

# SOUTH AFRICA: THE USE QUESTION – EXAMPLES AND LESSONS FROM THE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

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## COUNTRY CONTEXT

South Africa is a middle-income country with a diverse population of approximately 50 million people. The newest democracy in Africa, it achieved democratic rule in 1994 and adopted its constitution in 1996. Given the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, its stark geographic and economic landscape mirrors racial patterns. Since the advent of democracy, citizens have had high expectations that the democratic government would bring about economic and social transformation, and citizens generally look to the government to lead and effect change. The model of a pro-poor, interventionist and transformative South African developmental state has been working in the sense that policies and government programmes seek to ensure that political mandates are met.

The South African state has a bias towards redressing apartheid and thus focuses its programmes on effecting pro-poor and transformative programmes. In order to achieve this political mandate it requires strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and oversight in order to ensure the free flow of quality information on progress so that timely interventions can be made. Institutions supporting democracy (termed the Chapter 9 and 10 bodies in the 'Constitution of the Republic of South Africa') are prominent, and joined by the common purpose of upholding constitutional values and principles. Over the past 15 years, these newly mandated bodies working in the pursuit of good governance have developed a sophisticated oversight infrastructure that embraces most of the performance areas of government. Good governance is the extent to which there is transparency, efficiency, accountability and sound human resource management.

South Africa has a vibrant media, and much of the country's discourse focuses on issues of government performance. The bodies mentioned in this paper contribute to this discourse, largely by having produced some form of M&E. The work of these bodies focuses on different performance areas and become the subject of debate. Active citizen and political interest

in government performance results implies a high demand for performance results, thus creating good conditions for M&E to flourish. By focusing on results and examining different evaluation purposes, this paper demonstrates the tangible benefits that stem from M&E.

## M&E WITHIN THE OVERSIGHT ARCHITECTURE

South African democracy occurred parallel to the international movement over the past two decades of increased concern regarding the quality of public services. The increase in M&E as an activity, profession and function within government reflects a quest for credible and independent information on the performance of entities, the government in particular. It is no longer adequate for governments to report on their own progress; independent oversight has become mandatory, and the results of such reviews and assessments must be publicly available and disseminated without pre-release censorship.

M&E addresses a very real and direct public concern, as all citizens are interested parties in various roles (e.g. taxpayers, voters). Democracy necessitates that there be ongoing engagement between government and citizens as part of the accountability process; policy makers require M&E for activities such as policy review, implementation and improvement.

The following areas provide notable evidence of the value of M&E. M&E contributes to accountability, transparency and efficiency, with M&E evidence potentially forming the basis of policy and programme review. In addition, M&E has grown as a profession and is of public interest in that several stakeholders use M&E to debate matters of public concern. Given the various deliverables of M&E, a multi-pronged approach is required so that an M&E activity achieves the following:

- Stipulates clearly the evaluation framework, and through this the key performance questions to be asked;
- Demonstrates how different evaluation frameworks intersect with each other and promotes collaboration (rather than competition) among M&E actors;
- Ensures data integrity by specifying norms and standards for data gathering, validation, use and storage;
- Targets different decision makers with different evaluation results and with a clear understanding of what is expected from a particular evaluation intervention;
- Reports on the uptake of findings and recommendations so that there is a clear sense of how M&E activities affect policies and practices;
- Achieves all three M&E outcomes—transparency, accountability and learning—by recognizing the dynamic and interrelated nature among M&E purposes; and
- Contributes to democracy by providing evidence for debate and engagement, thus preventing an abuse of power.

The South African context, which has many producers and users of oversight data, illustrates how this approach relates to the supply and demand aspects of M&E. Suppliers/producers of oversight data (by M&E-related bodies) include the Public Service Commission (PSC),

Public Protector, Auditor-General, National Treasury, the Department of Public Service and Administration and Statistics South Africa. Among demanders/users of information are entities that are compelled to use it (e.g. departmental management), groups that require it for their own oversight (e.g. parliament), and groups that would draw on the information for their own research or advocacy purposes (e.g. academia, citizens).

The Presidency's Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation supports a Ministry that provides an overarching structure that guides M&E in the country, and is responsible for driving the government's outcomes approach. Evaluation results complement the work of the Presidency, which has the highest political authority to act.

### **The nature and primary purpose of evaluations**

Given strong national efforts, driven by bodies such as the PSC, the Auditor-General and the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, evaluations are undertaken and serve many purposes. Each of the oversight institutions in the country employs a combination of strategies to ensure that their particular mandates are met. The country subscribes to evaluation, which is a part of the thrust of the developmental state and which is also a legitimate activity stemming from the fact that M&E is reflected within the constitution as a mandatory function. Furthermore, government policies stipulate the need for evaluation, and this has been followed through in practice where programmes and policies are regularly evaluated. An evaluation policy has recently been adopted, after extensive consultation, thus supporting the evaluation function. Though the practice is not uniform throughout the country, attempts have been made to standardize practice through norms and standards. Oversight institutions' primary purpose remains accountability, which is in line with various constitutional provisions related to good governance. Attendant benefits, even if difficult to discern in the short term, include greater transparency about programme performance, and thus greater dissemination of results and learning.

Evaluation efforts cover a spectrum of areas and a range of issues and priorities. Different institutions conduct evaluations of policy, programmes, projects, specific interventions, initiatives and other areas. These generally occur in contexts such as standards of accountability, transparency, relevance, public interest (e.g. anti-corruption initiatives), redress and human resource practices. The evaluation of poverty reduction projects has received much attention, but of greatest public interest has been the monitoring and evaluation of service delivery.

Service delivery has been evaluated using different methodologies, and results triangulated drawing from other evaluations sources (e.g. non-government sector). The assessments have been against principles for Batho Pele, which is a normative set of what citizens can expect. The methods used to evaluate service delivery include compliance assessments, audits, citizen forums, inspections and appraisals. There is a significant amount of data on service delivery in different sectors and at different levels of analysis (national, provincial and local), which allows for effective interventions. The results are made publicly available for engagement and customized for management action (which the PSC then follows up on).

### **CONSTITUTIONALLY DRIVEN M&E**

There are distinct advantages to having constitutionally-driven M&E, such as enjoying universal status and respect, a guaranteed independence and high levels of credibility.

Mandated M&E efforts ensure that M&E is taken seriously and not viewed as an option. The constitutional provision for M&E, which the PSC is tasked with, and under which it is supposed to conduct in a manner which is fair, without fear, favour or prejudice, means that the PSC enjoys access and authority.

The nine values and principles for public administration are extensive in scope, and each of the nine values and principles is informed by a further set of policies and procedures. Engaging in an assessment of any of these requires identifying targets, norms and standards, which must be underpinned by a measurement system that allows for quantification of the values and principles. It is thus a complex task. The PSC has defined each of these in performance terms. For example, when assessing professional ethics there is an explicit understanding of what successful performance in the area means, how it can be measured and reported upon. There would thus be credible indicators, standards, methods for data collection, scoring and reporting systems for each. This has made the often lofty and intangible values and principles real and concrete. These principles are put into practice through the results for each area, whether generated for departments or entities.

The PSC has translated its constitutional mandate into a differentiated M&E system, which has provided it with the following:

- The ability to communicate confidently about the source, need and purpose of M&E across the country. This has resulted in a clearly defined M&E programme, which has also helped to galvanize support for M&E;
- The ability to choose evaluation issues due to its mandate to act on request or on its own accord. This has reinforced its independent status and the perception that it is not a political structure, but rather one that serves the country as a whole; and
- The ability to engage a range of actors with the common purpose of advancing M&E, which has resulted in the growth of the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association, thus building M&E capacity in the country.

## DIFFERENTIATED M&E PROGRAMME

It is expected that M&E should lead to the attainment of some purpose or goal. In this case, the national development plans would include the Millennium Development Goals, within which are clear targets that the country needs to achieve. The work of the National Planning Commission will become important, as the diagnostic analysis of development issues is critical for tracking purposes and assessing the extent to which policy and other interventions ameliorate problems.

It was recently launched and through the process of consultation currently underway, before proposals are formally adopted, greater clarity on what constitutes success in each of the areas should emerge. The Outcomes Approach of the presidency clearly defines goals to be achieved, thus making it possible to monitor and evaluate progress over time. The country has several frameworks for measuring critical elements that make up development, such as the budget (and efficient use thereof), human resource management, service delivery, corruption measures and public participation.

## Citizens

The PSC has taken a deliberate approach to ensure that citizens are engaged with government performance. The most accessible accountability tool is a toll-free facility that operates in all 11 South African official languages 24 hours per day, 365 days a year. The system has categorized and sent over 9,000 cases to the appropriate departments for attention. In many cases, the PSC intervened directly through investigation. Through this facility, the PSC has helped to recoup the equivalent of \$13,000.

Information from this M&E system assists in decision-making, as it provides departments with a reflection of what is taking place within them. In addition, political and administrative leadership have reporting requirements for actions taken to address referred cases. Aggregated information enters the public domain, providing the basis for debate, and provides the basis for generating more empirical data on corruption-related issues. Studies have indicated that reporting of incidents is really reporting of allegations of corruption, and not necessarily an indication of actual corruption. Only through investigation into the voracity of each of the allegations can a more accurate picture emerge as to what the actual incidents of corruption are.

Announced and unannounced inspections conducted by the staff of the PSC have provided a means for assessing how services are experienced. Service delivery inspections conducted at institutions such as clinics, police stations and courts have resulted in action-oriented reports that have been presented to the political and administrative leadership for action. There is substantial evidence that in sectors that have undergone inspection, service delivery has improved. The PSC has been able to triangulate this data with data from its other M&E activities, and there is now a solid body of work that reflects how citizens perceive and experience government services.

## Parliament

As a key user of M&E, it is important that the Parliament maintains relations between oversight bodies and itself. With power to summons and call to account, Parliament is a critical client of the PSC. Recently, different parliamentary committees have used PSC work. For example, the Portfolio Committee on Human Settlements used a PSC report on the department's governance to review its focus on how the programme is delivered. The rich oversight information generated by the PSC and Auditor-General provides the Parliament the ability to more effectively direct political and administrative leadership.

Engaging with the Parliament increases the respect accorded to evaluation reports. National and provincial government departments that are being evaluated are aware that reports will be reviewed by the various parliamentary committees. There are 140 of these entities in the country. The fact that there are different users with different levels of authority interrogating evaluation results generated by the PSC and other institutions, evaluated departments are beginning to take the exercise of evaluation seriously. The process of presenting findings to parliament and the provincial legislatures and committees facilitates the dissemination of information in the public domain, which further helps advance transparency and use. Some of the more successful evaluation endeavours include reports (e.g. 'The evaluation of the Department of Human Settlement') that lead to debate (by Parliament

and then followed by the media) regarding its findings and where department leadership was asked to comment on the report's recommendations. Parliament and its committees are key to transforming evaluation findings into action; the good relationship between the Parliament and the PSC has helped advance M&E in the country.

## Departments

There are different ways in which the PSC engages with departments, which are key service delivery units. The evaluation process helps to clarify the extent to which departments have successfully translated policy into tangible programmes, and the extent to which the process has been efficient and effective. A factor that contributes to overall departmental performance is the quality of staff management, which includes recruitment and selection and performance management. Therefore, an assessment of a department is a reflection of the overall quality of the leadership (political and administrative), strategic management (staff, resources, stakeholders) and the extent to which the developmental state is successful in a particular policy area.

The PSC engages with departments in all of the areas mentioned (e.g. reviews of policy, investigations into maladministration and other forms of reviews), and produces comparative data that indicates how departments perform in areas such as grievance management, managing financial misconduct and performance management. The most comprehensive assessment of departments is done through the Public Service Monitoring and Evaluation System, which has thus far assessed 150 departments and produced province- and sector-specific reports. The system allocates a score for each of the nine focal areas, termed the constitutional values and principles for public administration, and produces the basis for engagement on performance. Not only does it draw on performance information from other oversight bodies, but it also generates primary performance data. The process of engaging with results is also empowering, following the normal process of presenting draft findings for response, engaging with the management of departments on the scores, and making and tracking the implementation of recommendations.

The System is under a review process in order to make it more flexible to cater for the different sectors and to increase its diagnostic and evaluative elements. The initial System was standards-based, focused more on departmentally provided information, reduced evaluator discretion and placed a greater emphasis on compliance. As the public service evolved, it was decided to allow greater flexibility for diagnosis and to ensure that the administrative information on performance is validated through visits to service delivery sites. The aim is to gain a more comprehensive assessment of departmental performance. In time, this will include greater collaboration with other central M&E agencies in order to ensure, for example, that there is no duplication of effort and that issues such as outcomes are considered.

## Broader society

There will always be perceptions that the evaluation function is not sufficiently independent and is captured by some interest groups. This can and has been addressed by working actively with stakeholders so that the value of the discourse becomes a factor in ensuring that findings are irrefragable and the evaluation's independence is respected. The PSC has

engaged actively with a cross-section of society to ensure that it is perceived as genuinely advancing broad social dialogue on the evaluation of government.

Communication strategies have been used to draw in greater sections of society to engage on evaluation findings. The media (print, radio and television) help disseminate messages from engagements such as hearings, inspections, round tables, seminars, talk shows call-ins and conferences. M&E use has also been improved through collaboration with academia, the media, research institutions, non-governmental organizations and M&E professionals. This can be noted in the increase in citations of PSC work. The PSC is exploring technology as a means of accelerating report dissemination.

### EVIDENCE OF USE: TOWARDS RESULTS BASED DECISION-MAKING

The PSC monitors all of its recommendations through a systematic tracking system, from the point at which they leave the PSC to the point where they reach departments. The purpose of tracking is to ensure that recommendations are not lost; a deliberate dissemination strategy that forces decision makers to react to findings by the PSC prevents this from happening.

Not all reports necessarily require a response. In such instances, these would contribute to knowledge generation. It is important that the intention of each report is known up front. However, in most instances the evaluation reports require a management response, and it is thus necessary to realistically establish what this means in practice; by whom, by when and when a response would be viewed as valid. The PSC learned that it was not adequately directing its initial recommendations, but the centralized tracking system improved recommendations' uptake.

There are now several instances in which the PSC can claim that an evaluation has led to change. Examples include policy review (the term of appointment of heads of departments) and adjustment to overarching programmes related to rural development. More specifically, at a departmental level, the PSC can track whether a change that has been recommended has been implemented. The follow-up on inspected sites of service delivery has also shown improvements, which once again demonstrates how a proactive M&E approach can provide assistance. The more M&E units are called upon to make presentations, the greater the receptiveness to acting on results. This helps to deepen the accountability framework.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has shown how a comprehensive approach is required to ensure use. It has indicated the need for infrastructure to be in place, an enabling environment and demand and desire for results. This has taken place in South Africa due in part to the urgency for social change and its historic circumstances. This paper has indicated that there are several M&E players, all of which contribute to the oversight infrastructure. It is important that they collaborate so that there is no evaluation fatigue. Critically important, is that there must be a directed M&E effort, which entails delineating the clients in order to establish both individual and collective needs, and then addressing these through customized evaluation products, approaches and services. In conclusion, evaluators compete for decision makers' time and attention. This requires strategic and strong communication so as to demonstrate that M&E leads to evidence-based decision-making.