

Building monitoring and evaluation in South Africa: The Public Service Commission and the development of an evaluation culture and capacity

Richard Levin and Indran Naidoo

Introduction: Historical background of evaluation activities in South Africa

This is South Africa's tenth year of democracy, and there is much to celebrate. A good governance framework has been embraced and inscribed within the Constitution. Chapter 10 stipulates that Public Administration must be governed by democratic values and principles including:

- A high standard of professional ethics
- Efficient, economic and effective use of resources
- Development-oriented public administration
- Provision of services in an impartial, fair, equitable and unbiased manner
- Participation in policy-making and responsive to people's needs
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Good human resource management and career development practices to maximise human potential
- Representivity¹

In translating these values and principles into practice, South Africa has enacted a number of legislative measures, and developed policies and procedures in line with internationally accepted good governance practices. These have in many instances involved the implementation of elements of the contemporary public management framework, including a commitment to monitoring and evaluation. The development of monitoring and evaluation systems and practices has been uneven, although there are a number of exciting initiatives, which have drawn on a variety of methodologies.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) was established *inter alia*, "to investigate, monitor and evaluate the organisation and administration, and the personnel practices, of the public service"². Translating this constitutional mandate into a set of concrete practices has been challenging. It has also been important to understand that the PSC is not the only role-player in the attempt to build a culture and capacity for monitoring and evaluation in the country.

Key problems and challenges in implementing evaluation practices

South Africa faces a number of challenges in developing and implementing monitoring and evaluation systems and practices. One of these relates to post evaluation usage. Use, as Michael Patton has argued, is not an "abstraction", but "concerns how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings"³. The imperative to become utilisation oriented and useful should not override the recognition that evaluation causes tension and uncertainty in organisations, because it is "an

¹ *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, Chapter 10, Section 195, (1)

² *Ibid.*, Chapter 10, Section 196, 4 (c).

³ M. Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, Sage (1997:20).

intervention that causes ripples in the life of an institution"⁴. Treading the delicate balance between intrusion and providing 'developmental advice' has been a huge challenge for the PSC in exercising its mandate.

In addition to developing a public service monitoring and evaluation system (discussed below), the PSC also undertakes a variety of evaluation research in order to provide advice to national and provincial organs of state on public management and administration.

It has, for example, undertaken in-depth evaluations on the national housing subsidy, the structure and organisation of the national Department of Transport and the creation of alternative transport agencies as well as on land administration in the Eastern Cape province⁵.

The response to these and other evaluations as well as the uptake of recommendations has varied. In the case of the housing subsidy, many of the recommendations were in fact echoed in the results of a PSC-driven a citizen satisfaction survey. Although the Commission wrote to the Minister sending copies of both reports, there has been no response, making it difficult to gauge the extent to which the evaluation findings have been used.

In the case of the department of Transport evaluations, a follow up meeting with the minister was held in which it became clear that some of the recommendations pertaining to organisational structure were being embraced by the department. This included a suggestion for the establishment of a monitoring capacity within the department to assess policy impact. Recommendations on accountability of alternative service delivery agencies created within the transport sector are in line with broader proposals on state-owned enterprises and public entities, being handled by the Governance and Administration cluster⁶.

The provincial land administration report is instructive. The request to the PSC came from the Premier of the province. Land administration is, however, a national competency, meaning that implementation of recommendations would require endorsement and involvement of the National Department of Land Affairs. Key tenure legislation was not in place when the report was drafted. The national department was therefore sceptical about the PSC's report which it felt could preempt legislation still in the pipeline.

These examples suggest that South Africa still has some way to go in embracing a culture that would facilitate high quality monitoring and evaluation. They suggest that there is an uneven response to evaluation, as well as a need for greater coordination of effort. At any given time, it is likely that there will be a number of initiatives that coincide and that would have greater impact if better coordinated. Coordination and integration in government is a global challenge for all states, affecting a range of programmes, services and activities.

Other challenges relate to the building of state capability and capacity for monitoring and evaluation. Capability refers to the appropriate alignment of institutions, while capacity refers to the development of the necessary human resources to implement evaluation. Each government department should ideally develop both evaluation capability and capacity. This involves appropriate internal institutional arrangements as well as developing the necessary skills for monitoring and evaluation. In addition, it is necessary to develop a national capability and capacity to implement government-wide monitoring and evaluation systems.

⁴ PJ Rogers and D Fraser, "Appreciating Appreciative Inquiry", in *New Directions for Evaluation*, 100, (Winter 2003).

⁵ Public Service Commission, *Report on the National Housing Subsidy Scheme*, (2003); Public Service Commission, *Report on the evaluation of service delivery innovation in the creation of agencies at the Department of Transport*, (2003) Public Service Commission, *Report on the evaluation of the Department of the Department of Transport and its agencies*, (2003); Public Service Commission, *Report on the Evaluation of Land Administration in the Eastern Cape*, (2003)

⁶ The Cabinet has organised itself into clusters in order to improve intergovernmental coordination. The Governance and Administration cluster is the key role-player in promoting monitoring and evaluation within government. This is discussed below.

Main drivers of the evaluation agenda within and outside government

The key driver of the monitoring and evaluation agenda within the South African government system is the cluster on Governance and Administration. This structure brings together the key role players in the broad governance area. These include the Presidency, the department of Public Service and Administration, National Treasury, Statistics South Africa, the department of Provincial and Local Government and the Public Service Commission.

The President in his last two states of the nation addresses that mark the opening of parliament each year has identified Monitoring and evaluation as a government priority. Accordingly, the Governance and Administration cluster has been involved in developing a strategy to implement a government wide framework.

Current policy and operational strategies being used to address policies and issues

The South African government faces several challenges in implementing a government-wide framework for monitoring and evaluation. These include data sources, skills and capability and the uptake of an evaluation culture. The following section of this paper on plans and next steps will map out the strategy for the future. This section looks at the case of the PSC's public service monitoring and evaluation system as a case study of good practice on the implementation of a government-wide monitoring and evaluation system⁷.

The PSC's public service monitoring and evaluation system

The PSC, as noted above, undertakes a wide range of research and evaluation projects, often at the request of its principals or in response to a need identified internally. Since 2000 the Commission has been working to put in place a long-term research project focusing on the performance of individual public service departments.

Phase One of the process started with a scoping exercise that analysed the type of system that should be put in place and what should be researched. Based on its recommendations a successful pilot study (Phase Two) was undertaken in the Northern Cape in 2001.

Phase Three followed the Northern Cape pilot: the research instrument was simplified and streamlined and used to undertake research in seven national departments and seven provincial departments in three provinces during 2002.

The system looks at the extent to which departments comply with the nine principles for public administration prescribed in the South African Constitution noted in the Introduction to this paper. The research involves analysing departmental performance against a single performance indicator for each principle.

Throughout the various phases of the monitoring and evaluation project attempts have been made to streamline and simplify the research instrument. Focus and clarity have been recognized as essential to producing rigorous, concise reports that provide the kinds of information that will advise and support decision makers in drawing conclusions and taking the appropriate steps.

The 2002 framework had a number of shortcomings, including the following:

1. Despite efforts to simplify the questionnaires used in the Northern Cape pilot, the assessment framework was still too long, detailed and cumbersome and required information that was often not easily accessible or quantifiable.

⁷ This part of the paper draws extensively on: Public Service Commission, *Public Service Monitoring and Evaluation System: First Consolidated Report*, (Forthcoming 2004).

2. It required researchers to draw conclusions and undertake analysis for which they were not necessarily prepared or appropriately skilled
3. The framework allowed researchers too much discretion in making their final assessments and meant that departments in similar situations could be scored very differently.
4. It was too long and detailed and did not always lead to the production of simple, clear reports.

At the same time, the most important key features were affirmed as relevant: compliance to the Constitutional principles still provides an appropriate and illustrative conceptual structure to undertake the analysis of departmental performance.

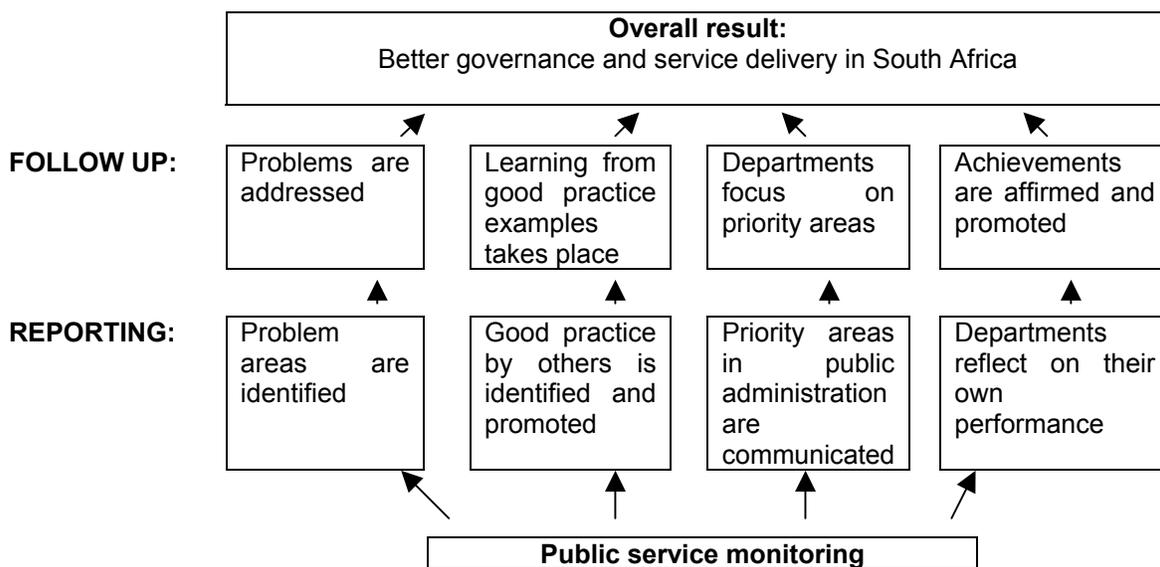
The performance indicators selected for each principle have shown themselves to be very useful in understanding how departments are faring in meeting the exacting standards set by the Constitutional principles.

The basic format and layout used in the 2002 framework has also proved to be fairly simple to complete and essentially user-friendly. In recognition of these factors, the revised framework has been shortened and made more focused, but the core essentials have been retained.

The scoring system has been made much more explicit and has shifted from a global scaling approach to one in which points are allocated for the presence of certain attributes, such as certain policies or systems. This makes it much easier to score the departments and reduces the level of discretion available to researchers. It also creates clarity on the part of departments as to what is required to meet good governance standards. Further changes to the scoring system may still be made.

The PSC approach: a programme logic model

The diagram below is a programme logic model indicating the intended outcomes of the system. This is a way of demonstrating how the public service monitoring and evaluation system intends to practically achieve its planned outcomes. It shows the intended sequence of events and impacts.



Choosing performance indicators

A key element of this project is the choice of the performance indicator used to illustrate how a Department is performing in terms of a particular principle.

During the pilot project in the Northern Cape several indicators were used for each principle, but this was found to make the process too long, detailed and obscure. As a result, it was agreed that a single performance indicator would be used for each principle. Based on the Northern Cape research, indicators were chosen that were quantifiable, easily researched and which offered insight into practices more broadly.

Indicators were selected on the basis that:

- The area illustrated by the indicator is critically important and issues in its management need to be noted (i.e. Researching the area sends a clear signal to Departments about the most important areas of public service management and administration); and
- Performance indicated through the research is illustrative of overall performance in terms of the principle (i.e. performance in terms of that indicator can be extrapolated to suggest performance in complying with the principle as a whole).

An example would be the choice of the performance indicator for professional ethics. The chosen indicator is: "Cases of misconduct are dealt with effectively and promptly."

The manner in which cases of ethical misconduct are handled is very illuminating. Departments that allow these cases to drag on for long periods of time, which have low incidences of pursuing cases and which are lenient on wrongdoers can be assumed to be doing little to address professional ethics in the workplace. The manner in which these cases are addressed is also a matter that is covered by regulations and records should be easily accessible, making it an easily researched performance indicator.

The system checks that:

1. A procedure is in place for reporting, recording and managing misconduct cases.
2. Cases are responded to promptly and finalised.
3. The department has adequate capacity to handle misconduct cases.

It is assumed that the selection of this indicator from a range of possible indicators of professional ethical performance and the associated standards will provide a clear signal to departments on how they are performing in the area and how they can improve.

Improving performance through monitoring and evaluation

This project reflects the PSC's commitment to contributing to the ongoing improvement of service delivery by government to all South African citizens. Service delivery improvement is a complex, challenging process that has many components to it. A very important element is creating a thorough, shared understanding of the current context and performance levels so that changes can be made where necessary and ensuring that excellence is replicated on a wider basis.

The research undertaken in this system is one of the ways in which the PSC contributes to service delivery improvement. By determining which areas are in need of attention, which are problems and by clearly identifying examples of good practice, managers are supported as they make decisions about where to target resources and energy.

Of course this makes it essential that the findings and recommendations from the research are accepted and valued by the departments who are monitored. This remains a major area of concern: government departments are complicated institutions and it is often difficult to access the right decision makers to get research findings considered and accepted and the related recommendations implemented.

The experience of the project so far is varied: some departmental leaders have proved to be hostile to being monitored and responded somewhat defensively to the reports generated by the process, particularly where they have been of a critical nature. Others have been supportive and

helpful and have received research findings with interest and enthusiasm. Where senior managers have been supportive the process has been more successful and effective.

The strategic focus in subsequent rounds of evaluation needs to be on ensuring that findings from the system are presented to heads of departments and managers in ways that empower and support them. This will require political support as well as the forging of good working relations at a project level.

Implementation of the system emphasizes the need for a standard government-wide monitoring and evaluation framework. It also shows that the public service is a complex and diverse network of institutions facing a range of daunting challenges. To achieve its own objectives this research programme needs to be relevant and useful to departments and must make ongoing strategic and operational changes so that a good working relationship between researchers and departments is built.

A government-wide M&E framework

While providing useful insight into the public service and its performance, the PSC's system does not answer all the important questions about how government is faring. Important questions such as value for money and human resource utilisation are not really addressed. This is why it is important for agreement on a systematic and integrated overarching framework for monitoring and evaluating government performance.

Such a framework should clearly allocate responsibility for monitoring particular areas to particular agencies, such as value for money monitoring by National Treasury, local level service delivery monitoring by the department of Provincial and Local Government and human resource utilisation by the department of Public Service and Administration.

If such a framework were in place the PSC's focus on governance and administration would make more sense, since other perspectives would be addressed elsewhere.

Using research findings in a constructive and positive way

This research programme provides detailed and generalised information on departments and the public service as a whole. To be valuable and useful the findings and recommendations made with regard to each department need to be taken up and implemented, or alternative strategies adopted instead.

The first round of evaluation had limited success in this regard: it is not clear that departments are using the findings nor that they are implementing its recommendations. For this to happen a better, sustained relationship between the departments and the PSC is probably required. It is important that the PSC, in undertaking evaluation work, constantly reflects on how it intends to achieve its goal of contributing to improved public service delivery in South Africa and that it makes whatever strategic and operational changes become necessary.

The PSC and other monitoring and evaluation agencies in South Africa also need to consider which methodology they wish to use in order to achieve particular outcomes. Indeed the PSC has had some success in impacting on the implementation of policy, through the use of Citizens' Forums, which can be understood as an expression of the appreciative inquiry approach.

The PSC and participatory, appreciative inquiry

The PSC in partnership with National Parliament has developed tools and methodologies to promote the incorporation of the views and perceptions of citizens in the process of service delivery improvement. This gave rise to the adoption of Citizens' Forums in which institutions independent of the executive participated jointly with citizens in proposing practical measures to improve service delivery.

The forums focus on specific delivery programmes⁸. During preparatory meetings involving various civil society groupings, participants were requested to prepare inputs and proposals on improving the identified programme. The forums last for two days. Day one involves presentation and discussion of various citizen inputs, and the identification of key themes to be work-shopped on the second day. The workshops require participants to not only be critical, but to identify what works as well as to provide practical recommendations on the improvement of specific services.

Citizens' Forums are both *empowering* and *educational*. They entail a multidirectional flow of knowledge through interactions between individuals, groups and institutions. People acquire experience in improving their living conditions through interaction with technical experts, state employees and their own individual and collective action. Citizens begin from the standpoint of their own local knowledge that enters a melting pot with expert knowledge aiming to generate transformations that endure.

This form of popular participation creates a better acceptance of decisions made by authorities and educates citizens to act independently. It also builds a *partnership* between individuals working together as a group, and between the group and change agents working with it. Citizens' Forums can also address the challenge of cultural diversity in South Africa. They provide a unique context for participatory evaluation where citizens and the state collectively contribute towards quality and improved service delivery.

This methodology may also be viewed as a form of appreciative inquiry, insofar as it focuses both on problems and how to resolve them, as well as on what it working well⁹. It was piloted and applied in the context of programme improvement. The forums were followed by sessions with participating departments requiring them to commit themselves to proposals that they were in a position to implement, as well as indicate where and why they were unable to respond to particular suggestions. The forums were reconvened to feed this information back to citizens and in one pilot site indicated that several of their recommendations had already been implemented.

The PSC monitors the implementation of all its recommendations. When the Citizens' Forums are rolled out at a national scale, participatory forms of monitoring will be introduced to establish the extent of the uptake of recommendations that emerge out of the process.

Plans for next steps to strengthen monitoring and evaluation initiatives

Assessing performance requires constant feedback from citizens, service users and partners so that policies and implementation practices can be improved. This makes a clear performance management framework for government essential.

There is a recognition that institutions at the centre of government need to take the initiative in developing an impact monitoring system for the whole of government. The key institutions are National Treasury, the department of Public Service and Administration, the department of provincial and Local Government, Statistics South Africa and the Office of the Public Service Commission. All sit on the Governance and Administration cluster, which has identified rigorous monitoring and evaluation to improve performance as a key priority for the second decade of freedom.

A national statistical system should complement and strengthen the monitoring and evaluation effort by providing statistical data and shared technical definitions. This makes the fast tracking of the national statistical system essential for successful impact monitoring. Statistical information is generally collected through a census or surveys. Such information tends to be collected

⁸ The pilot project focused on Primary Health Care in the Mpumalanga province and Poverty Alleviation delivered by the Eastern Cape Province's department of Social Development.

⁹ See AT Coghlan, H Preskill, T Tzavaras Catsambas, "An Overview of Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation", *New Directions for Evaluation*, 100, (Winter 2003: 5)

periodically and is better suited to the measurement of outcomes rather than specific outputs. It is often not usable for the measurement of annual performance but is better used for assessing results over three to five year periods.

Clear governance and development indicators are needed to measure government performance. These will constitute an overarching framework, which will include common definitions and standards. Statistical information on people's quality of life and their relative opportunities is currently not readily or widely available. Monitoring and evaluation of government programmes will allow decisions to be based on the best available information and makes the use of standardised impact indicators essential.

It is unrealistic to create a single, all-embracing whole-of-government M&E system. A more realistic approach should focus on the establishment of various government wide systems. As argued, Treasury, for example should focus on value for money, the Department of Public Service and Administration should focus on human resource utilisation, while the Department of Provincial and Local Government should focus on local government performance. Clearly such an approach would involve each system having its own specialised areas of focus. Nevertheless, the various systems should be based on shared standards, definitions and classifications and care should be taken to ensure that they interact conceptually and avoid duplication.

The National Statistics System (NSS) and other monitoring and evaluation systems, such as the Public Service M&E System at the PSC are part of the solution and should be coordinated with other information sets and systems in terms of common concepts and standards.

It is also important that monitoring and evaluation become more utilisation-focused if it is to have the intended impact on state performance. Institutions such as the PSC are already involved in monitoring and evaluating performance. However, departments often do not seriously consider recommendations that do not involve public service regulations. There also needs to be a stronger link between individual and organizational performance assessments. This means that managers must not only be assessed in terms of their areas of competence, but also in terms of project and programme results.