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The role and purpose of provincial-scale planning in post-apartheid South Africa

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Recently, prominent political figures have shown interest in the role of provinces mainly with regard to service delivery and strategic planning. The newspaper articles cited below reflect varying reactions and attitudes towards the provincial sphere:

Provinces: A R16-billion Waste of Money?

This article appeared in the front cover of a popular investigative newspaper, the Mail and Guardian (September 30-October 6, 2005) and it reflects the mindset and the stance taken by various government officials towards provinces. As purported in the article, the political administration of provinces will cost tax-payers approximately R16 billion by the end of this final year. About five R500 million will be spent in remuneration whilst R617 million will be spend on the administration of the provincial legislature. With all this money being spent on this particular sphere, South Africans surely expect it to function optimally and deliver services efficiently. It is regrettable however that most provinces in South Africa are not delivering as would be expected. The lack of sound management and skilled financial personnel within some provinces has led to the under-spending or compete wasting of money by provinces.

Some top government officials such as Trevor Manuel have expressed concern on the lack of enthusiasm by highly paid provincial premiers who are unable to unlock the developmental potential of provinces. Provincial political heads are said to be reaping hefty rewards with their salaries ranging from R600 000 and 800 000 per annum. Given the amount of money they earn, premiers should be more reflexive and accountable in their engagements. From a new regionalist perspective, provinces need to cooperate and interact more thus being able to tackle developmental challenges in a more concerted manner.

Financial Minister Trevor Manuel among others has called for the revisiting of the country's cooperative governance structure. The "softening" of the boundaries between spheres of government would result in a more hierarchical government structure with presumably a stronger central government. Such a move would be need to be carefully considered as any haste changes to the administrative structure might lead to more harm than good. On a similar vein, a hierarchical administrative structure might boost the performance of sub-national governments making them more accountable to responsive. What would make all the difference at the end of the day is the commitment of government officials in their engagement with developmental challenges they are faced with.

Thus, the statesmanship and the stateness of South African politicians and policy-makers will be proved by the way they deal with the current problems that South African provinces are faced with. From a planning perspective, development planners and academics have a duty to inform and contribute to the governmental processes through knowledge-sharing and creativity.