in-touch Newsletter

Ethiopia – a cradle of humanity

By Slava Gromlyuk, PAI Director

Last January, when the UK was still in the grips of winter, I had an opportunity to spend a few days in the warm weather of Ethiopia. It was my third trip to this country, this time to attend a two-day workshop organised by UNDP and the Ethiopian Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) to review and discuss the key outputs of the work undertaken by PAI consultants in developing a competency-based Human Resource Management System for the Ethiopian Civil Service. The event took place in Adama, a city

From left to right: Dechassa Debello (UNDP Project Manager), Slava Gromlyuk (PAI Director), Dr Mekuria Haile (FCSC Commissioner) and Bekele Gebisa (National Consultant)

some 60 miles south-east of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. I travelled to Adama on a day when Christians living in Ethiopia were celebrating Timkat (Epiphany), wearing beautiful white robes and singing hymns.

The workshop itself was well attended by Government officials from the Federal Civil Service Commission and selected Ministries as well as members of PAI's project team. The workshop was opened by the UNDP Project Manager, Dechassa Debello, and was followed by a welcome speech from His Excellency Dr Mekuria Haile, FCSC Commissioner. Our consultants highlighted the training programmes that they delivered to assist the FCSC and the Ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture in understanding and implementing competency framework processes. Our project team ran three separate training programmes covering competency framework development, competency assessment and training of trainers. The goal was to establish sustainable capacity for competency framework development and assessment in Civil Service institutions. The consultants also presented a summary of their key recommendations, including:

- Rationalisation and refinement of the competency framework
- Establishment and operationalisation of a Competency Assessment and Certification Service with an IT-based assessment and certification system
- Integration with HRM systems and processes, including job descriptions, recruitment, performance appraisal, training and development, and career progression
- Adaptation of a comprehensive competency framework implementation strategy
- Finalisation of legal, regulatory and procedural frameworks for Civil Service competency management
- Establishment of competency-based training systems to bridge competency gaps of civil servants.

These recommendations collectively aim to enhance the effectiveness of the competency framework, establish supporting structures, systems and processes and ensure seamless integration with existing HR processes. The workshop concluded on the second day following a session during which the Ethiopian officials started preparing their institutional action plans for implementation of the recommendations. Overall, the project was regarded as a success that made a valuable contribution to the Government of Ethiopian's objective of having a more skilled and high-performing Civil Service. Before leaving Ethiopia, I had an opportunity to pay a brief visit to the National Museum in Addis Ababa to meet "Lucy" – a humanoid female, whose 3.2 million year-old remains were discovered in Ethiopia some 50 years ago. It was fascinating to learn about this discovery in a place that is often referred to as a cradle of humanity. I am looking forward to visiting Ethiopia again in the future to continue our cooperation with the Government of Ethiopia and learn more about the country.

The rise and rise of artificial intelligence – a new era in public service or a science fiction nightmare?

By Professor Gavin Drewry, PAI Workshop Director

Professor Gavin Drewry

About 20 years ago, I sometimes watched a popular TV series called *Little Britain*. This consisted of short, often irreverent, comedy sketches satirising quirky features of early 21st century life and culture in the UK. One sketch, regularly repeated, with variations, featured a bored-looking desk clerk in a bank dealing with a request from an anxious customer. This clerk sat hunched over his computer, into which he tapped information about the customer's application. Then came his gloomy response, which was, invariably, 'computer says no.' The latter soon became a popular catchphrase. Why did this scenario touch such a chord?

Part of the answer has to do with the ever-increasing pervasiveness of information technology in the management and delivery of public services. Computers have enhanced administrative efficiency in all kinds of ways. But many consumers of public services do not trust or understand IT – and those who trust and understand it least tend to be the least well-educated and the poorest members of society who are most in need of help. That fictional TV scenario resonated strongly with the day-to-day frustrations of citizens struggling with an increasingly technocratic and seemingly impersonal public service. Another explanation for the popularity of that sketch lay in the absurdity of the notion that the negative decision was made by a machine rather than by a person. It is sometimes claimed that front-line public servants too often seem keen to pass the buck to someone or something else rather than to take personal responsibility for delivering difficult or disappointing news. And it is surely self-evident that 'decisions' made by computers come from man-made algorithms. Machines do what they are programmed to do. They do not 'think' or 'decide' in any human sense.

But is this still true? The onward march of IT in the last decade or so has been leading human societies ever deeper into a new era of artificial intelligence (AI) in which ever-more powerful computers can harvest and process massive quantities of data to an extent that may one day eclipse the capacity of the human brain. And, on the face of it, this looks like a big forward step. Already, we are seeing the medical benefits of using AI – for instance, in the early diagnosis of diseases such as strokes and cancers. It also has many uses in other predictive contexts, such as weather forecasting.

But inevitably there are potential downsides. For example, trade unionists complain about the reallocation of employment, particularly routine jobs (e.g. in call centres), to machines. It is also the case that AI can present malign opportunities to 'bad actors', including perpetrators of organised crime, despotic politicians and ruthless military leaders. There have already been worrying instances of the use of AI to generate misleading information and 'deep fake' images to try to influence the outcome of democratic elections; the ever-growing sophistication of such activity makes it very hard to detect and eradicate. AI can pose economic threats – manipulation of markets and the facilitation of cyber-criminality. Is the spectre of warfare, not only managed but even conducted by AI, so very far away from the nightmare realms of possibility? And what if those military machines were ever to develop 'minds' of their own …?

On the latter point, there has been much debate about the 'generative' potential of AI, in which machines can, of their own volition, create, or 'generate' data or entities that did not exist previously. Might the next generation of computers acquire 'artificial general intelligence' with the capacity to improve themselves through experience? The prospect of machines becoming endowed with powers of independent creativity is both fascinating and chilling. Some of this brings real-world science uncomfortably close to the realms of science fiction and to those blockbuster movies, featuring sentient computers, cyborgs and robots of one kind or another, often endowed with autonomous intelligence that threaten human existence.

The development of AI offers huge benefits to society and to public services but, whether or not we give much credence to the worst fears of those who see it as an existential threat, it certainly needs to be used with caution. Political leaders around the world are beginning to recognise the challenges and to discuss what can be done. The need for some kind of global regulatory framework has often been discussed, but international consensus about this and the form it should take is very elusive. Monitoring and enforcement, particularly given the involvement of non-state actors and the vast commercial self-interests of technology oligarchs, look to be an almost insurmountable challenge.

The continuing development of AI is hugely important, but those trying to keep pace with such a complex subject soon find themselves chasing a rapidly moving and shape-shifting target. We at PAI do not pretend to have easy answers, but we are wrestling with the questions – and look forward to sharing our thoughts with you in our professional development workshops, including our programme on *Digital Transformation of Public Services: The pros and cons of AI,* scheduled to run from 11 to 15 November 2024.

New framework contracts with the European Commission and the UN Office for Project Support

By Tetiana Opiopchenko, PAI Projects Manager

PAI is a member of a consortium led by IBF, Belgium, which has recently been awarded a contract under Lot 9 of the EC framework contract "Services for EU's External Action" (SEA 2023). The main objective of this framework contract is to enable rapid access to consultants with the right knowledge and experience to assist EC departments with policy implementation.

We are looking for consultants who are interested in opportunities available under this framework contract and who have expertise in the following areas:

- Public administration reform and organisational development of public institutions

- Reinforcement of the rule of law and the administration of justice

- Support for democratisation and elections

- Human rights and human rights-based approaches

- Gender equality and women's empowerment

We are also leading a consortium which has been awarded a Long-Term Agreement with the United Nations Office for Project Support (UNOPS) to provide consultancy services associated with the EU accession negotiation process and EU harmonisation for countries in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

We are looking for consultants with a Master's Degree and at least five years' experience of working for/with the EU institutions and/or the governments in the Western Balkan countries on EU accession matters. Please get in touch with us if you have experience of preparing presentations for bilateral/explanatory screening, preparatory work to meet opening benchmarks in selected chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, provision of chapter-specific technical support, development of strategic and policy documents on accession negotiation or support for the work of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and negotiation bodies.

To find out more about these opportunities and to send us your CV please complete our online *Key Information Form* and we will contact you, or alternatively contact Tetiana on tetiana.opiopchenko@public-admin.co.uk

Legislative drafting programme for the Parliament of Kenya

By Denise Smart, Customer Relations Manager

Following our successful Legislative Drafting workshop for lawyers from the National Assembly that took place as a mixture of face-to-face training and online learning in 2023, we were approached by the Senate in Kenya to deliver a programme for lawyers from the Directorate of Legal Services and the Directorate of Litigations Compliance. The programme took place in Nairobi and included sessions on the essential characteristics of good legislative drafting, how legislative sentences are constructed, how interpretation provisions work, the importance of a legislative plan in drafting Bills, and what needs to be contained in instructions to for drafters.

These programmes were based on our open workshop *Advanced Legislative Drafting: Sharpening your drafting skills* that takes place in London in September each year. This workshop is led by Lucy Marsh-Smith, who has over 30 years' experience of drafting legislation and who currently heads Jersey's Legislative Drafting Office. For more information about our workshops, whether scheduled or tailored for your organisation, please contact me at denise.smart@public-admin.co.uk

Exchanging knowledge and experience with North Macedonia

By Claire Cameron, PAI Director

Over the last year we have been collaborating with the Center for Change Management, North Macedonia, on a UK Government funded project called Exchange of Knowledge and Experience and Mentoring on Good Governance and the Functioning of the Centre of Government. The overall goal of the project is to create effective governance standards and to facilitate co-ordinated evidence-based policy planning and implementation. Our main counterparts are the Cabinet of the Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia responsible for good governance policies and the General Secretariat of the Government (equivalent to the UK Cabinet Office).

North Macedonian journalists attending PAI's London workshop

The Government of North Macedonia is under continuous pressure to improve public sector performance and to optimise public expenditure. Recent energy, food and health crises, as well as financial and budgetary pressure, creates an enormous demand in the public for the Government to show efficiency in policy making and implementation, and accountability to citizens for its spending and performance. The capacity of institutions to integrate good governance principles and adopt an evidence-based approach to delivering results is seen as essential for gaining and maintaining the public's trust in the Government, as well as being an important precondition for North Macedonia's EU integration aims.

Our consultants are working with Government counterparts to transfer their UK and international experience of embedding good governance standards in public institutions and further developing the capacity of centre of government bodies through advice and mentoring in the following key areas:

- How centre of government institution functions – evaluating alternative models and good practice examples
- Central coordination of policy planning, prioritisation and monitoring of policy implementation – including key performance indicators, data collection and reporting
- Transparency and accountability
- Focusing on delivery and results
- Performance management and quality assurance
- Using digital tools
- Support for strategic communication of reforms - communicating with stakeholders and the public.

As part of the project, we designed and organised a study visit to London in March for a group of North Macedonian journalists and editors. The purpose of their visit was to enable them to hear from UK journalists, policy and communications specialists about reporting on and monitoring government policy, programmes and performance and holding the government to account. The participants also explored how the UK Government communicates with reporters and media channels and how it gets its messages across to the public.

The study visit took place over three intensive days during which we invited speakers with current government policy and strategy experience, professional communicators, journalists and representatives from the Institute for Government and Transparency International. Visits to the BBC World Service, the Government Communications Service, based in the UK Cabinet Office, and the Thomson Reuters Foundation added a fascinating insight into current communications practices. The participants were accompanied by a representative from the British Embassy in Skopje and by senior colleagues from the Center for Change Management. All members of the group rated their visit very highly. It was a great pleasure to meet them and to work with them on such an interesting and varied programme.