

**➔ GUINEA BISSAU:
BUILDING A RESEARCH INSTITUTION IN AN INHOSPITABLE
ENVIRONMENT**

In a Nutshell

In Guinea Bissau, a group of motivated academics established a national research institute that became a model of sustainability. It introduced management arrangements that balanced fundamental research on the one hand, and consultancy and practical interventions on the other, with the latter funding much of the research. Contributions from external partners were systematically channelled to one-off operations such as training, infrastructure, equipment or time-bound events. Institutional priorities were considered above individual interests.

The institute became an anchor for professionals who wanted to further their academic knowledge and arrested brain drain. As well as a centre for debating crucial national issues, it ensured a place for democratic values, even amidst a difficult political transition.

The Story

Guinea Bissau's independence in the early 1970s was not accompanied by a proper transition for its public service. Its Portuguese rulers left it devoid of a civil service cadre, and the country came into its new status with a poor education system and only a handful of graduates from external universities. Despite this abysmal record, the former colony had a tradition of socio-historical research renowned in the West African subregion. This was due mostly to the dedicated and almost eccentric interest of a few Portuguese and Cape Verdian scholars organized around the Center for Studies of Portuguese Guinea, one of whom was none other than the eventual leader of the liberation struggle and the "father of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde nationalities", Amilcar Cabral.

Motivated by this tradition and building on the sheer enthusiasm that bloomed with the establishment of a new country, a group of young academics, trained mostly in western universities, decided to create a new institution from scratch. The National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP in its Portuguese acronym) came into being one decade after independence, despite raised eyebrows about the feasibility of such a public enterprise in a country with so many competing priorities and poor capacity.

Impelled by a strong sense of ownership, this group wanted to be in charge of an alternative way of doing business. It was a time when external cooperation was huge and influential, and Guinea Bissau was benefiting from one of the largest per capita aid levels in Africa. The architecture of INEP was thus based on a set of ambitious principles: the greatest autonomy possible within the parameters of

public service, collegial leadership, a strong mandate (for instance, to monopolize the ownership of governmental historical archives, set up a legal copyright registry and serve as the clearing house for expatriate research projects), and a new approach to civil service pay arrangements.

INEP soon put in place a mechanism that would allow its researchers to undertake well-defined, part-time consultancies, provided they fulfilled minimum research requirements. The consultancy remuneration would revert to the institute, which in turn would distribute it in the following portions: 40 per cent for the researcher(s), 20 per cent for remaining institute staff and 40 per cent for institutional development, which could include a library extension, buying a new photo lab or finalizing the microfilming of a particular archive. After just four years, INEP managed to cover 90 per cent of its recurrent expenditures from its own revenue, limiting the state subsidy to the base salary of its staff (which was very low) and the electricity bill. On the other hand, staff in all categories had an income ranging from three times the civil service pay to 25 times (in the case of the most entrepreneurial academics). Another important innovation was the authorization for civil servants to participate in INEP's consultancy or academic teams on a part-time basis. This often allowed higher ranking professionals to garner additional income, in a regulated and supportive framework.

The model and ethos of INEP rapidly attracted a lot of attention, both nationally and internationally. As a result, the institute was never short of partnerships, particularly with institutions that traditionally sponsor research in developing countries, such as the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation (SAREC, now integrated into Sida), and various Canadian and European NGOs. Their important contributions helped establish a modern library and training activities, and sponsored equipment (such as computers, cars, etc.) as well as seminars and events. Later, SAREC's funding was totally devoted to an ambitious publications drive.

In its life of nearly two decades, INEP has worked with all the major international organizations and bilateral agencies, including UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank. The institute's focus has shifted over time from a socio-historic bias to a socioeconomic one. More recently, a strong emphasis on environmental issues resulted in a renewed partnership with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). INEP currently manages the only biosphere reserve in Gambia Bissau.

Today, the institute employs 60 staff, half of whom are professionals.

Results and Critical Factors

- INEP has been able to maintain a credible and sustainable research capacity by offering an alternative to the use of national talent by donor agencies. In so doing, it has also fostered an ethos that has swayed political

developments. It emerged as an institution that actors across the political spectrum wanted to preserve, because they had or could have access to it, but also because it became an important employment alternative for those with the qualifications to join it. This is attractive when important figures find themselves out of political appointments.

- During the civil war that erupted in Guinea Bissau in 1999, INEP was severely affected, with its installations ransacked, archives destroyed and a number of researchers fleeing the country. Despite this setback, INEP continued contributing in ways that will remain useful for a long time to come. It has already published hundreds of articles in its three journals. One of these, *Soronda*, is still active, covering the spectrum of issues related to development challenges in Guinea Bissau. The institute has issued more than 50 monographs on various subjects, ranging from environmental to anthropological to macroeconomic studies, and has been the initiator and leader of a host of participatory studies involving all key political players. Thanks to its track record, management systems, large library and overall image, INEP has also been asked to lead the establishment of Guinea Bissau's first university.
- INEP's innovation arrested potential brain drain. Even more importantly, in a continent where remuneration issues have been an intractable problem within the community of scholars and civil servants, the institute's revenue generation template provides an interesting departure meriting a closer study by policy makers across Africa.

Further information

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