

Retired but not tired

There is an underutilised resource in our midst.
Francis Omaswa advocates greater use



Some years ago, the Parliament of Uganda debated a motion to reduce retirement age for public servants from age 55 to age 50, and the Prime Minister who moved this motion was himself aged 68 years. In the end parliament decided not to reduce but to raise the retirement age in Uganda from 55 to 60 years. Right now, the Chief Justice of Uganda reached a mandatory retirement age of 70 years; however, the President wants him reappointed and the person has also stated publicly that he is still strong and ready to continue in the service. But there is a public outcry against his reappointment. Africa is short of skilled personnel in many fields yet many African countries have retirement ages that are between 50 and 55 years. Developed countries with surplus of skilled personnel, have either no retirement age or it is higher than the African norms.

I want to make a case for the many retired but not tired public employees who are underutilised in our countries. Many of these colleagues are not prepared for retirement but are still very fit both intellectually and physically. They are a repository of institutional memory and understand their areas of expertise better than anyone else. The retirement pension that they receive is too

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small for them to live on and most embark on new ways of making a living that are not in their line of specialisation – so the country ends up losing the investment in the individuals.

The most frequently cited reason why public servants have to retire when they are at the prime of their careers is the need to create space for upcoming younger colleagues. In this case, raising retirement age would lead to bloating of the public service which makes the wage bill unsustainable. It should be possible to keep the public service numbers stable without premature retirement of the senior cadres through appropriate restructuring.

Another pool of retired but not tired group is the international civil servants who retire from the various arms of the United Nations system. Many of these grew up in the local public service before moving on to the UN system from which they retire. It is desirable for countries to look out for these individuals and put their expertise to use after their return to the countries. One of the challenges is the reluctance of the country public servants to open up to 'outsiders'. Added to this are the diaspora who chose to retire abroad but who could be encouraged to come back home annually, even if it is for short periods of time.

I would like to encourage African governments, diaspora groups, to look seriously at the making use of human capacity in the retired, but not tired, citizens.

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