

**Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) and
Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA)
REBUILD SOUTH AFRICA WEBINAR SERIES
REBUILDING GOVERNMENT
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OPENING REMARKS ON REBUILDING GOVERNMENT

This series of webinars has cast a spotlight on practical things that need to be done to take South Africa onto a higher growth and development trajectory.

A trajectory is more like a flight path, an arc – and we cannot discuss the issue of rebuilding government without answering the question about the direction in which that arc bends. In simple terms, it should be towards the prosperous, just and equitable society envisioned in our Constitution.

In terms of temporal objectives, I would argue that the targets set out in the National Development Plan (NDP) still stand, though the time-frames may need to be adjusted, given the experiences South Africa has gone through since 2012, when the NDP was adopted. We still pursue a decent standard of living for all; an unemployment rate of 6% and below; a skilled population; basic amenities and so on.

It is appropriate that the concluding webinar should be on rebuilding the state because it is the ultimate authority in society. Without it, national objectives cannot be met. I deliberately use the word 'state' because I think our gaze should be towards all instruments of governance.

As we reflect on 'rebuilding', we need to remember that, while the state was hollowed out during the period of systemic corruption and state capture, many functions continued to chug along, perhaps in some instances directionless and in others as piggy banks. The task now is to focus on what needs to happen going forward.

As the NDP was being finalised in 2012, there was some debate about prioritisation. An element of that was about the chicken and egg dynamic of whether you can pursue NDP objectives without a capable developmental state; or whether such a state would be the product of the plan's implementation.

I'm not sure whether the issue was conclusively resolved. But there was a common understanding that the path elaborated in the plan could not be pursued without at least developmental orientation and requisite capability within the state.

The attributes of such developmentalism are of profound relevance to today's discussion; and these are: strategic acumen for visioning; legitimacy for ideational leadership; appropriate macro-organisation; and a skilled and effective bureaucracy.

These are defining characteristics of a developmental state, though many such states emerged during specific historical periods as well as geopolitical and cultural settings.

I'll try briefly to link these attributes to South Africa's current experiences.

The past decade was a wasted opportunity largely because we spurned an opportunity to start implementing a time-bound vision broadly agreed to in society. In my view, 2012 was a kind of eureka moment because you would have to go back to the mid-1990s to find a similar level of societal consensus.

The 2012 opportunity was squandered, and the trust earned since 1994 dissipated. The issue is whether the hope and trust of the post-2017 period are now also waning. Related to this is the outcome of the recent local government elections which, of course, is not the purpose of today's discussion.

Two issues about trust and ideational leadership attach to current challenges: firstly, the slow pace of implementation of reforms and the unethical conduct uncovered in relation to Covid-19 resources, which undercut a large part of the goodwill that was starting to emerge.

The second issue is about an objective situation that faces reforming governments – that reforms do come with some pain as you correct past mistakes, and this can in turn lead to popular dissatisfaction if poorly undertaken and poorly communicated.

Rebuilding therefore should include openness with the public about the gain and the pain. Critical to this is a social compact among all social partners with a preparedness to contribute and to sacrifice for the common good; but also, the steeliness of the state to pursue national objectives even when consensus cannot be reached.

What also needs strengthening is joined-up leadership. It has been a struggle since 1994 to transform the fragmented apartheid state and ensure horizontal as well as vertical alignment in planning and implementation. The problem is not so much with the constitution, but in the management of intergovernmental relations across the spheres and intra-governmental coherence within each sphere.

Hopefully, the District Development Model will be effectively implemented; and a pilot agency at the centre of government will emerge, with the authority and leverage to ensure that all fall in line. Many had thought departmental fiefdoms were fast disappearing – but the unedifying spectacle among security ministries during the July 2021 unrest demonstrated that the turnaround is still some distance away. Integration is even more critical now, given, for instance, some of the worrying security trends emerging in the electricity sector, and the multifaceted impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

One of the crucial lessons from southeast Asia is about a meritocratic bureaucracy. This is not only about technical capability. It also entails employing functionaries who embrace the vision of the government and are able to translate it into implementable programmes.

Both Covid-19 and the July failed insurrection have brought out in bold relief the fundamental questions about vision, ideational and legitimate leadership, social compacting, appropriate macro-organisation of the state and an efficient bureaucracy. These misfortunes have generated extremes of selfishness and social solidarity; social upheaval and a people in political motion for good. Across all spheres of government, we need to encourage the positive impulses.

In this way, we will not only douse the flames of our social tinder; but climb back onto that trajectory described in the National Development Plan as well as the economic objectives elaborated in the Reconstruction and Recovery Plan.

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