



The National School of Government's Inaugural Annual Lecture Marking its 10th Anniversary, 19 October 2023, ZK Matthews Building, Pretoria

Delivered by Mashupye H. Maserumule, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Professor of Public Affairs at the Tshwane University of Technology

As I entered here, I started to contend with a very strong sense of ambivalence about what I have been requested to do, which is to give a lecture. I feel like the National School of Government (NSG) has requested me to give a lecture in a wedding. And you know that in a wedding there is always that uncle who would put you in your place if you dare try interrupt a celebratory ambience with anything that resembles the instruction of that old school principal who does not have a sense of occasion. By saying this I want to start with an apology to that uncle, in case I come across as not having a sense of occasion. I just want to say to him, if had known, I would have accepted the NSG's invitation to be part of the celebrations but declined the invitation to give a lecture. But that things are the way they are, let's just continue.

The analogy of "a return to the simulator" as a marker of the theme of your 10th Anniversary is an appropriate way to underscore the importance of how to optimise human capital formation for building state capacity. Public servants are, in the words of an American New Keynesian economist Joseph Stiglitz, "society's most valuable assets". And therefore, to use the analogy of one 'lowly bureaucrat' around here, like pilots and crew, public servants need a simulator to sharpen their capabilities for diligence in the provision of the public good for the good of society. The notion of a simulator, as a function of continuous learning and professional development, therefore presupposes rejuvenation of the state's capability in the provision of the public good.

In an evolving society where the complexities of managing state affairs abound, public servants need to be continuously trained, retrained, skilled and up-skilled. This is because, in the words of the English economist Alfred Marshall, "the state is the most precious of human possessions, and no care can be too great to be spent on enabling it to do its work in the best way". Building state capacity and institutional capability is the function of this, and are key for economic growth and the promotion of the welfare of the citizens.

For our purposes this afternoon, state capacity should be understood as the function of the adequacy of skills base and the relevance of the knowledge of those who are in the employ of the state, coupled with the ethical disposition, while institutional capability is concerned with the ability to put all of these to use in the provision of the public good. Iain McLean, the University of Oxford emeritus professor of politics defines the public good as "any good that, if supplied to anybody, is necessarily supplied to everybody, and from whose benefits it is impossible or impracticable to exclude anybody".



Your 10 years of existence as the NSG is an important lesson of institutional ingenuity on how to enable “the state to do its work in the best way”. We have watched your evolution over the years, where as you assert your strategic reinvention to deliver on your constitutional and legislative mandate to provide education, training and development, you appreciated that the task of building state capacity through various training and development interventions need a collaborative effort to maximise impact. And this is through, as your strategy shows, “integrated and collaborative network of training instructions and practitioners, including independent individual contractors, onboard trainers, higher institutions and private entities”(NSG, 2022-2023).

All these you invited to partner with you in the collaborative effort to build state capacity and institutional capability through various education, training and development interventions. These have long been recognised, from the inception of our democracy, as the key imperatives for the country to assert its developmental trajectory, where the notion of a Civil Service College was bandied about in the governing party’s early discussions on the ready to govern (McLennan, 2007).

Lurking in your decade of longevity are various antecedents that completes your history, from your humble beginning as the Public Service Training Institute (PSTI) in 1987, where along the way you became the South African Management Institute (SAMDI) and Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA) in 1996 and 2008 respectively. Compared to your predecessors, your gaze has now expanded to include those who are in the local sphere of government, state-owned enterprises, and organs of state. In other words, your focus in building state capacity is no longer only on the administrations in the national and provincial spheres of government but include the entirety of the state.

I stretched your history to 1987 perhaps as a side issue but important to demonstrate that you come a long way to achieve this milestone. This anniversary needs take note of the totality of the various epochs of your evolution. Another side issue which I need to mention is that you are partially funded by the state. And you derive revenue from your training and development programmes. Covid-19 pandemic hit, but you survived with remarkable resilience despite losing revenue because training and development interventions had to be cancelled. In this, there is a story to tell about how to build institutions that works. This needs to be documented as a case study for lessons on building state capacity and institutional capability.

I am saying this to emphasise the significance of learning from own lessons. This is because we do not do this much. Instead, we tend to be fascinated by foreign templates that lack contextual relevance to our own situational peculiarities. And the irony of all this is that, elsewhere, some tend to pick up our success stories, package them into case studies, and invite us to their countries to teach us about the very lessons that they learned from us. As I say this, South African Revenue Service come to mind



as a success story of our own as evidenced by regularly beating revenue collection targets at some point. SARS became a Harvard University case study. And it was also cited by the World Bank for its lessons on institutional reforms and public sector governance (Maserumule, 2022).

So, Mr Principal, Busani Ngcaweni and colleagues, just to reiterate what I said earlier, document the evolution of the NSG into a case study on building state capacity and institution capability before someone elsewhere come to do it and sell it back to us at the high price. And your uniqueness lies in the high turnover at the level of executive authority but the consistency of your mission related to capacity development and training and your strategic commitment to realise this have never been disrupted. In other words, what is the NSG's elixir for consistency despite who is a minister at a particular point in time? There is a lesson to share here!

In its history, this state training institution was, since 1994, overseen by thirteen ministers and, since 1999, nine directors-general. Your institution as the NSG in 2013 came hot on the heels of the National Development Plan's (NDP) embrace by almost all the political parties in Parliament in 2012 as the country's lodestar for socioeconomic transformation and development. The NDP says building a capable and developmental state is a key imperative to realise the country's developmental commitments, which the sixth administration has prioritised as an important pursuit "within a vibrant democratic system"(NDP, 2012). In other words, as the NDP contends, "a robust democracy is not just compatible with building a capable and developmental state but an essential prerequisite for the sort of developmental state needed to tackle poverty and inequality (NDP, 2012).

As I listened to your presentations yesterday talking about your strategy to re-invent continuous learning and professional development and how to optimise this intervention in the partnership model that frames your approach, I said to myself that the NSG has finally fully grasped the NDP about what needs to be done to build a capable and developmental state, especially in relation to "developing skills and expertise that will be necessary for future-public service cohorts", including reinvigorating the state's role in developing "technical and specialist professional skills"(NDP, 2012).

I am saying this looking at the bouquet of training and development programmes you have developed. And this makes you set to evolve into a simulator. A simulator is a furnace of human capital formation for the state where a sleight of hand or dexterity for the provision of the public good is sharpened through immersive learning as facilitated by the technologies of the fourth industrial revolutions to optimise the return to it - the simulator. And the reason for this is simple: highly skilled and professional bureaucracy with strong ethical disposition are key ingredients for building state capacity and institutional capability.

The partnerships you forged with institutions of higher learning to optimise the offerings of your training and development programmes show your strategic acumen in appreciating the importance of synergy of efforts in human capital formation for the state. This is set to optimise the country's



source of talent pipeline. In various ways you demonstrated institutional leadership related to this. And key among these is your drive to finalise the framework for the professionalisation of the public sector, which the Cabinet has approved in 2022. The Framework emphasises the strategic importance of collaboration. For long, collaborative efforts to build state capacity through training and development interventions have been a cursory pursuit bereft of strategic intent.

It is heartening that, since you became the NSG, you have been hard at work trying to correct binary approaches to human capital formation endeavours. I am saying this because as I read your reports, I see that you mark this 10th Anniversary of your existence today having managed to forge partnerships with eleven public universities on various training and development interventions in this country. Your strategy for building state capacity and institutional capability through various training and development interventions is based on collaboration, including with the private sector and civil society.

A partnership based on collaboration is not a business relationship but a shared commitment to optimise the sources of talent pipeline for the state. Your strategic response to the task of building state capacity and institutional capability reminds the universities to shake off their self-contained autonomous predilection, including their solipsistic disposition and ivory towering, as these represent an anachronism. And you are increasingly giving universities a run for their money as you have also entered the thought leadership space by hosting public lectures and master classes. But it is good that you host some of these in partnership with these universities.

I studied the 2017 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Public Governance Reviews of the national schools of government in building public service capacity to optimise the provision of the public good and was struck by how well you fare in what it regards as the best practice related to capacity development to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the state. OECD is a formation of the governments of 37 democracies with free market-economy working together to enhance the quality of their policies for sustainable development. Key among the recommendations of the OECD on the national schools of government includes linking training and development interventions to the “core competencies required across civil services”, with “whole-of-government and organisation-specific civil service learning and development strategies”. All this is what you have been doing, including regular review of your programmes to ensure that education and training is no longer for the new public management but to equip public servants with skills to run government like a democracy as the outcome of the development orientation of public administration, not business.

Of critically importance in your strategy is your recognition is that like any employer, government is not the “cause of the talent pipeline problem” but bears “the brunt of its effect”. It is because of this that your “thinking about the public service workforce in the round, instead of offering training and



development opportunities in a silo” (Dickinson, 2013), asserts your strategic and progressive posture. The importance of academia-government collaboration on human capital formation, in this regards, for building state capacity, cannot be overemphasised, including with professional associations as they too have an important role to play in the continuous learning, professional development, and the shaping of the ethical disposition of the public servants.

Of noteworthy that needs to be appreciated, in your partnership portfolio is that the tentacles of your reach extend beyond the borders of the country. You brought into the fold globally acclaimed institutions with impeccable executive education to share their expertise and experiences. Such, among others, include INSEAD and the University College of London. Of course, your footprint on the continent, which include, among others, Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) and Namibian Institute of Public Administration and Management (NIPAM) is also notable.

Your growing partnership portfolio has spawned multiple opportunities for the public servants to return to the simulator for the rejuvenation of their sense of public service and exuberance in refocusing their operational and strategic acumen in the provision of the public good. This is what the country needs to see it through the exigencies of the moment. And the reasons for this is no brainer. Nations that make strategic investment in human capital formation endeavours often succeed in their developmental pursuits.

How you have evolved as the NSG, coupled with your strategic repositioning relative to your training and development mandate for continuous learning and professional development of the public servants, creates an opportunity to reinvent state capacity and institutional capability. However, this depends on how do we, as a country, answer the question about R 4 billion spending on training and development interventions, where the NSG gets only 3,75% share of this; and the rest goes to the universities in the form of bursaries and private training service providers. In other words, does this really make a strategic investment in human capital formation to enhance state capacity and institutional capability?

Of course I am asking a rhetorical question to perhaps start an honest policy discussion about this matter, especially that some studies such as that of Government and Information Management System (GCIS) have revealed various instances of a “misalignment between formal qualifications of the public servants and the work they do”. GCIS had done a study on education and training initiatives in the public service for the NSG when you were instituted as such in 2013. Your evolution has always been how to respond innovatively to this disconnect as it does bode well to the efforts about building the state capacity.

It is not uncommon to hear a director-general complaining about the relevance and the quality of knowledge that the officials get from the post-school system. If all this is true, one may safely conclude



that the state is spending a lot of money on training and development interventions that are not linked to the strategic objective of building “a state that is capable of playing a developmental and transformative role”(NDP, 2012).

And I often wonder whether this is not what Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock refer to as “isomorphic mimicry” in their theory of state capability. They define this phenomenon of isomorphic mimicry as “a key technique of successful failure that perpetuates capability traps in development”. And, as they further explain, this “has become a primary reason why countries do not build real capability even after years of policy and reform engagement and (yet) billions of dollars of capacity work” have been spent to create what “looks like” rather than what ought to be.

I made this point in the SAAPAM conference where I participated in the panel to answer the question, what do the schools and departments of public administration in South Africa teach? And my answer was that they teach hegemonic consensus “invested in the doctrinal system that impose(s) a wilful blindness to (our) realities”. Despite this, many naturally prefer to study these qualifications more than what the NSG offers. This is because their certification after completion is linked to a national qualification framework level of a post-school system. If this is not linked to the country’s developmental agenda, it is about credentialism not competence. Credentialism refers to “the reduction of qualifications to simply conferring pieces of paper”(Mark Gatensby, University of Southampton).

With the 3.75% share of training and development spending, NSG can only do as much. And perhaps this is where the problem lies - right at the source of the talent pipeline, where a huge chunk of investment in continuous learning and professional development do not give the dividend required to enhance state capability. I wonder why often we tend to be coy to pin point this.

The withering of state capacity call into question the quality of public administration training and development interventions largely by the post-school system. And I wish we confront this question in the same way that the business administration education has always been the subject of scrutiny and public intellectual discourse. In the wake of the 2008 global financial meltdown, Philip Delves Broughton published a no-holds-barred article titled “Harvard masters of the apocalypse” in The Times of London, where he argued that some Harvard-trained MBA graduates played a leading role in creating this crisis. The article stirred fierce contestation.

The Harvard Business Review of 2009 hosted some of these debates, where the question was: “How could MBAs (from this prestigious University) have been involved in activities that caused so much damage to the economy and society?” The late Dean of the School of Harvard Business School, Jay Light, following the crisis and the debate it has generated and the complicity of some of its graduates,



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made a call for “great introspection” about how well their students should be prepared to run a business successfully. This is an inspiring lesson on how to confront the flaws of education, training and development system, especially as it churns out crisis rather solutions for societal advancement.

This occasion of your 10th Anniversary is apposite to pose uncomfortable questions, perhaps in the same way our colleagues in the business administration fraternity did. It is only by doing this that we could reach out to the profundity of our thoughts for sustainable solutions to the challenge of building state capability. Let’s seize this decade of institutional longevity to create a moment of “great introspection” and re-imagine education, training, and development system for continuous learning and professional development.

The opportunity for this exists in the academia-professional association-government collaboration. We need leverage on this to optimise confluence of efforts to institutionalise this simulator system for continuous learning and professional development. But this collaboration should not only be in relations to training and development, but other areas of strategic importance such as co-creation of curricula for the teaching of students of government and joint research efforts about how to enhance training and development interventions to build state capacity and institutional capability. This is the least we could give to posterity.

Thank you so much for your audience, and happy 10th anniversary NSG.