



## **Policy thinking needed as much as policy coordination**

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There is no doubt that policy coordination has been weak. Policy thinking too has been found wanting. This challenge was very glaring in the Zuma administration. It is clear, at least judging by President Cyril Ramaphosa's June 2019 State of the Nation Address (SoNA), that it is not only policy coordination that must be improved but also more critically policy thinking is urgently needed. This is going to be particularly critical when it comes to crafting and implementing the relevant policies and possibly legislation necessary for the seven priorities tabled during the SoNA. The priorities pertaining to economic transformation and in relation to the developmental state undoubtedly require robust social and economic policies. And there are issues that require thought leadership. For instance, social cohesion and the Africa agenda require more than policies.

Weeks passed since the festivities surrounding the sixth general elections and the recent news highlighting the poor state of our economy clearly lay bare the challenges facing the South African government and society. It is against this background that it is pleasing to see and hear that one of the least discussed reforms the President Cyril Ramaphosa is engaging with is the return of the stone that was castaway in 2010, namely the re-establishment of dedicated policy coordination capacity in the Presidency.

The Policy Coordination and Advisory Services (popularly known as the Policy Unit) during the Mbeki Administration was the main clearing-house in the policy making processes in South Africa. It undertook policy development and policy analysis, policy coordination and policy advice as well as helped in conducting medium- to long-range planning, and government-wide monitoring and evaluation. It was a very big mistake to disband the Policy Unit. The new departments that were created to pursue planning, monitoring and evaluation were important but coordination has greatly suffered in the past 10 years or so. The Mbeki Policy Unit and Working Groups helped with policy coordination – it is good to hear that working groups are being resuscitated too.

Among the factors that made the Mbeki Policy Unit function better was its perceived proximity to the President himself. Also, the policy analysts it recruited were largely

respected researchers. Its Head, Joel Netshitenzhe, is a respected thinker and political heavyweight. It could be argued that it also helped that the Director General in the Presidency, Rev Frank Chikane, brought significant stature and maturity that allowed the Policy Unit to function effectively. The Chief Policy Analysts, not just the Head, interacted directly with the President and the Deputy President as well as the Minister in the Presidency.

Also because the analysts were established researchers they could guide clusters and cabinet committees – and also attended Cabinet. They could also tap on expertise all over the world in ensuring that proposed policies were robust. Through the Clusters, implementation was monitored closely and heads of departments (i.e. Directors-General) could take advice from the analysts. There was in fact a healthy tension between analysts in the Presidency and heads of departments and Ministers just as there was a healthy tension between the National Treasury and the Mbeki Policy Unit.

In the context of the now established capacity around monitoring and evaluation as well as planning, the Ramaphosa Policy Unit would have to be different from the Mbeki one. Besides policy coordination, the new Policy Unit would have to have sound policy thinking capacity. It is not accurate that the focus of Ramaphosa's administration should only be implementation. There are still many areas that require policies and or reforms of existing policies for South Africa to properly advance wellbeing. In particular, a comprehensive social policy is still needed – the efforts towards a sound social policy were disrupted with the recall of Mbeki. Similarly, South Africa needs a clear economic policy. Linked to this is the need for a robust labour market policy. The many things that government plans to do cannot be accomplished without clear public policies. It would also be important that the new Policy Unit helps government to distil a developmental agenda from the National Development Plan (NDP) – a clear agenda would help in the implementation of the NDP, but also the necessary coordination of the different stakeholders.

At a more practical level, the new Policy Unit should prioritize areas that are frustrating the potential growth of the economy and inclusive development. Among other issues, issues such as local economic development, empowerment of small and medium enterprises, rural and peri-urban development, and social security could be prioritized. It might very well be that the starting point could be taking stock of policy initiatives that were interrupted by the recall of Mbeki. Undertaking the suggested review or taking stock is actually overdue.

The new Policy Unit, over and above taking stock of policy initiatives as suggested, should be a sounding board and a policy development entity to make sure that there is clarity and plans on what the Ramaphosa administration intends to achieve. Arguably, even “the review of the macroeconomic strategy to ensure that the policy mix supports inclusive growth” that Ramaphosa talked about in the response to the SoNA debates needs proper policy thinking that can be led by the Policy Unit instead of another Panel.

Undoubtedly, South Africa remains at crossroads. The vision for the future is still unclear. We should indeed look forward to programmatic and policy details in the budget votes. Importantly, as the President indicated, “there are no short cuts and there are no quick fixes” to the challenges South Africa faces. This supports the view that policy thinking is as much needed as policy coordination.