

## ***It should be a 'productive' instead of 'service delivery' public sector***

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South Africa needs to adopt a conceptual and practical shift that downplays the discourse of “service delivery” in favour of a “productive” public sector. This does not mean that the current wave of “service delivery” demonstrations are without foundation, but a recognition that such a discourse has both conceptual and practical weaknesses.

South Africa emerges from a liberation tradition, and is governed by a liberation movement. Thus, “service delivery” partly bears the dangers of liberation governors asserting that “we liberated you from apartheid, and now we will deliver unto you your socio-economic needs”. This historical based claim to authority and legitimacy, rather than the productivity of the public sector, weighs much heavier on the needy citizenry. Thus, the dominant discourse in the current “service delivery” demonstrations is: “what government promised us” and by extension “what we are entitled to”.

Here are two possible unintended complementary weaknesses of “service delivery” discourse: It is not too motivational on the side of the governors and their civil service, and also brews a sense of entitlement on the side of the citizenry. The overall unintended consequence of all this maybe complacency both within and outside the state.

The challenge is to build a productive state and society both conceptually and practically. That is, the public service must adopt a sense of being productive institutionally, individually, and collectively. Service delivery; and monitoring and evaluation, are mere integral parts of what makes up a productive public sector. Whilst, the dominant public sector discourse in this country has been one of “service delivery”, this has been articulated virtually de contextualized from the overall performance of the state.

Consequently, many of the currently ill termed “service delivery” protests are actually a quest for a better quality of life. Rather than an appeal for running water, and electricity, demonstrators are seeking economic opportunities. Those demonstrating from the squatter camps and townships would rather have economic opportunities to move out of such locations.

Similarly, the increasing discourse of monitoring and evaluation should not be articulated in isolation. It needs to be located within a bigger context of a productive public sector. Otherwise, it risks being limited to statistical accounts. That is, ministers and senior managers may deliver numerical targets without the necessary quality.

The advantage of focusing on the productivity of the public sector is that it combines both the meeting of numerical targets, and the quality of such targets. It encapsulates everything: the various services delivered, and the quality of such services. Thus, it is not just the number of crooks arrested, but how many were successfully prosecuted; it is not just the number of students that are thought and pass, but how many qualify for admission at higher education institutions; it means beyond job opportunities created – how many are actually at work; It goes beyond the public busses government puts on the street, to how much time people wait at bus stop, and reach their destination safely and timely; and, it is the amount of time people wait for medical attention at public hospital that determines public hospital productivity.

This is what President Jacob Zuma meant by a “performance orientated government” in his 2010 state of the nation address. The same is also referred to as an “Outcomes – based government”. In the latter, the focus is on the

impact of the quality of life of the citizen. This goes beyond the current limited interpretation of “service delivery”. It also deals with the dangers of limiting monitoring and evaluation to an IT system, and mere numerical targets.

The grounds are fertile to elevate and locate service delivery, and monitoring and evaluation within the strategic context of a productive public sector. Two examples stand out: the building of stadia earmarked for FIFA 2010 soccer world cup has moved at a phenomenal pace. These have been delivered on time, and are of world class standards. During the bidding process, government provided guarantees to Fifa that the world cup infrastructure will be delivered qualitatively, and timeously – and this is the case. Whilst the building of the stadia was partly delivered through partnerships with the private sector, the public sector is the key driver. The second example is that of Gautrain. It is a massive infrastructure project which is timeously and qualitatively progressing through the set targets.

Given the two above factors, the South African public sector does have the capacity to perform at the highest levels. It can be productive when called upon to do so. If the public service can deliver on its commitments and undertakings to a major world body such as Fifa, then similarly it can and should deliver its commitments to the taxpaying electorate. The same zeal committed to the 2010 soccer world cup infrastructure building, can be applied to the building of houses and other Expanded Public Works Projects (EPWP).

Perhaps the big problem is that many in the public service may have actually grown to believe the hype about lack of capacity. Capacity building is a continuous process, and needs to be approached that way. The assumption that it is lacking is actually counterproductive.

Entrenching a productive public sector doctrine will contribute immensely to the professionalization of the public service. It will give a greater meaning to service delivery. It will also gear government’s performance systems beyond targets to quality outcomes.

Perhaps the high levels of public sector productivity in delivering South Africa’s commitment to delivering the 2010 infrastructure should be the major legacy that the public sector must take forward.