p. 36; Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006).

#### Phase of advancement (2003-2008)

Starting from 2003, public management reform efforts were redirected towards creating a more efficient system of management by improving distribution of powers and duties within the public sector and further de-centralization of functions. The legal framework was expanded and more laws on public administration establishments, procurement, state non-commercial organizations, customs services, military and police services, and tax services were adopted to regulate the performance of the civil service system. In addition, some amendments to the Civil Service Law were adopted to strengthen the presidential oversight over the civil service (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006). A number of projects are undertaken in the country aimed at improving the legal and regulatory framework for civil service management and development of a highly qualified staff.

#### *Assistance by international donors*

Since the inception of the reformation process, Armenia received a great support of international organizations in strengthening its public sector. Although this support is viewed by some as “a fragmented approach to the reforms and the potential loss of a strategic perspective”

(Hovsepyan and Khudaverdyan, 2006, p. 28), it still was very instrumental. Many donor organizations such as IMF and World Bank have provided significant technical assistance and financial support to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector. Assistance of “other donors such as USAID, UNDP in public sector reforms, has been directed at establishing favorable conditions for the initiation of administrative reforms rather than being directly linked to the launch of the reforms” (Hovsepyan and Khudaverdyan, 2006, p. 29).

The government of the UK is providing a long-term assistance to improvement of the public sector performance through programs initiated by the Department for International Development (DFID). The DFID started its activities in Armenia in 1996 and provided technical, methodological and advisory assistance to the Public Sector Reform Commission in implementation of structural and functional reforms. In March 2003, it launched the Armenia Public Sector Reform Programme (APSREP) for the ongoing support to the Government of Armenia for implementing public sector reforms. DFID allocation for Armenia for the assistance in public sector reforms in the fiscal year 2007/08 is over £3 million and the main activities are laid around three components: (1) restructuring and rationalizing the functions and structures of central and regional government; (2) increasing effectiveness, accountability, and independence of civil service through Human Resources Management and Development; and (3) connecting citizens to public services and policies (DFID, 2007).

Support in implementation of public management reforms in territorial administration and local self-government bodies and in development of civil servant re-training system was received from the TACIS (Government of Armenia, 2007).

## **Implementation of reforms – internal insight**

### Official Standpoint

To understand the scope of public sector reforms in Armenia from the official point of view, an in-depth interview with Manvel Badalyan, the Chairman of the Civil Service Council, was held in October 2007 to reveal the official's opinion about achievements and current state of public management system reforms. The Chairman confirmed that the Civil Service Law had laid a logical ground for the public administration system in the country. Numerous amendments to the Civil Service Law reflect current changes that could not be anticipated by the time the Law was drafted. The main purpose of these amendments is to minimize subjectivity and influence of a human factor.

According to the Chairman of CSC, the Law in practice secures positions of civil servants against political instability. Several chiefs of staff already survived re-appointment of ministers. The Law assures periodic training and attestation of civil servants every three years for improving their knowledge and reassuring their suitability to the occupied positions. The training is conducted by the Public Administration Academy with the help of many higher educational institutions. The Chairman mentioned that there is a shortage of instructors for the training of civil servants. To overcome this setback, the Council is currently developing a "Training of Trainers" program, which would allow enhancing the expertise and number of instructors.

The attestation process, which is conducted by the CSC, allows screening the best professionals in the field. In total, since 2002, 420 civil servants failing to comply with requirements have not passed the attestation. The attestation procedure is open to observers from NGOs, mass media, and other interested parties. The Council regularly (every month) sends the

schedule of upcoming attestations to mass media. As the Chairman of CSC said, “the Council values participation of interested parties and welcomes all efforts to improve the system.”

To assure fairness of recruitment procedures, all civil servant positions are openly announced by the CSC and are filled on a competitive basis. Civil servants applying to the new positions should meet criteria outlined in the “official passport” for that particular position. The examination of applicants is done under constant scrutiny. The Evaluation Commission is selected by a computer system from the continuously updated database. The Commission, as a rule, consists of two CSC members, two representatives of the organization to which the applicants are applying to, and two specialists in the field from Armenian higher educational institutions. Members of the Commission are informed about the examination 24 hours before it in order to diminish the likelihood of patronage. Dismissals are cautiously monitored by the CSC. The Council also developed a cadre reserve, which maintains a database of workers that may be invited for short-term employments.

Although there are still many goals to achieve, the last five years of Council’s existence were rather promising. According to the Chairman of CSC, there is an immense difference between current and past perceptions of roles by public servants. Most of the civil servants perceive citizens as “clients” and realize that their duty is to “serve” public. Slowly but surely the system is improving. Even being not fully formed, public management system has already developed a valuable experience that can be shared with others.

### Pilot Study

In order to reveal insider's opinion on current state of public management reforms, a pilot survey was conducted in two ministries of the Republic of Armenia. Eight interviews were held with civil servants at different administrative levels defined by the Civil Service Law: chiefs of

staff, heads of division, leading specialists, first category, general, and junior specialists. The study focused mainly on measures that have a direct effect on quality of overall performance of public sector institutions: personnel management, administrative procedures, and performance management. The measures were adopted from the questionnaire used by World Bank in carrying out a study on public sector reform efforts in three countries: the Kyrgyz Republic, Romania, and the Slovak Republic (World Bank, 2003). The study revealed that most of the implemented public management changes in Armenia applied at large to personnel management and administrative procedures areas.

In the area of *personnel management*, the surveyed public sector bodies were successful in creating a formalized framework of personnel policies. According to the empirical results, ministries have generally merit-oriented personnel system, which “exerts a strong effect on public sector performance” (World Bank, 2003, p. ix). All respondents agreed that decisions relating to personnel are mostly based on professional experience, merit, and performance; albeit none of them could deny the existence of decisions influenced by family or political connections, party affiliation, wealth and status and/or patronage within the institution. They explained this phenomenon by “Armenian cohesion” - standards of family relations and friendship that existed in Armenia since olden times. The findings demonstrated that decisions relating to personnel policy in the ministries were mostly based on the criteria specified in their by-laws rather than unwritten or informal rules and are audited on a regular basis by a special board operating within a Ministry or by a chief of staff. Although the ministries do not have an established appeal process, if a civil servant does not agree with a decision and believes that it does not comply with the Civil Service Law regulations, he/she can appeal to the above-mentioned board by presenting a report with sound justifications, and the decision may be revised. Personnel policy decisions

are accessible to nearly all workers of the institution. When asked whether the institution has appropriate levels of management, opinions diverged. More than half of respondents think that, since each staff member has only one immediate supervisor, having several levels of management does not complicate the process; others think that there are too many ranks and system needs fewer levels but stronger and well-motivated workforce.

Strong *administrative procedures* lay down the ground for building a well-functioning merit-oriented system and promote the creation of an institutional environment in which state employees work (World Bank, 2003, p. ix). The results of this pilot study illustrated that surveyed public institutions embarked on strengthening their systems of administrative procedures. On one hand, procedures and regulations in the field of internal management are reported by most of the interviewees as formalized, officially approved, and are easy to understand. On the other hand, half of the respondents believe that there is a certain ambiguity in administrative procedures, which allows different interpretations and subjective decision-making. As one of the respondents mentioned, this is done purposefully to save some room for the possible corruption. Nearly all respondents agreed that existing framework of administrative procedures is imposing an excessive number of administrative steps and adding too much time to the process of decision-making and service delivery. What applies to the monitoring and enforcement of administrative procedures, almost all respondents mentioned that administrative procedures are well monitored and violations are exposed to the maximum degree, though not always punished since some of the abuses may exist due to technical malfunction.

In general, respondents agreed that the established system of administrative procedures in their institutions serves the institution well. Information for the effective work performance is readily available to the civil servants and they have a clear understanding of the institution's

goals and strategic plans. Meanwhile, only half of the respondents believe that staff members are involved in the implementation of organization's strategies and problem solving. Organization's strategy and problems are openly discussed and all opportunities for the staff involvement are given. It is another issue whether staff members want to participate in these discussions due to the lack of work motivation.

Nevertheless, the study revealed that the whole culture of organizations has changed since the Soviet times: all interviewed civil servants perceive citizens as clients and demonstrate their genuine interest in serving those. Both ministries have a special division ("general division") that deals with citizens' complaints. The established complaint system serves as an effective instrument for improving poor performance. In addition, organizations function more transparently. They regularly inform public about their activities and regulations through a number of ways such as publishing annual reports and informative bulletins, holding press conferences with mass media, etc. However, the prevailing mean for dissemination of information is the organization's website, which also provides an opportunity for user's feedback. The use of e-governance know-how at public sector level promotes creation of an informed society and helps to change the old logic of public administration.

The survey included a question about protection from political instability. The findings revealed that the higher is the occupied position of the civil servant the more he/she is afraid of losing the job albeit protection provided by the Civil Service Law. They consider the regulation on protection of civil servants from political changes as a nominal shield, which, as one of the respondents mentioned, "does not really work in Armenia."

Successful *performance management* at public state bodies is a powerful tool to measure service quality and to assure work improvement. For the purpose of our study, performance

management was measured by asking whether incentives to improve quality of work or service were used in the ministries. Since the salary is ridiculously low, a number of material incentives are used for increasing performance of the staff and for their retention. However, some of the respondents did not think the value of these incentives is satisfactory. Although they understand that it is a matter of budgetary constraints, they still believe that the organization must find ways to reward individuals who perform well. It could use some non-monetary rewards such as additional days off, public recognitions for exceeding performance standards. Besides the use of these small monetary incentives, no other performance management tools are utilized in the organizations. The organizations lack such simple assessment techniques as mutual evaluation of employees and supervisors and self-evaluation. Respondents highlighted the need to create a reliable system of performance measurements and evaluations in public organizations that would allow measuring productivity and quality of public personnel performance objectively.

### **Conclusion**

Despite tremendous efforts and resources that have been allocated to the process, the reforms still show little progress. The efficiency of the public management system remains hindered due to the lack of accountability, ineffective management practices, and corruption.

The Civil Service Law has laid the grounds for the public management system. It guarantees positions of civil servants against political instability, assures periodic training and attestation of civil servants, open competitions for vacancies, highly scrutinized dismissals, etc. The Armenian administrative system underwent significant transformation: governmental agencies were restructured and new positions of chiefs of staff independent of political influence were created. Organizations now have more formalized framework of personnel policies and

stronger system of administrative procedures. They are now open to public and are more transparent in their actions. The organizational culture changed considerably since the Soviet times. Civil servants understand that citizens are their clients and their main goal is to serve those. However, the attitude towards performance measurements is rather prudent. The civil service system in Armenia lacks developed work performance measures, does not use systemized work assessment techniques, and lacks performance-related pay structure. In addition, low salaries are not only discouraging qualified staff to perform well but also empower some state officials to accept bribes. Absence of the well-motivated personnel can threaten the sustainability of public sector reforms undertaken in Armenia since the ability of government agencies to function effectively is related directly to the motivation of their workforce. Unless something is done, current low equilibrium of public employee motivation and status is going to be a serious impediment to increasing government's efficiency. In addition, it requires tremendous efforts to change population's perception of the civil service as of a system totally based on patronage not merits.

A number of projects are undertaken in the country aimed at improving the legal and regulatory framework for civil service management and development of highly qualified staff. The National Assembly has already ratified the agreement between the Republic of Armenia and the International Development Association (IDA) on launching a program for the modernization of the Armenian public sector (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2007). The ongoing UNDP activity in the field of e-governance aims at improving the transparency and accountability of government institutions in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals. The idea is to promote the use of information technologies and establish interactive e-governance systems and mechanisms for disseminating public information countrywide (UNDP, 2007).

Further bids are called for changes in the human resource management and development of a highly dynamic system of criteria for performance measurement, introduction of pay and promotion system, establishment of an efficient system of certification for training programs, and “better public expenditure management through budgetary planning that is better linked to respective sectoral developments and has better accountability mechanisms” (Gabrielyan and Selimyan, 2006).

On the whole, the implementation of the public sector reforms, sometimes painful and radical, sometimes controversial and unbalanced, has a large impact on the Armenian society. The commitment of the government and public to reform civil service is high and that is essential for the successful implementation of future projects anticipated in the field.

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