

Editorial

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Guest Editor

At its general assembly in September 2015, the United Nations approved the sustainable development goals. These new global targets for improving people's lives across the globe extend for another 15 years the values and principles of the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs focus on the big picture – embracing the pursuit of economic development while leaving no one behind and giving every child a fair chance of leading a decent life. Underlying the SDGs is an emphasis on protecting future generations by addressing climate change, adopting renewable energy and managing resources sustainably.

As the African Progressive Panel points out however, the SDGs will only succeed globally if they can succeed in Africa – whose rapidly growing population most needs the change that the agenda describes (APP, 2015:8). So, what will it take for the SDGs to succeed in Africa? In this editorial I highlight three prerequisites. Firstly, we need a committed, functional and professional public service that is transparent in its activities and has respect for the poor and vulnerable members of society. Secondly, we need local community members that are able to galvanize the views of the community in not only planning for development but also for monitoring development projects through oversight activities. Lastly, we need to pay specific attention to the needs of women who bear the brunt of a dysfunctional state at many levels including health, transport, housing and environmental degradation.

The views expressed by the various authors in this issue speak to these three areas. **Wissink** starts off the discussion with a reflection on building a capable state. The focus is on South Africa's public service, which has undergone and continues to undergo tremendous change in an effort to embrace the needs of a previously excluded group of people. Nevertheless, **Wissink's** views resonate with public services of many African countries which continuously attempt to refine their practices and programmes to ensure that public officials truly serve and reflect the values of their constitutions, meet all the ethical requirements, and constantly maintain practices of good governance. For **Wissink**, education and training of public servants

can achieve much, particularly if academics and practitioners agree to engage and grow the discipline of Public Administration in line with the paradigms and the ever-changing demands and challenges of contemporary society.

There is no doubt that new knowledge, innovation and technology are increasingly becoming the drivers of growth and development in leading economies that are continuously shedding their reliance on traditional resources such as labour and capital. Krakk (2005: 58) notes the critical need for multi-functional competencies required of employees due to the changing nature of work organization particularly the integration of theory and practice. In South Africa however, discrimination in the provision of education and training opportunities meant that generations of black South Africans were prevented from acquiring the skills that would make them eligible to pursue productive employment opportunities (Lewis, 2002:727). Accordingly, Adcorp (2014) reports a consistent shortage of skilled workers leading to around 470,000 unfilled vacancies in the South African private sector. Skills shortage is a major constraint to growth, investment, and job creation and curtails the pursuit of a knowledge economy. To become a knowledge-based economy Africa will require that the essential building blocks for skills development be put in place. In South Africa, according to **Jobandhian and Mothopeng**, the basic building blocks are in place given the policy and legislative framework that is supportive of skills training in the work place. The primary elements that assisted and strengthened the National Skills and Development Strategy in particular are designed to ensure skills development for employment creation, poverty alleviation, infrastructure expansion, and the development of small, medium and micro enterprises. A lot however still needs to be done particularly in the operations and administration processes of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

Kekana, Mtapuri and Thabethe extend the discussion on the professionalization of the public service using an empirical study on procurement for a school feeding scheme. As Ambe and Badenhorst-Weiss (2012:242) remind us, procurement is central to the government service delivery system and promotes aims which are, arguably, secondary to the primary aim of procurement such as using procurement to promote social, economic or environmental policies. Indeed the model proposed by Kekana, Mtapuri and Thabethe highlights the need for ownership of the school feeding schemes by the parents and schools as this ensures control and accountability in the procurement and implementation

of the programme. While this article focuses on public procurement, one should not lose sight of the underlying theme – the School Nutrition programme with its multi-faceted objectives. The fact that the proposed model suggests the use of local women’s co-operatives to provide good quality service means that not only are children provided with the much needed nutrition, but also that there is job creation for the unemployed women groups in the communities surrounding the Schools. There is thus a strong social objective in many government programmes that public servants ought to be acutely aware of in the course of implementing government policies.

Phago and van der Westhuizen explore the issue of public service delivery within the context of the provision of housing – recognised globally as a basic human right. The provision of this basic human right is, sadly, compounded by a multiplicity of factors. First of all provision of housing has to happen in concomitance with the provision of running water, sanitation and a safe environment. Secondly, in South Africa, there is the added challenge of having to work through the housing backlogs, monitoring standards of construction as well as the growing urbanisation. Phago and van der Westhuizen identify yet another challenge in the provision of housing, namely, managing housing policies crafted at one level of government but have to be implemented by a different (lower) level of government. This particular challenge speaks to operational and administrative issues of coordination and organisation – issues that require committed and professional public servants as well as an informed citizenry that is capable of monitoring plans and processes.

On the issue of an informed citizenry many African countries have embraced decentralisation with a view to increasing the reach of the state, improve delivery of public services and increase oversight over the use of public resources. In this regard, local councillors play a crucial role in planning, monitoring and evaluating development projects. **Mwesigwa** reflects on the ability of these councillors to actually play this oversight role. In his article he evaluates the effect of English language proficiency on councillor involvement in council sessions across Uganda’s municipalities. Mwesigwa concludes that while English language proficiency itself does not constitute action; speaking, listening, reading and writing in English can increase a local councillor’s involvement in local government’s development programmes in Uganda. He further warns that councillors that are more proficient in English are more likely to influence council decisions on the basis of their English

proficiency and not necessarily because of their interest in the needs of the council or those of the poor and marginalised.

In Africa, any discussion on the poor and marginalised inevitably involves the plight and the unique needs of women and children. Women and children significantly bear the greater burden in respect to the effects of poor service delivery. In a situation of a dysfunctional procurement system, poor public transport, inadequate training programmes or inactive local councils, women are more likely to bear the brunt. Often however, it is not a dysfunctional public service system but embedded cultural practices that affect the livelihoods of women. **Eniola and Mubangizi** tackle the contentious issue of reproductive health rights of women in Africa using the particularly engaging cases of South Africa and Nigeria. The authors argue that while some African countries have signed and ratified various international instruments on the protection of the reproductive health rights of women – and incorporated them into their national laws – there is a gap between policy and implementation. Eniola and Mubangizi lament the ignorance that has led to some women either subscribing or simply accepting infringements of their rights occasioned by prevailing cultural practices in their particular communities. Their conclusion is that whenever there is a conflict between cultural practices and women’s reproductive health rights, the latter should take precedence. Protecting women’s rights – indeed protecting all human rights, professionalising the public service, skills development and participation in local governance are some of the building blocks towards the achievement of the recently adopted sustainable development goals. That is the underlying message in this issue.

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