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Connecting skills planning to provision

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Introduction

Skills planning and development for the public sector are intrinsically linked to the state's capacity to deliver on its social service and development mandates.

In South Africa (and many developing countries), government provision is linked to redistribution, poverty alleviation, and economic growth. The sector is associated with development and a state that can deliver (Mc Lennan, 2007). Despite poor economic growth prospects, some significant changes have been achieved in social development.

However, 28 years after the first democratic elections, which include Covid and state capture, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, where the high levels of poverty, unemployment, crime, and corruption undermine democracy (Levy et al., 2021). More recently, rolling electricity blackouts have eroded public trust in the ability of the state to lead development.

In addition to tackling poverty and inequality, knowledge, skills, and organisational capacity for a socially-just, people-centred, responsive state sit at the centre of South Africa's development strategy. 'Skills development' or 'capacity building' is often cited as the solution to poor delivery or slow economic growth. The assumption is that the right skills development will capacitate the state.

The most recent iteration of this approach is the Cabinet approval in October 2022 of the *National Framework Towards The Professionalisation of the Public Sector*. The Framework focuses on revising entry, promotion and improving skills.

Professionalisation, therefore:

> ***means having qualified people who know what they are doing and are fully equipped to perform their jobs with diligence. This entails continuous professional development and making public servants more competitive by sharpening their "know-how" and skill sets. (NSG, 2022, p.8)***

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This approach overlooks how politics, history, and culture shape institutions[1] . Professionalisation is articulated in the National Development Plan as a solution to poor performance in service delivery, a contested political-administrative interface and a mismatch of skills to work functions. The assumption is that policy change and the right skills development will improve performance. What are the right kinds of skills, and who develops them? What happens when someone with the knowledge and skills lands in a department that suppresses autonomous action? In seeking to answer some of these questions, this Brief focuses on exploring what is needed to strengthen labour market intelligence and skills provision to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state.

How does skills planning happen?

The University of Witwatersrand's Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) embarked on a study on behalf of the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) to understand the demand and supply sides and the factors impacting these.



The public service sector is embedded in complex socio-economic and political systems which influence how skills are understood and developed. Using existing occupational categories, competencies, and skills to identify gaps and priorities ignores how established routines, work, leadership, and management cultures support or constrain effective performance. It also means that skills anticipation may not identify obsolete or future skills.

In principle, skills planning should consider current and future needs concerning the organisational cultures, working practices, and goals that enable performance. While most government departments seem to understand that "skills development priorities must be identified using organisational performance as the lens" (PSETA, 2021b, p. 4), analyses are template-driven self-assessments that do not provide the necessary insight for organisational change.

Therefore, contextual analysis and identifying patterns and drivers impacting skills development are necessary. Each planning system is contained by the focus of its efforts — development, human resources, or skills, labour market supply and demand for skills, performance management for human resources, and economic growth and delivery for development.

Even when departments identify cross-cutting issues, the tendency is to allocate the issue to a function. For example, gender is allocated to a responsible focal point and "ticked." Every annual report produced by public departments contains a paragraph on gender and usually some statistics about where women are and how numbers have risen. However, gender is not only about the numbers; it is about safe and respectful Public Service work environments and the extent to which the state can address gender-based violence, provide safe living spaces, and change mindsets.

The National Development Plan specifies that Public Service "staff at all levels must have the authority, experience, and support they need to do their jobs. This will require a more long-term approach to skills

1 - This refers to the established formal and informal routines, systems, practices and cultures which frame workplace behaviour (and performance).

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development." This view reflects an approach to skills development, which includes skills, regulations, and work organisation.

A similar purpose is contained in the 1995 White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, which envisioned training and education as critical to "develop the professional capacities of public servants and to promote institutional change" by developing a developmental work ethic, knowledge and skills for enabling institutional change and community responsiveness.

This approach directly links the state's reform agenda to the education and training of the public service sector workforce, assuming that the more effective the public service, the more likely policy implementation becomes. It also starts a list of assumed skills for a capable and developmental public service.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) proposed that service delivery should be integrated, sustainable, people-driven, responsive, focused on safety and security, developmental, inclusive, and enabling people's participation in decision-making. The Constitution, Section 195 (1) adds ethical, efficient, economical, and effective use of resources, impartial, fair, equitable, accountable, and transparent.

These skills are difficult to define and develop. One respondent, a chief director, says:

Initially, in the old competency framework for senior managers, we used to have integrity and honesty as one of the competencies. .... But, as we went along, that was dropped, and because ... you cannot measure it and say, we are measuring integrity, for example, through the assessment tools that we have, but rather we advocate for that to be inculcated through other interventions.

Identifying the skills, abilities, and capacities of a capable, ethical, and developmental public service sector workforce is complex because there is a lack of clarity and consensus on what a South African developmental state looks like and, therefore, what the related skills and capacities might be. South Africa has adopted the form of a developmental state without considering state capacity or capability.

The current standards, measures, and competency frameworks draw on historical practice and dominant global frameworks (such as the Asian Tiger model) that are not easily translated into South African contexts. Current standards are not tested against actual performance in the workplace or service delivery improvement, except nominally in performance reviews. Even if the identified skills gaps or capacity challenges are cleared, their functionality in supporting a developmental strategy is not guaranteed.

In addition, public service training is spread across a range of providers without any system or policy for setting norms and standards and ensuring quality. Partnerships require agreements and are usually focused on providing specified courses. There is little coordinated engagement with the supply side. Most offer standard programmes with indirect links to career paths and little practical focus on forming norms and values for a shared ethos. Curriculum quality varies, as do methodologies, assessment strategies, and materials.

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Training is often of doubtful relevance (due to a lack of data about how the delivery systems work and what skills are required to shift established patterns) with limited impact on performance. Programmes are designed out of context, creating challenges in integrating learning into the workplace.

Policy implications

Exploring the skills requirements for the developmental state highlights how complex skills planning and regulatory processes intersect with the historical, contextual, and institutional factors that shape the state, the nature of work, and what skills are needed.

Training is only part of the challenge of building a public administration that can 'do the work'. Skills development requires the institutionalisation of appropriate working practices and behaviour. Planning and provision should consider skills and the institutional structures, systems, and processes that provide support. The objective is that such development will help shape and transform the institution of the state. Issues of political will, employment criteria, discipline, and culture must be addressed simultaneously.

An official from a policy department states that:

So, when it comes to prioritisation and being adaptive, the system doesn't allow us; it takes us at least five years to change policy or legislation. So, you got to go for all those loops and stuff to sometimes be able to adapt a budget system, you know, when we had the flood disasters, it goes again.

The PSETA must bridge demand and supply within this complexity to ensure a relevantly skilled public service sector workforce. This requires an understanding of the changing shape of the South African state and implications for current and future skills anticipation and provisioning planning. PSETA's role is not to build a capable state but to lead the planning and development of skills to develop a skilled, capable, and innovative Public Service sector. This task sits at the interface between state capacity and state capability.

PSETA can guide and enable the development of the mindsets, work organisation, and skills that build capability. For example, the PSETA could use its regulatory role to align and improve data collection and sharing, facilitate discussions across silos about strategic skills needs concerning contextual and historical challenges, and engage government providers, Higher Education Institutions and Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges.



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