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Kwandiwe Kondlo

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Institutional Leadership and the Challenge of Policy Implementation: The Case of South Africa's Extended Public Works Programme

Kwandiwe Kondlo
University of the Witwatersrand

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Abstract

It's not that one is seeking to advance an elite led institutional approach to development and service delivery by bringing into sharp focus the question of institutional leadership, but it's a matter of fact that a strong well-rounded leadership of institutions, especially in the context of 'young' and emerging democracies is at the center policy implementation and service delivery. Even though South Africa has been a formal democracy for 30 years, the country still bears a lot of characteristics of a young and immature democracy where leadership is highly needed. Institutional leadership is among the big challenges facing South Africa's post 1994 political economy, hence the proliferation of concerns about the state of institutions, especially their functionality and or dysfunctionality hence the poor levels of delivery of services to communities. The question about whether our institutions are performing the way they should is persistent. The drive to professionalize the public services is related even though inadvertently to some of these concerns. Conceptually institutional leadership infers championing in a dedicated and focused way the establishment, advancement, nourishing and protection of institutional processes and values thus ensuring down-to-earth implementation. Honoring delivery commitments made to communities, creating "collective moments" for self-reflection (Laloux, 2014) within the organization are important pillars of institutional leadership. Institutional leadership therefore requires strong individuals at leadership level who can serve as "evangelists" of results-oriented practices in policy implementation. This kind of leadership is more hands-on. Rao (2002) describes this kind of leadership as comprising 'powerful actors' who drive 'the legitimation of practices' much like religion or ideology. The lack of this kind of leadership in public institutions combined with the character of some of our institutions, sometimes defined by pronounced elements of dysfunctionality or divergent development, contributes to the dilemmas of policy implementation and hence poor service delivery to communities. The Expanded Public Works Program, a policy-based program which in all the phases of implementation has encountered, among other impediments, challenges of coordination, provides a useful case study and example of institutional leadership challenges,

divergent institutional development hence the muted policy implementation and service delivery. The challenge goes even far deeper than that and its nuance gets far more complex when one looks at the defective social base and 'political form' which underpins the institutions.

This article pulls together a complex puzzle of issues such as institutional leadership, institutional character and development, as well as leadership in policy implementation, to enrich understandings of what institutional leadership means as well as its significance in service delivery.

Keywords: Institutional leadership, Policy implementation, Extended Public Works Programme, Dysfunctional institutions, Institutional character, Institutional performance, National Department of Public works.

Introduction

There are not many scholars who have examined the conceptual and practical challenges at the interface of leadership and institutional performance. The role and position of institutional leadership in ensuring that policies find way to realistic implementation is persistently debated but the solutions are varied and sometimes inconclusive. This article seeks to add a voice to the scholarly debate. The challenge is how do leaders in public institutions remodel themselves as 'evangelists' (Rao, 2010) or champions of on-the-ground- results-oriented implementation. The challenges in getting to this level are numerous but begin with how one deals with issues involved in the making of a leader and the institution itself. In other words, the historical context of the institution as well as the qualities of the leader, are very important. In the case of a leader, it starts with the 'self' at micro personal level, to lay the foundations of an institutional leader who is well rounded and fit to lead an institutional configuration and through his leadership, posit the institution to goal congruence, a recipe of institutional success. Leadership begins at a micro-personal level from where the transformed 'self' begins, this is the 'self' who regards serving others as ethical duty; the 'self' who also sees in the development of institutions, as the making of a 'vehicle' of ethical purpose. The approach used in this article, to deal with issues of institutional leadership and policy implementation involves theorising first, the meaning of institutional leadership. This article begins with a theoretical overview to sketch out conceptual and theoretical questions as well as issues relevant for further research by scholars in this area. One is acutely aware of the excellent work by Heradien (2013). This article crosses several boundaries as it looks into issues of concept and theory and these are related to the national experience of the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP), which one may regard as an institution. The concurrence with Heradien (2013) is found in the conclusions reached. The conclusion is that in a country with a widely known history of structural unemployment, the design of EPWP should have been with permanent employment measures in mind from the outset. In that way the programme would have avoided the permanent twilight zone in which it is captured. The article also reflects on the research done on the EPWP and sent to the Department of Public Works for consideration as part of the medium-term evaluation. The article then proceeds to analyse and elaborate on issues of institutional leadership and service delivery and reflects on possible solutions.

Mapping the Theoretical Terrain

Institutions as vehicles of purpose are usually undergirded by a 'political form'. The character of 'political form' is important in the derivation of the ethical ambition and fibre of the institution. In other words, the ideational constructs that underpin institutions cannot be divorced from the goal culture of the political project institutional context; institutional performance and institutional leadership are important constructs that correlate even though not always in a determinate or positivistic sense. In our case in South Africa, the character of the 'political form' embodies "aspirations of the petit bourgeoisie" who seek to have "access to, and control of state power and capital" (Bundy, 2014:23). However, the trick is that the 'political form' in the country is premised on a social contract to serve and develop citizens. Government, irrespective of who leads, has a burden of service to citizens, and institutions of government have been fashioned through regulations to ensure that government lives up to its mandate and social contract. Institutions of the state including government departments are therefore, in Selznick's (2004) terminology, "organizations infused with value beyond the technical requirements" of the task at hand. But the challenge is to have them do what they are legally and politically meant to do and that is where the issue of institutional leadership becomes a critical imperative. Yet the infusion with value indicated by Selznick is not 'automatic'. That it is part of the ideology of the present regime and the orientation of government policy doesn't make it happen automatically. That is why institutional leadership becomes crucial; the nub of it is in dialogic engagements with communities who are served and the continuous improvement of the quality of services delivered. Institutional leadership and institutional performance always cross paths; they do correlate, even though not necessarily in a positivistic sense. The logical path of institutional leadership (Di Maggio, 1988) embodies delivery in coherent ways, internal institutional coherence of purpose and action as well as partnership models that are agile and constantly monitored. Of course, the claims of performance may be measured differently depending on time and context. The role of leadership in these institutions is vital for the realisation of policy goals and the direction of implementation processes. There are of course debates that are difficult to close about the type of institutional leadership required to implement a particular set of policy objectives and the set of discursive strategies leaders need to design to better maintain institutional performance in identified policy areas. How leaders inspire and maintain team coherence and also lead in knowledge provision is one set of attributes which needs to be balanced with ability to manage intricate dialects of "changing field-level and institutional-level pressures" (Suddaby & Viale, 2011:424). Field-level pressure occurs at 'ground-level' of programme rollout and institutional pressures at systems level and co-ordination spaces (Suddaby & Viale, 2011). It appears from existing research on the EPWP that the 'dimension of ground level field pressures' and that of institutional pressures at systems level and coordination spaces attest to very foundational design pathologies, hence the importance of institutional leadership with an intellectual pedigree. The evaluation literature on EPWP indicating challenges

faced by this important programme will be reviewed in sections below.

The EPWP is one very important policy implementation area that is easily identified for analysis because of the controversies around its delivery track record and the great potential it has for alleviation of unemployment through initial skilling or re-skilling of unemployed members of various communities. But EPWP as an institution needs strong leadership that is committed and passionate about ethical commitments to citizens. A paper written by Mondli Hlatshwayo (2017) is very useful as it provides an analysis of experiences of direct participants in the programme. Most importantly, Hlatshwayo (2017) provides a qualitative review of the EPWP from the perspective of the beneficiaries of municipal EPWP projects. He argues in the article that "various South African government sectors hire EPWP workers to provide local services such as cleaning and maintaining infrastructure, but the employment of these workers can still be regarded as precarious, in the sense that they have no job security, earn low wages and have no benefits such as medical aid or pension fund". The interviewees indicated that, although they appreciate the temporary employment opportunities provided by the EPWP, they also experience health and safety risks and lack the advantages of organised labour groupings. Their main disadvantage, however, is that they cannot access permanent employment, which offers better wages and concomitant benefits. It is on this basis that this article argues about the low exit space of the EPWP programme (failure to access permanent employment), which has now become the magnifier of institutional leadership failures. The question then is which institutional forms, along with non-institutional stakeholder interventions can be mobilised and harnessed to rescue the programme from its twilight zone.

In situations like that of EPWP, one wonders the extent to which the kind of leader described in Rao (2002) could help in turning around the situation. Rao (2002) identifies the significance of a singular powerful actor who leads a team of committed transformers and, as a team, drives the legitimation of a practice much like a religion or ideology. Rao's terminology most aptly signifies an important component of institutional leadership and introduces the role of a 'committed' individual who strongly adheres to a set of principles. This is the individual who utilises institutional supporting mechanisms and existing governance mechanisms and cognitive frameworks to alter power and performance arrangements through explicit institutional strategies (Washington & Davis, 2008). The snag, however, could be the manner in which our public institutions are designed and regulated, and the cultures one finds in these institutions – in combination, they impede and delay change.

Extended Public Works Programme

A detailed report developed by South African Cities Network (2020) provides a very detailed update on the state of the programme, including its performance. The focus on cities of course limits the generalisability of insights derived and conclusions made as rural South Africa is effectively excluded. Of course, the report does provide useful information to update researchers and policy-makers about the status of the

programme. There is also the Medium-Term Review Report submitted to the National Department of Public Works in October 2012, which includes research by the Camissa Institute of Human Performance, in partnership with the Nielsen Company South Africa. The consortium was commissioned by the National Department of Public Works (DPW) to conduct the Mid-Term Review of the implementation of EPWP Phase 2 for the financial years 2009-2012. The report assesses EPWP implementation to identify successes, achievements, constraints, shortcomings, and good practices. In addition to the assessment, the report of the Consortium also provides high level practical proposals and recommendations for EPWP Phase 3. These proposals are also reviewed in this section of the article.

The origins of the EPWP of the South African government can be traced back to the Growth and Development Summit (GDS) of 2003 during the Thabo Mbeki administration. The programme was designed to serve a wide range of government policy priorities covering areas such as decent work, sustainable livelihoods, education, health, rural development, food security, land reform and the fight against corruption. "The National Department of Public Works (DPW) was appointed by the National Cabinet as the custodians of the EPWP and the first phase (Phase 1) of the programme was implemented from 2004 to 2009 with the aim to create one million short- and medium-term work opportunities for the poor and unemployed nationally. These work opportunities were combined with training with the aim of increasing the employability of the low skilled beneficiaries within the formal employment market. The programme targeted four main sectors, namely, infrastructure, environment and culture, social, and economic. The programme achieved its one million work opportunities target one year ahead of time" (Medium Term Review (MTR), 2013:26). During the second phase, in the 2010/2011 financial year 607 612 work opportunities and 203 690 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs were created (Department of Public Works Annual Report, 2010-2011). The report also indicates that 62% of the beneficiaries were women, 51% were youth and 0.45% were people with disabilities (MTR, 2013:26). In the 2011/2012 financial year, 843 459 work opportunities and 251 127 FTE jobs were created. Of these beneficiaries, sixty percent (60%) were women; fifty percent (50%) were youth and 0.19% were people with disabilities (APRM Report, 2013). The Community Works Programmes, during the same financial year, created 105 218 work opportunities across the country, in 63 municipalities and 529 wards. Sixty-nine percent of the participants during this period were women and 54% were young people. For the 2012/2013 financial year, government made an allocation of R1.4 billion to the CWP (Annual Report, Department of Public Works, 2010-2011). By the end of October 2012, 114 383 out of 171 500 work opportunities had already been provided (Annual Report, Department of Public Works, 2010-2011). Of the work opportunities provided, 71% had been allocated to women, 52% to young people and 0.78% to people with disabilities (Annual Report, Department of Public Works, 2010-2011).

In terms of design, the Programme is structured in such a way that projects fall under the remit of specific ministries and sectors. This implicitly recognises that different

projects need a variety of technical capacities, modalities and tools, rather than a uniform approach that treats very different projects in the same way (MTR, 2013:3). In spite of the fact that the programme reached its goal of one million work opportunities 'ahead of time', its impact on unemployment and income transfers to poor households is still far lower than envisaged. The first phase reached only 11% of the country's unemployed in the 2007-08 financial years. A cross-sectional study conducted for the 2009/2010 financial year shows that EPWP Phase 2, despite the limited benefits to households, continued to have a limited impact in contributing to halving unemployment by 2014 (MTR, 2014).

The programme has been criticised for design flaws that address short-term employment rather than sustainable employment. It has been labelled as a hybrid programme consisting of multiple/sectoral models and objectives and therefore would not make any substantial or significant impact on poverty and unemployment in South Africa (MTR, 2013; Meth, 2011; Subbarao, 2009; McCord, 2011). However, none of the critics or even the researchers involved in the Medium-Term Review, has carefully considered the role and impact of institutional leadership in the implementation of this policy. But the Report does reflect, even though briefly, on issues related to institutional leadership. This appears in some of the findings of the medium term's review report.

Among the key findings of the MTR of the Department is that "political and executive management leadership and ownership of the EPWP still remains critically important to its effectiveness as the Programme depends on willing cooperation and productive coordination between lead and sector departments at national and provincial levels as well as at the local government" (MTR, 2013:13). The report further indicates that "executive and senior managers need to have EPWP accountability and responsibility in their performance contracts. There is a need to address political patronage that is creeping into EPWP projects, especially at provincial and local government levels and the unintended political effects should be addressed through good governance practices and quality and availability of information to share with the public to foster transparency" (MTR, 2013:13). Institutional arrangements and coordination between national, provincial and municipal levels were also identified as an area where improvement is required.

The EPWP in South Africa is one of the biggest and most important programmes post-1994 and is at the same time an interesting microcosm of governance and policy implementation challenges in the public sector. But the worst mistake would be to abandon the programme simply because of the challenges encountered, be they at the level of conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring or evaluation. In other words, whatever the infirmities of the EPWP, the greatest hope lies in expanding the programme, building on what works, and dealing progressively, with gaps, weaknesses, grey areas and challenges. The value of independent evaluation based on continuous monitoring cannot be overemphasised. How the NDPW, as the lead department in this programme, deals with knowledge is another question that may need to be examined later.

The research report which is part of the MTRR submitted by the Camissa Institute of Human Performance (2013) in partnership with the Nielsen Company South Africa, to the Department of Public Works covers many issues that, if broken into components, would reach require full-blown research. The report provides useful information that will go a long way towards assisting reflections and thoughts about the design of the coming phases of the programme. Chapter 12 of their report is titled 'Towards EPWP-3'. Especially its outline of important issues such as fiscal implications, overall programme design, different delivery models, targeting and determination of benefit levels will require serious consideration in the design of EPWP Phase 3. What one could also find interesting about Chapter 12 is the 'sort-of' disconnect between the substance of the chapter and the empirical data obtained during fieldwork indicated in Chapter 6 and 7. The fieldwork results indicate that, to a very great extent, things are working well for the EPWP Phase 2. However, in Chapter 12, the impression one gets is that the whole programme needs a serious overhaul. From the viewpoint of good research scholarship, the report is problematic in that its evidential base is not solid. Exactly when and where were the interviews conducted? In which communities did the interviews occur? How long did each interview take and who interviewed who? What were the protocols informing the interview process? In which language medium were the interviews conducted? Given the difficulties encountered during the research (as explained in Chapter 3), what is the margin of error of the report submitted to the Department? While the report provides important food for thought, it does create problems as it is fraught with numerous editorial errors and inconsistencies This article wishes to make observations on two important issues, namely, the quality of research done and recommendations made in the research report of Chamisa presented as part of the medium term review of the Department of Public Works.

Scientific Rigour in Applications-Based Research

The importance of corroborated knowledge cannot be overemphasised in the development, implementation and evaluation of government programmes. It is vital to the success of these programmes. On a closer look it seems the research that was done for the Department on the EPWP was not really using corroborated time-series cross-section data in which serial correlation in the error terms is controlled and used to help control potential endogeneity bias. That is why this article emphasises that the choice of research methodology and instruments is crucial; that is why institutional leadership also needs some knowledge production skills. The challenge of the research that was done on EPWP Phase 2 is that it had many questions to deal with and this compromises the sharpness of focus as well as depth of analysis. If one were to reduce the key questions of the review undertaken to only two, one would say the Camisa Institute researchers were expected to review and identify: 1) what could be immediately shown to have worked – by implication, this places emphasis on quantitative measures and quick-wins; 2) identifying and analysing the difference the programme has made to the diverse range of stakeholders who had originally been targeted by programme interventions. The problem is the use of evidence based

on immediate results and the expectation of quick programme turnover. The four-year life of a programme phase is significantly short if contrasted with the potential time span required for the intervention to yield recognisable impact.

One could argue that the most appropriate method that the research team could have used is the community action research method. A community action research method involves co-creation and co-production of knowledge in partnership with the very beneficiaries of a programme. This method moves from the premise that ordinary people know and can reflect on programmes affecting their lives, have questions and priorities of their own, and have skills and sensitivities that can enhance or undermine any community project. The community action research method is a collaborative approach to inquiry and it assists to negotiate entry into the intangible borders each community has and helps manage the insider-outsider dichotomy that researchers often experience when they walk into communities, they do not know. The challenges experienced during fieldwork undertaken before the writing of this report (as explained in Chapter 3) partially attest to the 'disconnect' between the researchers and the realities of communities.

The Substance of Findings and Recommendations

All the same, there are recommendations in the report that I find useful and that I wish to strengthen. They include the following:

1. Mainstreaming the EPWP in the life and work of departments involved at all levels (national, provincial and local). This will be a process but there has to be a well-planned beginning. The chaos one often finds in the running of departments and projects at local government level will be one of the greatest challenges in this area.

2. Top-down modes of implementation in which powers of initiative and procedure come from above are very much characteristic of bureaucracies all over the world. Steering and control from below with facilitation from above may need to be explored to create an alternative model of cooperation that fosters collective ownership.

3. The issue about institutional configuration and support required to have a more effective Phase 3 is important to reflect upon. The idea of a special purpose vehicle that will report to the NDPW may need to be investigated; it cannot be discarded completely. Fragmentation and silos have become so common in the governance landscape of South Africa that it is almost impossible not to think of a central structure that serves as a unifier of common interventions and programmes such as the EPWP.

4. A Partnership Framework is needed to strengthen collaboration and leverage resources for implementation. The suggestion about partnerships with SETAS, Universities and research institutions should be explored – it will improve the quality of training, research information, and monitoring and evaluation. How to make partnerships with the private sector effective and sustainable is also

a point for exploration. As the report indicates, the partnerships will facilitate the entry of beneficiaries into the labour market as well as create opportunities for beneficiaries to increase their skills. A clear and practical guideline on what is an EPWP project in each sector and how to mainstream EPWP in project planning, design, contract management and monitoring, is a useful suggestion.

5. Platforms for dialogue with civil society should be established to increase advocacy of the EPWP and improve implementation with appropriate project management support. NPOs and NGOs need to be incentivised and non-wage costs should be included in their funding.

The Challenge of Institutional Leadership

The absence of an institutional leadership core around which things cohere is clearly at the centre of performance challenges encountered in this programme. Perhaps one could even be inclined to argue that, putting aside the short-term relief for those community members who have benefitted from the programme, the EPWP is essentially a mirror of the wretchedness of our fate as a young democracy. A democracy that is good on paper but weak on implementation creates and casts its own cloud, which darkens its fate. On 1 May 2024, Lerato Fekisi of the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC), wrote what superficially appears as a positive rendition of the EPWP titled "Eastern Cape EPWP offers desperate job seekers hope". However, as one engages the piece, it becomes clearer that there is a sense of growing levels of despair within communities, despair that the programme is merely papering the cracks over. The article indicates that "thousands of desperate job seekers in Gqeberha slept outside the city hall, some arriving as late as midnight, hoping to be the first in line to hand in their application forms for the required 150 vacancies under the Expanded Public Works Programme". The leaders who commented on the incident in Gqeberha included the Deputy Minister of Public Works and the Executive Mayor of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. The response of the Deputy Minister, even though superficial, did indicate that government is aware of the need to do things better. Talking about the EPWP, he indicated that "it's more about re-imagining the programme and repurposing it so that so that ultimately we are able to come out with a more sustainable intervention ..." (SABC News.com, 1 May 2024).

Institutional leadership would go further than what is happening in the Eastern Cape's response to desperate demands for accommodation in the programme. What one noticed was that institutional performance issues are patronised and there is no indication of depth of vision and understanding of granular implementation issues. Even though institutional leaders may not directly affect technical performance, the moral character of their leadership impacts on organisational life and performance. Building 'soulful organisations' is what institutional leadership does. "Soulful organisations" (Laloux, 2014:4) are models of sound institution where work is not drudgery; where the institutional culture is free of resentment, resignation and apathy and this emanates from a leadership that commands the force of moral example (Laloux, 2014).

Conclusion and Issues for Further Consideration

To strengthen the EPWP, there is a need to ensure various interventions at both theoretical and practical levels. Among these, one can cite the profiling of households and communities from which targeted beneficiaries come. Each beneficiary comes from a household and a community hence it is important to connect the programme interventions with households first and eventually with communities. This makes it possible to track changes or improvements that occur and to receive feedback in form of the collective impression of the households on the impact of the programme.

Having examined the research report on the EPWP, it appears as though there is also a need to revise and improve scientific tools that inform the targeting of beneficiaries. Perhaps it might assist the Depart of Public Works to examine the Provincial Indices of Multiple Deprivation (PIMD) developed by KwaZulu-Natal to rank wards according to levels of disadvantage using the scores indicated by the tool. This could help enrich and inform the basis for choice of certain individuals, households and communities over others and will help deal with the problem of uneven standards in the choice of beneficiaries. There are also innovations required at structural level – one could cite as an example the establishment of community-based EPWP support committees (or it could take the form of a Forum of Community Advisors) to navigate district and local government divides, strengthen social capital within the community, mobilise support for the programme and sensitise government policy-makers about better strategies of cooperation with communities where various projects are undertaken.

One may also need to caution against divisive tendencies of the kind of 'driving politics' behind the choice of beneficiaries and roll-out of the programme, especially at local government level. Without critiquing the political sociology of our democracy in South Africa, it is a fact based on the experiences of some communities, especially in rural areas, that the reach and impact of programmes such as the EPWP is constrained by the social power of local notables who dominate local institutions, including programmes and projects in their vicinity, because of their positions in the ruling party.

The problem-solving capacity of government as the overarching institution, service delivery programme and initiatives all require strong institutional leadership as the driving force. Understanding knowledge production and, most importantly, the authority of knowledge in institutional advancement for service delivery is emerging as a critical core skill an institutional leader needs to have. The institutional leader needs to have a strong sense of the quality of knowledge that underlies policy decision-making and as this is critical to the success of government intervention (Prakash, 2015). However, we need to be careful about research whose scope is defined too widely. Research that tries to 'talk to everything, all at once' tends to be superficial and fails to confront bargaining interests and entrenched commitments one usually finds in the political system in which programmes like the EPWP operate. The mid-term review of a programme, ideally, should provide a thorough look at each key component of the programme edifice and provide a clear link between policy and

evidence in a way that provides policy-makers and operational staff with evidence needed to amend a programme. In other words, it allows policy-makers to build on what works and recast what does not work. Important considerations to variations in specific cultural, geographic and historical contexts of target communities are always important so that we don't gloss over variations and differences and promote generalities.

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