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Advancing Evidence-Based Practice for Improved Public Sector Performance: Lessons From the Implementation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool in South Africa

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Abstract

Enhancing public sector performance is on the agenda of most governments. In South Africa, as the analysis of the literature indicates, there is a dearth on studies that systematically assess the implementation of public sector performance improvement tools. This article is based on the study that explores the implementation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) within the South African public sector for the period 2011-2016. It borrows from implementation science and assesses the critical components in the implementation process. It utilises a secondary data review, experiential knowledge from action research and semi-structured interviews. The critical implementation components are outlined and lessons from the implementation process are drawn to inform future practice.

Keywords: Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT), Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), Public Sector, South Africa, Gross Domestic Product, Evidence-based practice.

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, most governments have been faced with a multiple stakeholder conviction that public sectors are too large and inefficient (Capling *et al.,* 1998). In addition, the efficient utilisation of public resources, high quality policies for economic growth and the well-being of citizens are always priority developmental issues for governments (Afonso *et al*., 2009). Public sector productivity accounts for a significant proportion of total economic production in most countries; for example, it is estimated that in the late 1990s, public sector activities contributed 40% of the total economic production in developed countries (Jackson, 1999). The contribution still remains significant for developing countries in the 21st century[1].The public sector performance-economic development discourse has been given considerable

[1]For example, the contribution of government spending to national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in South Africa stood at 20.3% in 2015 (IDC, 2016).

attention (Agell *et al.*, 1997) and public sector institutions are continuously under scrutiny from a wide range of stakeholders including politicians, civil society, activists, academics, and regional and international institutions. Public sector reforms are on the development agenda of most governments. Within the South African context, it is argued that the pre-apartheid South African public sector was out of touch with contemporary public sector reforms (Thornhill, 2008, in Cameron, 2009). The post-apartheid public reform agenda, like that of many countries, has been driven by the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm[2] (Miller, 2005; Levin, 2004) which, among others, underscores the significance of public sector performance.

This has been so, particularly, in the last few decades, where there has been increased attention to measuring public sector service delivery and performance (Cameron, 2009; Figlio & Kenny, 2009; Boyne *et al.,* 2006; Jackson, 1999). Such a move has been in line with the recognition that government efficiency – the ability to transform revenues into public goods and services – is a function of public sector efficiency (Angelopoulos *et al.*, 2008). However, public sector performance is multi-dimensional and costly; hence, stakeholders rarely get information on the performance and quality of public sector performance. Public services are multiple (they must do justice to different values) and are rendered in co-production (in cooperation with third parties) (de Bruijn, 2002). There is limited evidence on an agreed framework for the determinants of performance in public organisations (Boyne, 2006). Additionally, there is no conclusive evidence on the benefits and demerits of introducing performance measurement systems in both the public and private sectors (Micheli & Mari, 2014). Empirical studies on the measurement of public sector organisational performance are limited (Afonso *et al.*, 2009; Boyne *et al.*, 2006). Such scarcity may be attributed to the focus of public administration scholars on organisational processes as opposed to outputs and outcomes.

There have been wide ranging debates on appropriate tools for performance assessment (see, for example, Micheli & Mari, 2014; Boyne, 2002; Ostrom, 1973). Debates have also focused on the best sources of performance data as well as the relative validity of such data (Kelly & Swindell, 2002). A number of studies have been conducted on assessing the application of performance measurement systems in the public sector (see, for example, Spekle & Verbeeten, 2014; Padovani *et al.,* 2010; Figlio & Kenny, 2009; de Lancer Julnes, 2006; Gianakis, 2002; Kloot & Martin, 2000). However, the implementation process of applying performance assessment tools is not well documented, yet such studies are critical in informing implementation practice. In addition, it is asserted that many efforts to implement performance management tools that are designed to improve the quality and outcomes of human services have not reached their full potential due to a variety of challenges inherent in the implementation process (Aarons *et al.*, 2011).

This study reviewed the implementation of the Management Performance Assessment

[2]Some of the key elements of NPM include decentralisation, rightsizing, corporatisation and Senior Management Systems.

Tool (MPAT) within the South African public sector. In 2009, the government established the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) to strengthen the use of monitoring and evaluation to improve performance. A key activity by DPME has been the implementation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) for monitoring the state of management practices in national and provincial departments. In South Africa, there have been no studies that assess the systematic process of the rolling out and implementation of the MPAT process by DPME. The study upon which this article is based aims to fill this gap. It does not evaluate how MPAT was rolled out by various national and provincial departments[3], but focuses on how the DPME implemented MPAT at the national level. Borrowing from the theoretical constructs of implementation science, the study addressed the following question: What are the critical components and lessons in the implementation process of MPAT? The study explored the MPAT implementation process by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) between the periods 2011 and 2016. It is envisaged that the knowledge gained from this study may be adapted to inform MPAT implementation in countries where public sector performance management strategies are being strengthened.

Exploring the Key Guiding Concepts for Performance Measurement and Management

The notion of performance is utilised in assessing individual and collective efforts and encapsulates the unitary purpose of organisations (Micheli & Mari, 2014). In the literature, the word 'performance' is applied in many contexts, since it carries different meanings (Wholey, 1999). Schiavo-Campo and McFerson (2008) define performance in terms of resource utilisation, immediate results, ultimate results and the process followed *thus*, deriving meaning from the context of application or usage (i.e. national, sectoral, department or unit). Sicotte *et al.* (1998) argues that performance focuses on the attainment of goals within defined production systems, cultural values, and environmental adaptation. Within the public sector, performance entails more attention to cost, movement towards alternative strategies of service delivery, reduces duplication and redundancy in activities, and emphasises transparency in operations (Ingraham, 2007). Other dimensions of performance include, *inter alia*, focus on inputs cost, staff time, workloads, legal authority, political/bureaucratic support, on net impact, client/customer satisfaction, service quality and activities or processes that translate inputs into outputs and outcomes (Wholey, 1999).

The concept of performance measurability[4] lacks a common conceptual understanding and is highly contested (Micheli & Mari, 2014). There have been debates around the key properties of measuring (objectivity, accuracy and precision) between qualitative and quantitative measures with regard to validity. Review of literature shows that it has been linked to a number of variables, including efficiency (cost-effectiveness of

[3]These are given in periodic reports by DPME on the state of management practices in the public sector.
[4]In this study, measurement and assessment are used interchangeably.

the public sector in reaching a range of objectives of government intervention), return on investment and meeting set targets. Angelopoulos *et al.,* (2008) and Boyne (2002) highlight some indices utilised for measuring public sector efficiency. Such indices cover dimensions such as measures of output quantity, output quality, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, equity, probity, democracy and impact. Other variables are innovation, leadership, managerial quality and strategy implementation. Performance measurement within public sector institutions improves transparency, accountability, innovation, and rewards performance, prevents bureaucracy and improves quality of policy and decision-making (de Bruijn, 2002). There is recognition for the need for understanding linkages in planning, decision-making, action and results in measuring performance. Such a realisation brings the need for public sector institutions to integrate measurement within every stage of planning, decision-making and implementation of programmes and projects.

Smith and Mayston (1986) highlight the issue of comparability when assessing public sector performance. Public sector institutions are normally assessed relative to other agencies offering the same services, yet there are contextual, mandatory and operational differences. Within the performance assessment discourse, some scholars have coined the concept of public capacity. It is defined as the ability of the permanent administrative machinery of government to implement policies, deliver services and provide policy advice to decision-makers (Polidano, 2000). The benefits of the utilisation of performance data has received scrutiny in recent years and there are mixed views on its utility. For example, research has shown that public sector institutions utilise performance measurement data in both productive and unproductive ways. A study by Rouse *et al.* (2007), in the United Kingdom, shows that schools responded positively to performance measurement data by improving performance, but some also engaged in apparently strategic behaviour that made it difficult to determine the genuineness of accountability induced behaviour.

de Bruijn (2002) highlights some perverse impacts of performance measurement. These include: stimulation of strategic behaviour; blocking innovations and ambitions; veiling actual performance; killing professional attitude; increased bureaucracy and punishing performance. Strategic behaviour or 'gaming the numbers' is a scenario where there is performance on paper without social significance or benefits. Focusing on production processes may have huge financial benefits, but has been found to have negative implications for the promotion and adoption of innovations. It is argued that aggregation of public sector performance information at sectoral level may reduce relevance at the lower level where the information is generated. Consequently, insight into the connections that exist on the level of the primary process may be lost. Thus, decision-makers must deliberately design performance management assessment systems that generate relevant data at the operational level. The type of data generated by performance measurement tools is critical. For example, relying on quantitative indicators tends to canvass important qualitative data, giving a distorted image of performance. Efficiency improves

production at a lower budget. High performance ratings may lead to 'punishing performance' in the sense that management may assume the need for lower budgets for proceeding years due to improved efficiency. In this case, an affiliate organisation not investing in efficiency is rewarded with a budget that remains the same with performance remaining equal.

Management and measurements or assessments are inextricably inseparable. In fact, Lebas (1995) argues that management can hardly exist without measurement. The concept of performance management has diverse conceptual understandings in various disciplines (Lonsdale, 2009; Carroll, 2000; Otley, 1999). Within the public sector management literature, there is an array of concepts that encompass performance management. Such concepts include results-driven government, performance-based management, governing for results, performance-based budgeting, the new managerialism, reinventing government, the new public management, outcome-orientated management and marketisation (Behn, 2001; Kettle, 1997; Aucoin & Peters, 1995; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). It also includes concepts such as performance evaluation, performance monitoring, and performance reporting (de Bruijn, 2002; Pollitt, 2006; Halachmi, 2005; Wholey, 1999), performance measurement (Swindell & Kelly, 2000; Thompson, 2000), performance budgeting (Berry, Brower & Flowers, 2000; Hendrick, 2000), and performance contracting (Behn & Kant, 1999; Byrnes & Freeman, 1999; Clary, Ebersten & Harlor, 2000; Grote, 2000; Marshall, 1998). Irrespective of the orientation, all of the mentioned concepts are geared towards improving public sector performance, enhancing results and creating value addition for citizens (Behn, 2001).

Performance management is also defined as an evaluative process of assessing and arriving at a judgement about performance against the achievement of specific goals and objectives within a specific context. It is a process designed to improve organisational, team, and individual performance, which is owned and driven by line managers (Armstrong, 2014; Rubienska & Bovaird, 1999). Carroll and Dewar (2002) assert that it is the collecting, reporting and using of information about government programmes to assess and improve the delivery of government services. Briscoe and Claus (2008) define performance management as a system through which organisations set work goals, determine performance standards, assign and evaluate work, provide performance feedback, determine training and development needs, and distribute rewards. However, there is a note of caution premised on the optimism and untested implicit assumption in the concepts, strategies and tactics of performance management that it actually does improve the organisation's performance and public accountability. This is not necessarily true, as the nature of organisational behaviour is such that some organisations are likely to perform better by implementing performance management measures while others, using the same tool, may perform below expectation (Behn, 2011). The factors contributing to the inability of managers to systematically apply performance management ideas to the challenges of effective and efficient performance may be due to political, cultural, rational, technocratic factors, public apathy, and leadership support (Ohemeng, 2009; de Lancer Julnes & Holzer, 2001).

Management Performance Assessment Tools and Their Irrationale to the South African Public Sector

Management Performance Assessment Tools (MPATs) are based on managerial freedom or autonomy and managerial accountability. The managerial freedom school is premised on the belief that performance freedom from unnecessary bureaucratic constraints allows gathering and reporting on how a system operates *vis-a-vis* planning, organising, leading and controlling (Kettle, 1997; Thynne & Wettenhall, 2004). The accountability school holds the view that performance assessment focuses on enabling system improvement and ensuring accountability on the utilisation of public funds to citizens (Berman & Wang, 2000; Bouckaert & Halligan, 2008; Wholey, 1999). MPATs enhance achievement of better results at the individual, team and organisational levels through measuring performance within an agreed framework of goals, standards and competency requirements. The common feature cutting across all tools and approaches is the focus on enhancing organisational and/or individual performance.

The South African *Constitution* provides for a public service administration at the national, provincial and local spheres of government. The government's commitment to improving public services and to establishing the cooperation and coordination necessary to achieve meaningful outcomes for South African citizens formed the basis for the development of MPAT in 2011. The process is led by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and the Offices of the Premier with the support of the National and Provincial Treasury, Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), and other transversal departments. MPAT is a structured evidence-based approach to the assessment of management practices that aims to improve the performance and service delivery of national and provincial departments. The guiding assumption of MPAT is that improved management practices are a necessary condition to improving public service performance and service delivery. MPAT promotes good management practices within the public service through establishing benchmarks for performance. It establishes baseline performance, provides managers with useful information to improve performance and catalyses improvement in management. MPAT is based on the premise that effective service delivery is a function of four key performance areas: strategic management, governance and accountability, human resources management and financial management (see Figure 1, page 687). The MPAT assessment cycle is linked to the planning cycle and designed to acquire data from existing sources of information generated by constitutional institutions such as the Auditor-General (AG) and Public Service Commission (PSC) into a single database.

MPAT scores a department's management practices against four progressive levels of performance as shown in Table 1 on the next page. Level 3 represents full compliance with a particular policy or prescript, while Level 4 represents performance that goes beyond compliance. Within this scoring structure, MPAT seeks to encourage departments to be innovative in their management practices. For a practice to be assessed at a particular level, the department must meet

FIGURE 1: MPAT key performance areas



Source: Department of Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation (2013)

TABLE 1: Levels of performance

Level	Description
Level 1	Department is non-compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 2	Department is partially compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 3	Department is fully compliant with legal/regulatory requirements
Level 4	Department is fully compliant with legal/regulatory requirements and is doing things smartly

Source: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (2013)

all the requirements for that level. If the department, for example, only meets two out of the three requirements of Level 3, it will be scored at Level 2 (partial compliance).

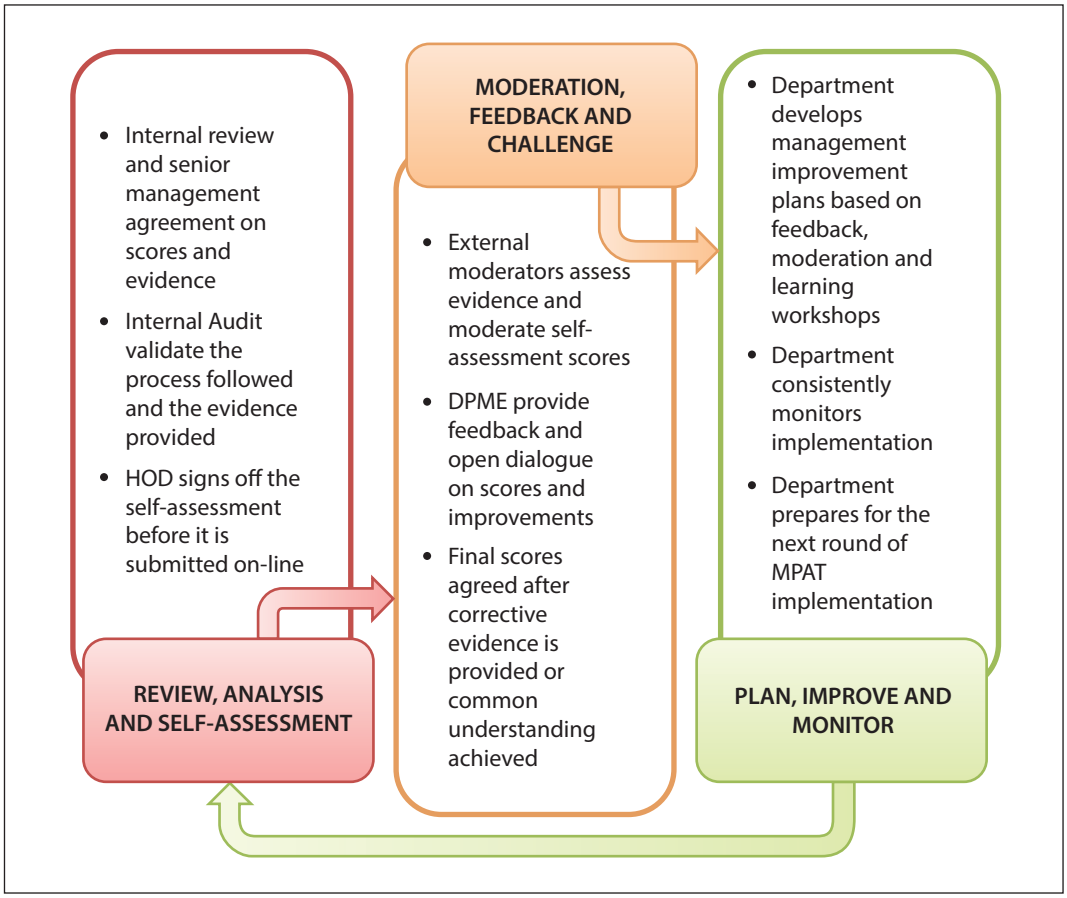
At the operational level, the implementation of the MPAT is designed to follow a five stage process: preparation and launch; self-assessment and internal validation; external moderation; final scores and recording; and improvement planning. The preparation and launch is conducted each year around July-August. DPME issues the MPAT standards for use in the forthcoming cycle of assessment. During this period there is training of moderators, and the opportunity for departments to acquaint themselves with the MPAT standards and required evidence documents. Once MPAT is launched, departments are given a month (usually September) to conduct their self-assessments and validate these internally prior to submission to DPME.

DPME and a team of external moderators moderate the self-assessments and provide feedback to the departments. Departments have the opportunity to 'challenge' the moderated scores by providing additional evidence. DPME finalises the MPAT scores, provides feedback to departments, and submits a consolidated report of MPAT results to Cabinet. The consolidated results and results of national departments are published on the DPME website. Departments are expected to develop plans for addressing gaps and weaknesses identified in the MPAT process. These plans are not submitted to DPME and need not wait for the final MPAT results. In practice, departments start planning the improvements during the self-assessment phase when the gaps in their management practices become evident. Figure 2 below summarises the MPAT process.

Analytical Framework: Evidence-Based Practice Implementation

The analytical framework for the assessment of the implementation of the MPAT borrows

Figure 2: MPAT implementation process



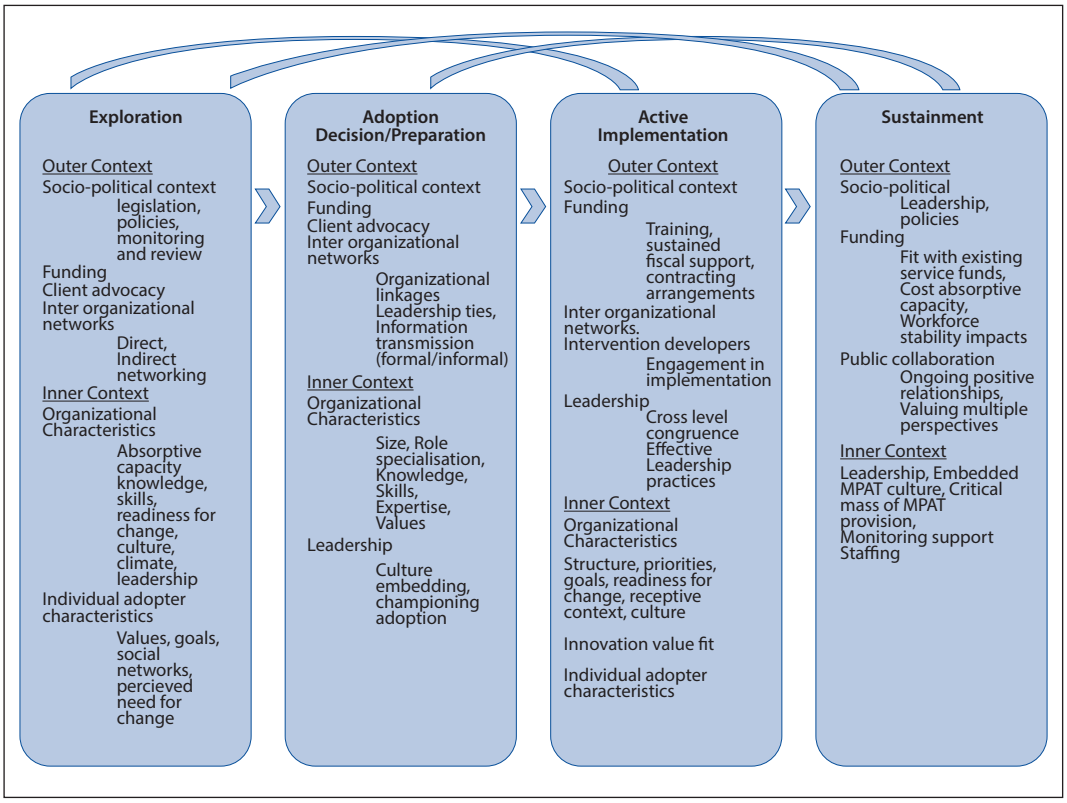
Source: Department of Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation (2013)

from the concept of implementation science. Implementation science studies the process of implementing programmes, practices and innovations that have some evidence from the research field to suggest that they are worth replicating (Metz *et al.,* 2015). The evidence base of the worthiness for studying the implementation of MPAT, within the implementation science framework, stems from its utilisation in development of selected assessment tools in the South African public sector. For example, DPME developed and piloted the Local Government Management Improvement Model (LGMIM), based on the same assumptions as MPAT, with the content and processes adapted for the local government context. The National Treasury developed the Infrastructure Capability Maturity Model (ICMM) to assess the management practices and performance of provinces in supporting the delivery of infrastructure.

Implementation science is evidence-based programming focusing on the active and planned effort to mainstream a new intervention within a practice organisation (Ogden *et al*., 2012). The study upon which the article is based borrows from a multi-level, four-phase model of the implementation process to systematically assess MPAT implementation: exploration, adoption/preparation, implementation, and sustainment (Aarons *et al*., 2011). It recognises that improving service delivery in the public sector is influenced as much by the process of implementing innovative practices as by the practices for implementation, as well as shifting the way business is conducted. It recognises the complexity of implementing human service innovations due to their reliance on the actions of individuals and organisations that exist within complex multi-layered socio-economic, socio-cultural and political contexts (Fixsen *et al*., 2009). Figure 3 on the next page shows elements of the four phase model utilised in the study, which allowed a systematic exploration of the MPAT implementation process in South Africa.

The exploration phase creates awareness of the MPAT. It is premised on the assumption that adoption in human services organisations is affected by the variability of values and beliefs by various stakeholders and the prevailing socio-political environment. It asserts that, in the public sector, stakeholders with a strong focus on development of new technologies and understanding of best practices are well placed to implement appropriate strategies (Aarons *et al.,* 2011). This phase analyses the potential match between the MPAT's key elements, activities, and theory of change with the organisation's absorptive capacity, culture and values and informs the organisation's decision to proceed or not to proceed with implementation of the tool (Bertram *et al.,* 2013). Potential barriers are identified during this phase, including funding streams, staffing patterns and organisational and systemic factors. The adoption phase defines key tasks to be accomplished before stakeholders experience a change in practice. There is a requirement for methodological examination of the MPAT with regards to implementation components, i.e. competency, organisation and leadership (Bertram *et al*., 2013). Factors such as organisational fit of practice (roles, structure, values, etc.) may affect adoption of MPAT. Leadership is an important variable in creating both the organisational culture and climate conducive to the adoption of MPAT and in taking ownership of the implementation process.

FIGURE 3: Phases of the four stage model



Source: Adapted from Aarons *et al*. (2011)

Although implementation science is in its nascent phases, a number of studies have been conducted in areas of healthcare, organisational development, and business and mental health. These studies have drawn variables that influence the implementation of evidence-based practice tools within social and organisational contexts. Such variables include ensuring alignment among stakeholders around the targeted approach (Glisson & Schoenwald, 2005) and strengthening existing partnerships to shape the implementation process and contextual fit (Horner, 2014). According to Odgen *et al.* (2012), implementation drivers include recruitment, initial training, supervision/coaching, performance assessment, decision support data systems, facilitative administration, systems interventions and leadership. These components must operate in a holistic manner. They are supposed to be interactive, integrated and synergistic. Sustainability must be an integral part of the implementation process. According to Damschroder *et al.* (2009), there has been limited empirical work around the sustainability of implementing innovations within the public sector and there is no comprehensive model to guide the conceptual thinking on sustainability. In the study, these

components are not taken as a step-by-step template; they provide a framework for developing variables in line with the public sector performance management discourse. This recognises the contextual and discipline-specific nature of implementation science.

Methodological Approach

This study utilised qualitative data collection tools. These allowed the exploration and in-depth understanding of the MPAT implementation process. Additionally, qualitative and observational studies in implementation research are often valuable in identifying problems in creating change and generating hypotheses about the determinants of and the conditions for change (Palinkas *et al.*, 2011; Grol & Jones, 2000). The study drew on the large volume of material generated on MPAT implementation since 2011. These include:

- MPAT annual results reports presented to cabinet.
- Report on the implementation evaluation of MPAT.
- Case studies developed for each year (2011, 2012, 2013) documenting good practices.
- Presentations of DPME on MPAT.
- DPME annual performance planning documents.
- Audio and video materials on interviews with DPME officials and officials from government departments.

Semi-structured interviews were held with the MPAT team in DPME to obtain information about MPAT's implementation that was not necessarily contained in the formal documents. Interviewees were identified using snowball sampling. The study also utilised experiential knowledge from engagement in the MPAT implementation process by one of the researchers who was part of the MPAT development and went through three MPAT cycles with DPME.

Results and Discussion: Unfolding Implementation of MPAT in South Africa

Exploration Phase

Socio-Political Environment

The implementation process for the MPAT is a change initiative precipitated by contextual events in the public sector environment coupled with the need for effective institutional support. Following the national and provincial elections, in 2009, the Zuma administration took office. Although of the same political party as its predecessor, the new administration sought to introduce major changes in the public sector in order to deliver on its election manifesto. These were system-wide policy shifts for the public sector and changes in the machinery of government. During the periods 1994 and 2009, the Government focused on dismantling the legacy of apartheid, integrating the disparate administrations, introducing new institutions as mandated by the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996, overhauling the legislative frameworks, and building a new civil service based on the democratic values and principles. There was recognition that, despite well-paid public

servants compared to their middle-income country counterparts and the availability of adequate financial resources to government departments, the quality of service delivery in many sectors fell below the expectations of citizens and the standards set in government policies.

Adoption Decision and Preparation

A New Policy Focusing on Improving Government Performance

In 2009, the Government introduced the 'outcomes approach' as captured in its policy document 'Improving Government Performance: Our Approach'.[5] The new policy sought to focus the public sector on outcomes or results, and to instill a culture of performance. The government decided to focus on a few priority outcomes and introduced the concept of outcome delivery agreements entered into between a group of ministers to be held accountable for an outcome, and the President of the Republic. Priority sectors were identified, with a realisation that a capable public service was a necessary condition. The Forum of South African Directors-General (FOSAD) was established in 1999 to diagnose the causes of poor service delivery and it identified poor public sector management as a key factor. The weaknesses in management included poor application of performance management, weak accountability mechanisms for public servants, poor decision-making processes, and insufficient attention to implementation of policies and plans.[6] It was within these perspectives that MPAT became one of the initiatives for improving public sector performance.

Active Implementation

Establishing the Ministry of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

The 2009 policy reforms made provision for the establishment of the Ministry of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation within the Presidency. The Ministry was mandated to, *inter alia*, foster a results or outcomes orientation across the three spheres of government (national, provincial and local) and other public sector institutions. The Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) was established in 2010, with the expectation that it would focus on the following areas identified in the 2009 policy: support the establishing of systems and processes to manage the outcomes approach, including the delivery agreements; institutionalise the government-wide monitoring and evaluation system; and enhance public sector service delivery. There was, therefore, a clear mandate for DPME to support the improvement of government performance across the public sector. Results from semi-structured interviews with key informants from DPME indicated that the institutional location of DPME within the presidency sent a strong message of the importance of performance monitoring and evaluation.

Implementation Factors

Implementation literature highlights the importance of implementation factors that trigger change and the active

[5]The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, Improving Government Performance: Our Approach, 2009.
[6]Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, the Presidency, Republic of South Africa, Mid-Term Review of the Priorities of Government, March 2012.

implementation process (see for example Aarons *et al.*, 2011; Hurlburt & Knapp, 2003). Changes in the public sector often have an event precipitating the introduction of the change, or at least speeding up the implementation of the change. In the case of MPAT, results from this study indicate that the non-delivery or late delivery of school textbooks to schools in Limpopo Province sparked a major outcry from the national government, civil society and ordinary citizens. Evaluation of the 'text book crisis' involved the Forum of South African Directors-General (FOSAD), the National Department of Basic Education, National Treasury, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and DPME in analysing the causes of the problem. The conclusion reached was that weak management practices were at the core of the failure to deliver textbooks on time. An identified feature of the textbook crisis was the perceived poor management and accountability at almost every stage of the service delivery process, and at every level in the Provincial Department of Basic Education.

The crisis triggered a set of interventions that are viewed as precursors for the implementation of MPAT. DPME, the DPSA and the National Treasury formed the nucleus of departments in the administrative centre of government, and were charged with the responsibility of coordinating and contributing to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the public service. DPME and the Technical Assistance Unit (TAU) of the National Treasury began exploring management and accountability frameworks of other countries. An initial visit by DPME and TAU to Canada to learn about the Management Accountability Framework (MAF) of the Treasury Board Secretariat was followed by a longer visit by senior officials of DPME and the DPSA to understand the MAF in greater detail and to see how a similar tool could be developed for the South African public service. The DPSA, DPME and National Treasury formed the Technical Committee of officials that led the development of MPAT.

Organisational Culture of DPME

The role of organisational fits in effective implementation has been well documented (see for example, Kyung-Kwon & Young-Gul, 2002). Kotter (1996) proposes that effective structures for coordinating and driving change should have the following attributes: a mind-set focused on quality, an innovative, flat structure, flexible, networking, speed oriented, stakeholder focus and global focus. DPME was established in 2010 at the time when the government was seeking solutions to service delivery problems. The Department was small, and the team tasked with designing MPAT consisted of fewer than 10 officials. The structure of DPME and the MPAT team was flat, out of necessity, as it was a small organisation. According to research results, the benefit of this flat structure was that the MPAT team could engage directly with the Director-General (the most senior official of the Department) without having to traverse the many layers of bureaucracy that are a feature of public sector organisations. Decision-making was, therefore, speedy and officials had clarity on what the Director-General required. The MPAT team had a strong orientation towards speed, being flexible and taking risks. This is highlighted from the following quotation from a structured discussion with a senior DPME official:

> ...the message the Director-General communicated to the MPAT team was to design, test and implement MPAT in as short a time as possible, without compromising the quality of MPAT. The culture promoted by the Director-General was that of learning-by-doing…

The MPAT team was given the space to make mistakes and learn from the many mistakes they made. It had a strong stakeholder focus and, in order for MPAT to succeed, it recognised the need for support of officials in national and provincial departments. The team identified and cultivated MPAT champions in these departments. They were also aware of the necessity of collaborating with other departments and agencies that perceived DPME and MPAT as encroaching on their mandates. A technical team of senior officials from DPME, the DPSA and National Treasury was established to drive the development and implementation of MPAT. Other entities, for example, the office of the Public Service Commission, the then Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA – which is now the National School of Government) and the Auditor-General also participated in the design process, and were identified as important secondary sources of information for MPAT. DPME looked globally for existing models that it could learn from. In addition to the Management Accountability Framework (MAF) of Canada, DPME considered models from other countries including New Zealand, Kenya, India and Brazil. Although each of the models provided useful insights, DPME was cautious not to adopt these ideas uncritically. The MAF of Canada probably came closest to DPME's requirements and while some elements, such as moderated self-assessments, were adopted, MPAT essentially was a home grown innovation.

Development Process and Content of MPAT

Although DPME led the design of MPAT, the tool is an outcome of a highly consultative process with other central policy departments at national level, provincial departments, and other government bodies. Following extensive research of international models and the various assessment systems already in place in the South African Public Service, the first version of MPAT, then known as the Performance Assessment Tool (PAT), began to take shape. PAT identified the four broad Key Performance Areas, which have remained constant, even though there have been minor modifications to their titles. MPAT formulation was based on existing regulations and policies. In developing the content of MPAT, DPME took the deliberate decision to base MPAT on existing policies and requirements. Research results indicate that such an approach was important for three reasons:

(a) For MPAT to be credible, it had to be based on regulations and policies that were applicable to all government departments as they set out the minimum requirements.

(b) There were already many policies and regulatory requirements in the Public Service. By annually monitoring the extent to which these were implemented or complied with, policy-makers would have the evidence to inform policy changes and any implementation support that departments might require.

(c) One of the expected benefits of MPAT was that it would provide a consolidated picture of management practices across the entire Public Service. At the time of MPAT's development, there were several reporting mechanisms in the Public Service with each one valid in its own right. However, heads of department/directors-general did not have a consolidated view of how their departments were performing in implementing the various public administration policies.

Institutional Arrangements and Influence of Policy Owners or Custodians

The design of MPAT was highly consultative with other government bodies that had been in existence for many years prior to the establishment of DPME. These bodies were the primary policy owners with deep knowledge of these policies. They also had staff capacity that was far greater than the capacity of the newly established DPME. It was, therefore, essential for DPME to secure the active participation and support of these institutions. These key institutions are the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and the National Treasury. The DPSA is the custodian of the Public Service Act, and the Public Service Regulations that govern the administration of the Public Service. It is responsible for a wide range of public administration policies, including human resource management, ICT, occupational health and safety in the public service, labour relations, anti-corruption, and service delivery improvement. The DPSA's mandate covers the key performance area 3: Human Resource Management, as well as aspects of key performance area 2: Governance and Accountability, for example, service delivery improvement. The DPSA requires departments to prepare human resource plans, service delivery improvement plans and other relevant plans, and to report on these to the DPSA. Given that DPSA's mandate covers significant parts of MPAT, it has a significant influence in shaping the content of MPAT. Each of the management performance (sub-KPAs) contained in MPAT (see Figure 1, page 687) had to be discussed with the policy expert in the DPSA. The DPSA policy experts also helped to formulate the standards for the management practices, the evidence requirements and the moderation criteria. The DPSA, by far, was the most involved and vocal of all the central administration departments in the development and implementation of MPAT.

The National Treasury is the custodian of the Public Finance Management Act and Treasury Regulations that govern financial management in the Public Service. The Treasury Regulations and associated instructions set out the prescripts for the many aspects of financial management, including supply chain management and expenditure management. The Office of the Accountant General in the National Treasury has its own Financial Management Capability Maturity Model (FMCMM). Departments use the FMCMM to assess their level of compliance with a comprehensive range of requirements for good financial management, including internal audit. As the FMCMM covered a broad spectrum of public financial management requirements, there was a great deal of concern from the National Treasury that MPAT would duplicate what was already collected through the FMCMM. Following several discussions, DPME decided to confine the key performance area 4: Financial Management, to supply chain management, as this was an area of major concern for FOSAD.

Table 2: Number of standards per key performance area

Key Performance Area	KPA 1: Strategic Management	KPA 2: Governance and Accountability	KPA 3: Human Resource Management	KPA 4: Financial Management
Number of standards	3	10	11	9

Source: Department of Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation (2013)

Contributions of Other Government Institutions

Inter-organisational networks are a critical component of the implementation process (Aarons *et al.,* 2011). Within MPAT, the study identified key support institutions to include the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the Auditor-General (AG). The PSC is mandated by the *Constitution* to, *inter alia*, monitor and evaluate public administration against the principles and values of public administration, as set out in section 196 of the *Constitution*. It manages secondary data used by MPAT, including information on performance agreements of senior managers and the financial disclosures of senior managers. This information is used during the moderation of the self-assessments of departments. The AG is the supreme audit institution in South Africa. It conducts regular financial and performance audits of national and provincial departments, local municipalities, and other state entities. The audit outcomes published annually are an important source of secondary information for MPAT.

Shaping MPAT Standards, Evidence Requirements and Moderation Criteria

The MPAT design team endeavoured to keep the number of standards manageable. At the inception of MPAT, a mapping exercise of management standards found hundreds of indicators. The team was selective and reduced the number of standards to 33. Research results highlighted concerns from departments regarding the distribution of standards across the four Key Performance Areas, as the standards and Key Performance Areas are weighted equally. As Table 2 above shows, Key Performance Area 1: Strategic Management has three standards and, therefore, the assessment of KPA 1 is less rigorous than the assessment of the other KPAs.

The standards in MPAT are largely a reflection of the central administration departments that participated actively in the design of MPAT, namely DPME, the DPSA and the National Treasury. MPAT does not cover all the key areas of management of a government department. For example, it does not cover asset maintenance and management[7] that consumes large budgets and has been identified repeatedly by the Auditor-General as an area that requires improvement. The National Department of Public Works, the policy department for the management of immovable state assets, did not participate in the design of MPAT.

Determining the Requirements for MPAT Standards

There were debates on MPAT standard requirements among policy-makers and

[7]Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Implementation evaluation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT), 24 March 2015.

practitioners. The requirements for Level 1 non-compliance were clear. But there were many debates about the fine line between Level 2 (partial compliance) and Level 3 (full compliance). There was a feeling among some that the requirements for Level 3 were too onerous and did not recognise that the Public Service in South Africa was still developing. They felt that MPAT should adopt a developmental approach, as it was intended as a tool for fostering progressive improvement in management practices. Another school of thought believed that Level 3 represented the minimum expected of departments, as these were activities that they were legally obliged to perform. This school of thought was concerned that if the requirements for Level 3 were set too low, it would serve to reinforce a culture of mediocrity in the Public Service. Another school of thought questioned the relevance of having four levels when MPAT essentially measured compliance with policies and regulations. The view held was that there should only be three levels: non-compliance, partial compliance and full compliance. Level 4 (doing things smartly) was considered vague and open to very subjective interpretation (see Table 1, page 687).

Ensuring Credible Evidence from MPAT

The issue of the validity of results from performance measurement tools is highly contested between the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms (Kelly & Swindell, 2002). In designing MPAT, the team carefully considered the evidence documents required for moderating each MPAT standard. It was discovered that, although the evidence requirements set out in the MPAT tool seemed straightforward, departments experienced difficulty in providing the evidence documents during the first cycle of MPAT. This was, in part, due to the poor state of document management in several departments.

In reviewing MPAT after the first cycle, the MPAT design team streamlined the evidence document requirements, and where appropriate, departments were required to merely certify that particular documents existed and did not have to submit the actual documents. This approach was especially useful where documents were confidential. As far as possible, DPME and the moderators drew on secondary sources of information for moderation. Although evidence requirements have been streamlined over the four cycles of MPAT, there is a tendency by departments to submit irrelevant documents, in the belief that a larger volume of evidence documents will be more convincing. It may also be that they do not have confidence in the moderators' ability to fully understand the departments they are moderating, thus a need to provide as much evidence as possible to convince the moderators.

From the onset, it was clear that there had to be criteria for moderating the departmental self-assessments. The evaluation criteria had to be clear and relevant to the MPAT standard being moderated and had to be reliable. The pilot round of moderation revealed variable interpretations of the moderation criteria, and so the criteria were reviewed and refined. Other strategies to improve the consistency in the application of moderation criteria included the training of moderators and support from the Canadian Treasury Board Secretariat in quality assurance. DPME also introduced a 'challenge period' to give departments an opportunity to respond to the moderated scores and provide

further evidence where they disagreed with the moderated score. Although DPME has worked on improving the moderation of self-assessments, an independent evaluation identified moderation as the weakest aspect of MPAT's implementation. Departments have questioned the expertise of moderators, and also the role of moderators in relation to the role of internal audit units that are required to certify the evidence submitted for moderation.[9] The volume of evidence documents that moderators have to read is overwhelming (DPME estimated over 70 000 evidence documents in the 2015 cycle), and some departments have expressed concern that moderators do not read all the evidence documents. The moderation process involves a large contingent of government officials (for example, 80 moderators in the 2015 cycle) in a 'lockdown' for a week. There are questions about the efficiency of the moderation process, and whether there are more efficient and effective ways of verifying the evidence submitted by government departments. Concerns on the validity of MPAT results are echoed in the following quotation from semi-structured interviews:

> … MPAT has been a compliance matter, we hope MPAT 4 will have a change of approach… does what is evaluated in respect of self-evaluation or assessment represent itself in the same way when you report to the Portfolio Committee in terms of APP… does the Auditor-General find the same finding… M&E section together with strategic planning must make sure that the reports speak to one another…

Mandatory Versus Voluntary Participation

Although the decision of the Cabinet indicated that all national and provincial departments should be assessed, DPME did not coerce departments to participate in the first round of MPAT. DPME, through its road shows and consultations, encouraged departments to participate in MPAT and 65% of all national and provincial departments conducted self-assessments. Following the submission of the results of the first MPAT cycle to cabinet, the departments that did not participate were somewhat embarrassed, and in subsequent years, there has been a 100% participation rate from national and provincial departments. While it could be argued that the high participation rate in MPAT is due to its mandatory nature, the independent evaluation of MPAT[8] found that 87% of surveyed heads of department described MPAT as a meaningful learning opportunity and 13% indicated that they participated to comply with performance agreements expectations of political principals.[9]

Institutionalisation of Improvement Plans

Participating departments were expected to develop plans or strategies to improve management practices. There was a great deal of discussion about improvement plans including the following issues: Should these be stand-alone plans or should they form part of existing organisational improvement plans? Should they be submitted to DPME in the case of national departments, or to the Office of the Premier in the case

[8]This was conducted by PDG Consulting.
[9]Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Implementation evaluation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT), 24 March 2015.

of provincial departments? What would a good improvement plan look like? Are there guidelines for improvement plans? Will the implementation of these plans be monitored and who will monitor the plans? DPME adopted a pragmatic approach to the issue of improvement plans. In the first instance, it did not have the human capacity to monitor the implementation of improvement plans directly and used the annual MPAT scores to monitor improvements. It also encouraged departments to incorporate improvement plans into existing organisational improvement initiatives rather than develop stand-alone plans.

Participatory Annual Review of MPAT

At the end of each MPAT cycle, DPME reviews the MPAT tool as well as the implementation process. These reviews are participative, and include partner departments, MPAT coordinators and MPAT moderators. Importantly, DPME has been responsive to the criticisms and suggestions made to improve MPAT, and changes are reflected in the subsequent MPAT cycle. The independent evaluation of MPAT implementation noted DPME's responsiveness to suggestions for improving MPAT. This annual review is part of the DPME philosophy of learning and progressively improving MPAT.

Institutional Capacity for Implementation

DPME invested in developing its internal capacity as well as the capacity of departments that were required to use MPAT. There was an emphasis on 'learning-by-doing' and relatively new and junior staff participated in all phases of the MPAT cycle, and attended road shows and meetings with departments. This hands-on-experience and the trust placed in these officials helped to build a confident MPAT team that was seen as credible and responsive. DPME invested in developing the capacities of MPAT coordinators and moderators through training workshops, guidelines and networking. From the onset, it was evident that moderators had to be selected carefully and trained in moderation. Monitoring and Evaluation Units in the Office of the Premier are the focal points and the coordinators of MPAT in their respective provinces. The capacity of these units varies across the different provinces, and in many instances this capacity is limited. Although DPME provides support to these units, especially during the self-assessment process, not all units have the capacity required to coordinate MPAT in their provinces, and this could affect how the province as a whole fares in MPAT. Information technology is an important enabler for the implementation of MPAT. In the first year of its operation, MPAT operated on a simple Excel system. The web-based system only became operational in the second round of MPAT (2012-2013). This gave DPME the opportunity to refine MPAT and its processes before finalising the web-based system. However, information technology without developing the capacity of users is not effective. DPME received technical and financial support for the development of MPAT from external development partners. The department, however, was clear that it would lead the process and the support from development partners was there to complement government efforts.

The Importance of Leadership

Leadership at the political level and the administrative levels is a key factor in organisational change in the public sector. Political leadership sets the broad direction for change or

reform, while administrative leadership gives content to the proposed reform. Importantly, these two levels of leadership need to work together to achieve the objectives of the proposed reforms. In the case of MPAT, there was a strong political commitment to MPAT by the then Minister of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, who sought the approval of cabinet for the design and implementation of MPAT, and reported the MPAT results annually to Cabinet. The then Director-General of DPME, who conceptualised and initiated MPAT, played a key role in leading the MPAT process from its inception. Some key informants commented on the good working relationship between the political leadership (Minister) and the administrative leadership (Director-General) as a critical success factor for MPAT. The Forum of South African Director-Generals (FOSAD) provided leadership to MPAT, as it was mandated by the President to find solutions to poor service delivery in the public service.

Conclusion and Lessons for Implementation Practice

The study upon which this article is based applied the Evidence-Based Practice Implementation Framework to explore the MPAT implementation process by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) between the periods 2011 and 2016 in South Africa. The results indicated that the critical implementation components are the exploration of the socio-political environment, appropriate legislative reforms, understanding implementation factors, organisational culture and organisational fit of the implementing institution, development process and content of MPAT, institutional arrangements and relationships between policy-makers and custodians, stakeholder engagement, determining MPAT standards, ensuring validity of MPAT results, institutionalisation of improvement plans, and leadership capacity and continuous review of the MPAT implementation process. A number of key lessons were drawn from the study. Firstly, is the importance of the context within which MPAT is implemented. Systems of government and public administration vary from country to country; it is important that the particular country context is taken into consideration in the design and implementation of MPAT.

Secondly, MPAT should be located within broader reforms so that it enhances or enables reforms, rather than undermines the reforms. Thirdly, there is a need to clarify the service delivery problem under consideration. It is important that there is a clear theory of change articulated from the onset. The fourth lesson is determination of the need for a regulatory basis for MPAT to be sustained as a regular assessment process. The fifth lesson is the need to build and maintain partnerships from the onset: policy and oversight of management practices typically involve several central administration departments. The lead department should build partnerships and coalitions with these departments. The sixth lesson emphasises the need for keeping the MPAT tool simple. There is always a temptation to have the most comprehensive tool, but this creates complexity very early in the process. It is advisable to focus on a few priority issues (following a thorough mapping of what currently exists). Lesson seven entails keeping the implementation process light. There is always a risk for MPAT to consume an increasing amount of human and financial

resources with each successive cycle. It is important to keep the process as light as possible. This could be done, for example, by limiting the documentation that departments are required to provide. Lesson nine emphasises the need to communicate results constructively and transparently. While it is necessary to point out areas where management practices are weak, the intention should not be to make departments or individuals look bad. Feedback coupled with suggestions for improvement can go a long way. Depending on the country context, the results should be transparent and accessible to other oversight institutions and civil society. The tenth lesson is the need to monitor the implementation and evaluate the outcomes. Lastly, there is a need to invest in developing capacities of officials involved in MPAT in areas such as facilitation, data analysis, public policy and management information systems.

Although this article tackled the MPAT implementation process, there is a need for further studies to assess the impacts of MPAT on performance of various public institutions in South Africa.

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