Public Service Leadership for a Developmental State in South Africa: some preliminary thoughts

1. Introduction

Our government has committed itself to building a developmental state in South Africa. This is based on the recognition that to overcome our triple developmental challenges – unemployment, poverty and inequality, as well as to transform the structural basis of the economy, requires a developmental state. This presentation focuses on the public service leadership required for South Africa to become a democratic developmental state. It is part of an initial reflection of the Public Service Commission’s (PSC) work on the developmental state.

2. Thinking About Developmental State in South Africa

One issue that has attracted considerable scholarly attention for centuries is the factors that account for national prosperity. Factors such as geography, culture, and ignorance have been used to explain why some nations prospered and others failed. But none of these factors is as analytically robust as those that ascribed national prosperity to institutions. Institutions are one of the leading determinants of national prosperity – nations rise or fall because of the nature of their institutions.

By institutions, to draw on one of the world leading institutionalists, Douglas North (1994), are the formal and informal rules of the games that structure human behavior. But beyond this Northian perspective, organisations also constitute institutions. As structural features of a society, they may be “formal (a legislature, and agency in the public bureaucracy, social and political bodies, educational bodies or legal framework), or they may be informal (a network of interacting organisations, or set of norms). As such, an institution transcends individuals to
involve groups of individuals in some sort of patterned interactions that are predictable, based upon specified relations among actors (Peters, 1999: 18). Therefore, institutions are both rules and organisations.

Institutional architecture that provides incentives for citizens, organisations (both public and private) to realise their capacities have accounted for developmental success on the one hand. On the other hand, those that create disincentives for their people and organisations have resulted in developmental failure. This point is powerfully brought home by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) in their widely acclaimed book, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*.

The concept of the developmental state (DS) shows the importance of state’s institutions in national prosperity. To be sure, any discussion about a DS is a discussion about internal organisation arrangements of the state and rules that structured their interactions as well as a discussion of the nature and character of state-society relations and how both shape development outcomes. Therefore, a discussion about a developmental state is a about state capacity. The initial deployment of the concept was to explain the developmental success of Asia. The East Asian developmental states (Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan) transited from low income to middle and now to higher income countries because of the robustness of their state institutions. Also, their cousins – Malaysia and Thailand – transited to middle income status due to capable state institutions.

A developmental state can simply be defined as one that acts “authoritatively, credibly, legitimately and in a binding manner to formulate and implement its policies and programmes. This entail possessing a developmentalist ideology that privilege industrialisation, economic growth and expansion of human capabilities. Such a state also has to be able to construct and deploy the institutional architecture within the state and mobilise society towards the realisation of its developmentalist project” (Edigheji, 2010: 4. emphasis added). Therefore as Chang (1999) rightly points out, a developmental state has to be defined in political, ideological and institutional terms (Chang, 1999). In his words, a developmental state is one that creates and regulates “the economic and establish political relationships that can support sustained industrialisation” and which “takes the goals of long-term growth and structural change seriously, ‘politically’ manages the economy to ease the conflicts inevitable during the process of
change (but with a firm eye on the long-term goals), and engages in institutional adaptation and innovation to achieve those goals” (cited in Woo-Cumings, 1999: 27. emphasis added).

The definition above highlights key features of a democratic developmental state, namely: the bureaucratic capacity (organisational capacity), political capacity and its ideological orientation. The political and bureaucratic leadership in developmental states primarily focus on industrialisation and improving the wealth of their societies including citizens. Their primary focus is not to enrich themselves. To achieve their goal, they established institutions (both organisations and rules) that created incentives for public and private organisations as well as citizens to fulfill their potentials. Also, the institutional norms deter self-enrichment. The point therefore is that developmentalism as an ideology and capable state institutions are the defining characteristics of a developmental state.

Central to a DS is the importance of professional public service, including a professional and competent administrative service. This is they because are responsible for “actual planning, intervening, and guiding of the economy” (Johnson, 1987: 152). This is not to suggest that the bureaucratic elites are the only players in the process of development governance as they work within the broad policy parameters set by the political elites. But once the political leadership set the broad development agenda, the bureaucratic leadership (as the technicians) are responsible for formulating detailed policies and plans to achieve the broad developmental goals. A symbiotic relationship exists between them. This relationship engenders accountability, with the administrative leadership being accountable to the political leadership.

This conceptualisation set the framework to think of both the political and administrative leaderships that South Africa will require to become a developmental state.

As a concept, the developmental state has find resonance in other developing countries, including African countries that aspire to overcome the challenges of underdevelopment and to transform the structural basis of their economies. Our country, South Africa, is one of the two African countries that have expressly committed itself to building a state that is both democratic and developmental state. This is the recognition that to be able to address its triple developmental challenges - higher levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality - as well as to transform the
economy from one that is dominated by the mineral industrial complex. This therefore calls for an efficient public service and administration that enhance the state’s organizational and technical capacities to realize its developmental objectives. Therefore, building an efficient, competent and professional public service and administration is one of the immediate tasks that confront the South Africa’s government.

3. **Qualities of leadership of public service in a developmental state context**

(a) **Developmentalism and nationalistic ideology**

One major quality of public service leadership in a developmental state is that it is driven by an ideology of nationalism, which shapes their developmentalism ideology. Its actions are informed by the need to overcome underdevelopment and the need for their countries be independent of foreign domination, be its military or economic. As a consequence, public service leaderships, especially the political leadership in developmental states are highly nationalistic and patriotic.

(b) **Strategic thinking and ability to forge and implement broad development agenda:**

Another characteristic of political leadership in a developmental state context is ability to clearly understand the challenges that confront their societies. Cognizant of this, they are able to devise policies and programmes to respond to them, as well as being able to craft institutional architecture to underpin their developmental agenda. Towards this end, they established professional administrative apparatus (civil service) with the capacity to design the tools for the attainment of their broad vision. But the institutional arrangements are not statics – they constantly evolve to respond to emerging challenges. Against this background, political leadership in developmental states always anticipates change, including crises and opportunities, and devised strategies and plans to mitigate the former while taking advantage of the latter.

A number of questions arise from the above. First, does our political leadership understand the complex challenges that face us as a country? Second, has the political
leadership devise the right policy tools to that will enable the country to overcome its developmental deficits? If the answer to the above questions is in the affirmative, why has inequality risen to the extent that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world today, and poverty and unemployment have remained stubbornly high, the gains of the democratic dispensation notwithstanding? To be sure, our government have taken some bold social measures to ameliorate our social deficits, including building millions houses, an expansive social security system, etc, and has redesigned state’s institutions, including the establishment of an agency for social grant, reconfiguration of departments (resulting among others in the establishment of Department of Economic Development, Department of Monitoring and Evaluation in the Presidency, Department of Rural Development; Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities; and the National Planning Commission. Inspite of these remarkable institutional re-engineering, coordination challenges, among others, remain. This calls for us as a country to revisit our institutional architecture if South Africa is to become a developmental state.

(c) Building a developmentalist coalition: One of the qualities of public service leadership is its ability to forge a developmentalist coalition with other important actors in society. In this coalition, the political and administrative leaderships are key actors. In order to achieve their vision of national transformation, a division of labour exists between elected officials and administrative. While the former sets the broad developmental agenda, the latter based on their technical expertise design the policy tools to achieve the objectives set by the political class. This is necessary because the political leadership has the political authority; hence the administrative leadership has to be accountable to them. But because the former do not necessarily have the technical expertise, they have to rely on the technical capabilities of the latter. These speak to both the political and technical capacities of a developmental state.

(d) Ability to work across government rather than in silos: One other attribute of the administrative leadership is their ability to work across government ministries and agencies in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the state. In a developmental state, this ensures that the state act as a coherent and collective entity, with public
leadership that is infused by a common purpose. This is reinforced by the political leadership establishing an overriding entity (E.g. Economic Planning Board of South Korea, Economic Development Board of Singapore, etc) to coordinate government programmes. In our country, the National Planning Commission (NPC) was established in 2009 by the President Zuma’s administration with the aim of ensuring greater coordination among government departments. Whether the NPC will achieve this goal remains to be seen.

(e) **Inspirational**: Developmental orientated leadership in the public service must possess the ability to inspire/motive public service workforce at all level to actualise their individual and organisational potentials as well as individual goals and those of the organisation.

(f) **Engaging citizens, business and CSOs to partner**: In a developmental state context, both the political and administrative leaderships of the public service must have the strategic capacity to engage people, organisations and partners in the development of both national and organisational visions and plans; execution of plans; and in the delivery of results. All of these are geared toward structural transformation of the economy, polity and society.

In South Africa, the above mean that responsive leadership has to promote **democratic deliberative institutions** that will enable people’s organisations, including social movements and civil society, to take part in the development and governance processes.

One reason for democratic deliberative mechanisms is that technocratic processes are inadequate to decide which capabilities and technologies are required for our country to expand its productive base and enhance the capabilities of South Africans. Abilities of public service leadership (political and administrative) to respond to our people’s needs will be dependent on citizens and their organisations driving the developmental agenda rather than technocrats and rating agencies. This by itself calls for bringing back-in the “people’s contract”, the theme of the ANC’s manifesto in 2004, as the principle underpinning of governance.
The above will lead to an inclusive political process with an advantage of engendering accountability and transparency in governance.

Busani Ngcaweni (2012), head of the office of the Deputy President, highlights some other attributes that administrative leadership of the public service needs to posses for South Africa to overcome its triple developmental challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality. These are as follow:

**Political Competence:** This mean that the administrative leaders must have a “full appreciation of the mandate of government and selflessly executing this mandate, conforming to the highest ethics and values, and in accordance with the prescripts of the Constitution of the Republic” (p.6). He further enjoins them to embrace developmental state as a defining framework for state action.

**Technical Skills and Competence:** Public service leaders, especially the administrative leadership, need to employ their skills to ensure that public goods are provided effectively and efficiently.

**Discipline, Commitment and excellence:** This calls for public service leaders to “exercise due diligence in the application of public resources (money, time, infrastructure, etc), and striving for superior outcomes”. (p.8).

**Trust, honesty and integrity:** This mean that the administrative leadership of the public service have to be truthful to their work, cognizant of the mission, vision and mandate of the state; and being trustworthy of people who are the custodian of democracy and ultimate employer of the public service leaders. In his view, public service leaders have to be “servant-leaders”.

**Accountability:** This mean that public service leaders have to be accountable for their decisions and actions. It also entails political leadership of the public service being accountable to citizens, while the administrative leadership is accountable to the political leaders.
4. Conclusion

In this presentation, we noted that in order to tackle the tripple developmental challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality, our government have pledged to build a developmental state. We briefly defined the concept and set out some of the qualities required of public service leadership for South Africa to become a DS. These are some preliminary thoughts and further work is being done in this area.
References


