



TACKLING THE
DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

Head on

COMMENT ON THE GREEN PAPER:
NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

Constitutional democracies are often 'messy'. Systems in a democracy are largely dependent on a number of processes. If these processes are not synchronised, it may lead to development trajectories that are not determined by common visions, but are rather informed by the vicissitudes of those who participate in those processes.

South Africa is no different and our democracy is characterised by a particular type of messiness in which our three spheres of government are simultaneously autonomous and saddled with incoherent powers and functions. This often results in institutions working at cross-purposes and, at times, in agreements negotiated between municipalities and their citizens not being met because other spheres (which are central to meeting those commitments) do not share the same objectives. Those working with municipal IDPs, provincial strategic plans, line functions departments' strategic plans and intergovernmental relations in general, know this all too well.

At the same time, we have a large but fractious political party dominating the governing institutions across virtually all spheres. This, expectedly, causes tensions *within* the state as well as *between* the state and party. This context makes the Green Paper on National Strategic Planning a welcome

introduction to our constitutional democracy. It promises to be developmental because it introduces the notion of research, evidence-based action and policy coherence.

The proof is in the planning...

There is nothing of substance with which to find fault or weakness in the Green Paper. What it proposes is simply good planning and an attempt to provide direction to a complex governing system. The concept has received widespread support across all sectors. Criticism leveled at the Green Paper has largely been directed at the personalities of those involved and possibly the proposed structure, rather than the content of strategic national planning. On the other hand, the failure to reduce spatial and social inequality in post-apartheid South Africa, despite the extensive resources spent on 'development', is well known and documented. The most exciting aspect of the Green Paper is therefore the recognition of this failure and the introduction of the National Planning Commission (NPC) as a mechanism to provide direction so that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future.

Photo: Israel Abate

Laying the foundation

The Green Paper clearly states that in order for good development planning outcomes to emerge, the following conditions need to be in place:

- solid institutions;
- a highly capable state;
- strong relationships between major social forces; and
- clear focus on the strategic objective across the board.

It is perhaps a weakness of the Green Paper that it does not provide a sense, even at a rudimentary level, of the type of planning systems that might be of value to harness these conditions for good development planning. In South Africa our planning systems comprise post-apartheid planning legislation layered on top of apartheid planning legislation. It is hard to operate within the complex and frustrating system that this creates. Bad planning systems tend to destroy any initiative aimed at bringing about substantial change. This is clearly demonstrated by the failure to transform the apartheid space economy over the last decade and a half, despite impressive expenditure in the areas of housing, education, health and utility infrastructure. The warning signs have been there all along. Government's own 10-year review spoke to this failure, yet little was done to induce significant change (other than the questionable ASGISA and failed JIPSA processes). At the same time local government has been consistently identified as the sphere of government closest to the people, 'the face of government', where 'development meets the people', and other characterisations that underline its importance to the concept of developmental local governance. The Green Paper itself recognises the central role that local government plays in the development process. This is a fact of which the NPC will need to be cognisant.

Appetite for change?

The question that arises is whether government (or the ruling party) has the appetite for significant change. The implications of National Strategic Planning and the proposed NPC are that government will be expected to implement far-reaching and possibly dramatic changes, which could fundamentally alter the system of governance and the framework within which planning and development decisions are taken. In this regard, there are two factors that we should keep track of in order to measure the extent to which fundamental change will be possible.

Policy review vs turnaround strategy

In 2007, national government initiated a significant policy review of the powers and functions of sub-national government.

It was based on the experience, research and lessons of the previous decade, which showed that the system as it applies to provincial and local government is not working effectively and needs overhauling. Among other recommendations, it called for a review of municipal and provincial powers and functions as well as the structure and boundaries of municipalities. This fundamental review has never been released for debate. In its stead, a report entitled 'The State of Local Government in South Africa', was hastily commissioned by the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs. On the basis of this report and the Local Government Indaba held with municipalities in Boksburg, a 'turnaround strategy for local government' is being drafted and is meant to be available by the end of 2009.

Three problems are immediately identifiable with this course of action. Firstly, it ignores those recommendations which some in the ruling party have already accepted as necessary interventions if sub-national government is to be effective. Secondly, it assumes that the problems in the local government sphere are in fact caused by local government rather than by the structural deficiencies of the Constitution and the physical structure created through municipal demarcation. Thirdly, the turnaround strategy is yet another knee-jerk reaction from the same ministry that gave us the Urban Development Nodes, Rural Development Nodes, Project Consolidate and Siyenza Manje. Instead of dealing with the challenges presented by the policy review and making fundamental changes, there seems to be a penchant for more of the same which will ultimately not lead to much except to entrench the weaknesses of the existing system. The NPC, when it is established and in whatever form it takes, will most likely reach the same conclusions as that of the policy review, namely, that in order for a planning system to work and for an effective development state to be achieved, the current system of sub-national government will need to be fundamentally restructured. The recommendations they are likely to make are therefore unlikely to be radically different to those made in the policy review. If they can't be implemented now, how will the conditions have changed to such an extent in 18 months time that they will be implemented then?

Response of ANC allies

The response of the ruling party's allies to the concept of the NPC has been interesting. On one hand, there has been legitimate concern about the power of an unelected body such as the NPC over the rights and responsibilities of bodies such as Cabinet. In fact, SALGA has raised the same concern. On the other hand, their response has been vitriolic and full of hyperbole, which fails to deal with the content of the Green

Paper that they must have had some hand in pre-approving. Rather than seeing the Green Paper as a document that introduces the concept of centralised planning, they've personalised it as an attempt to centralise power around personalities. Where the debate has not been personalised, alternative models such as a two-tier Cabinet or a variation of different Cabinet clusters have been proposed. These do not constitute a NPC, which, if international models are used as a measure, should by its nature be linked to, but removed from the daily tasks of governing. The Cabinet-based approach does not really help the debate in respect of the value or importance of centralised planning in a democratic state with a decentralised executive. This means that the NPC could end up being little more than a clearing house for ideas developed elsewhere instead of being a thought leader in the field of development opportunities and identifying the choices the country needs to make.

Towards the White Paper on National Strategic Planning

Centralised planning, especially within our model of democratic governance, is an indispensable component of the developmental state. However, the implications are that a number of changes that will be necessary, and which are recommended by the NPC (whichever form it takes), will need to be implemented. In this regard, it will be useful to see how a White Paper on National Strategic Planning addresses:

- establishing a synchronous national planning system which supports rather than undermines sub-national planning, while also taking into consideration the constitutional principle of subsidiarity;
- changing development legislation so that apartheid era (and inappropriate post-apartheid) development-related legislation is repealed in favour of performance-based legislation that promotes spatial, social and economic restructuring;
- creating an NPC that simultaneously has political accountability as well as the relative autonomy to set its own research agenda and to have that agenda funded and the outcomes respected;
- suggestions on how recommendations that are already in place as a result of thorough, tested and legitimate research, (which meet the overall objectives of a developmental state) are implemented before the NPC is in place; and
- the time frames for establishing an NPC, its form and function, as well as what initiatives could be implemented before it is established.



Conclusion

This short article has sought to introduce the notion that national planning is important. However, on its own, national planning is insignificant as a development driver – especially where no planning systems exist. In any democracy, the state has no option but to tackle the messy aspects of engagement and the attendant tensions that consequently arise. These are made worse by a fractious ruling party and contradictory powers and functions of governing institutions. In this context a NPC is a very important contributor to a functional planning system. However, the extent to which South Africa is ready for it when other initiatives are being ignored, certainly makes for interesting discussion.

This makes the next phase of the discussion on National Strategic Planning, the White Paper, such an anticipated one.

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