

Response to the National Planning Commission's vision for 2030

Education, training and innovation

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Introduction

Solutions to the dual crises in education and employment are among South Africa's most urgent developmental priorities. Not surprisingly, they feature as central challenges identified in the New Growth Path strategy document launched in the latter half of 2010 (DED 2010). In these difficult times of slow global growth and economic contraction in the developed North, the challenge of job creation has become even more complex for countries like ours in the South. While some noticeable initiatives, such as the signing of a local procurement accord by the government, business and labour to boost local industry (Hofmeyr 2011), have been launched to counter its effects, the overall picture remains dire.

At end of October 2011, South Africa's official unemployment rate stood at 25.0 per cent, while the more expanded rate, which includes discouraged job-seekers, was calculated to be 36.0 per cent (Stats SA 2011). Another way to understand these figures is to observe recorded levels of economic inactivity, which includes South African students and home-makers who are unable to work due to age, illness or disability, or because they

have given up on searching for a job. In terms of this measurement, 45.4 per cent of South Africans were economically inactive during the third quarter of 2011. This rate is lowest among those aged 25–54 (27.5 per cent), followed by 55–64 year olds (59.5 per cent), and is the highest among 15–24 year olds (74.7 per cent). Of course, economic inactivity rates among the youth are inflated due to enrolment at secondary schools or tertiary institutions (Stats SA 2011).

Formal educational achievement is not the only requirement for job market access and participation, and the National Treasury (2011a: 15) rightly observes that it is not ‘a substitute for skills’. However, it does contribute to improved chances for social and economic mobility and poverty reduction. A workforce that is both educated and skilled is paramount for South Africa’s long-term development.

In November of 2011, the National Planning Commission (NPC) released its Draft National Development Plan (NDP), duly recognising the critical role that education, training and innovation will play in the achievement of the country’s long-term developmental objectives by contributing towards ‘eliminating poverty and reducing inequality’, and laying ‘the foundations of an equal society’ (NPC 2011: 261).

On the plan’s release, the NPC emphasised its draft status and noted that the final plan would be a product of broad consultation and inputs. This policy brief aims to contribute in this regard by engaging with a number of issues that have been raised in relation to the improvement of the country’s education system.

The NPC’s response

The NPC’s recognition of the catalytic role that education will have to play must be read in the context of the frustration that exists with the apparent disjuncture between education spending and outcomes. South Africa invests a substantial proportion of its national budget on education, yet poor educational outcomes persist year on year. In fact, spending on education in 2011/2012 accounts for the largest share of the budget (21 per cent of non-interest allocations) and receives the largest share of the additional allocations (National Treasury 2011b). However, educational quality remains a ‘central concern’ as learners ‘fare poorly in global benchmarking exercises’ and achieve low literacy and numeracy rates in primary school assessments (National Treasury 2011b: 13, 36, 37).

The NPC report notes that the shortcomings of the system are most apparent in low matriculation rates, particularly among learners from impoverished communities; but even amongst those who do complete secondary school, marks are often insufficient to access tertiary education institutions (NPC 2011). Furthermore, it alludes to the fact that literacy and numeracy test scores differ widely between learners at historically white schools and those completing their education at poorer schools, located in so-called township areas. Like the National Treasury, the NPC bemoans South Africa’s low rankings on particular international and African continental indicators. The roots of such poor performance are complex, but substandard teacher performance, poor school management and leadership, and lack of infrastructure feature as some of the most stubborn obstacles towards improved achievement.

The NPC proposes a bold ‘National Education Pact’, which should see stakeholders (political parties, the government, unions, the private sector, professional bodies and subject-specific associations, student organisations, associations of governing bodies and community groups) joining hands to provide input in the creation of a more professional education bureaucracy. It is envisaged that the parties to the pact will work together towards ensuring clear career paths for educators, building a professional education department (which recognises expertise as the only criterion for appointment and promotion of teachers and principals) and clarifying the roles of government and trade unions in education.

Ultimately, such a pact will have to result in outcomes that render the system more efficient and capable of monitoring progress.

Matters raised in and omitted from the NPC report

In the following sections, we comment on some of the issues that either have been raised or may require further amplification in the final version of the report if it is to achieve these objectives.

Holistic strategies that looks beyond the classroom

Finding the correct measurement indicators of educational achievement in relation to budgetary investment is a challenge that many countries face. This is complex and requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the school-level remedies alone. It is equally challenging to operationalise these indicators in concrete strategies.

Much of the analytical focus of the NDP has been placed on school-level interventions, including the importance of improving and professionalising educators, as well as officials and leadership within schools. The importance of these interventions should not be underestimated. However, although there may be an underlying assumption, the report is not explicit enough on how proposals relate to the particular socio-economic contexts within which schools are located. In order to escape criticism of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, it may be necessary to expand on the linkages between the schooling system and broader society.

Apart from some recommendations related to nutrition and early childhood development programmes, the plan includes relatively little reference to the extramural social circumstances that impact on learner performance. In an article published in the *2009 Transformation Audit* of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), Stephen Taylor and Derek Yu explore the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on educational achievement through an analysis of the results of the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and find that 'wide discrepancies in educational achievement persist on the basis of SES' (Taylor & Yu 2010). Their research shows that the personal household circumstances of each individual learner crucially determine entry into 'differently functioning parts of the school system'. According to the authors, the chances of achieving high educational outcomes in the 'historically black system' are small (Taylor & Yu 2010). As such, children from poor households and disadvantaged communities – arguably those who are most in need of a highly functional and supportive school environment – are trapped in the worst-performing institutions within this system. While proposals to improve school functionality and management find resonance, they cannot be addressed without simultaneous dedicated work to understand and accommodate the critical role that the SES of poor households plays in the performance of learners.

In the light of these findings, it may be asked whether the NPC report has not placed disproportionate emphasis on technical and bureaucratic solutions to a problem that is far more intricate. Indeed, it may be argued that the mandate of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is limited to what happens within schools, but part of the NPC's mandate is to link the dots between government initiatives across departments. The NDP provides an opportunity to chart the way in terms of offering educational 'innovations' that are responsive to the specific social environments within which learners are located. If we envisage the learner as the main beneficiary of a quality education, then a holistic approach that looks into system-wide barriers to learning needs to be adopted (Bloch 2010). One would hope that the final version will elaborate more on this.

Poor communities are often host to social ills, such as alcohol and substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and high-risk behaviours that can lead to increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Research suggests that expanded community involvement and reciprocal engagement in the life and well-being of schools can both improve matric pass rates and lower dropout numbers. One such project uses the results of a qualitative case study of 96 schools in Soshanguve, which explored the impact of a 'full community involvement paradigm' in planning for school improvements. Researchers found that interventions of this kind can lead to a 'highly contextualized response to the needs of the local communities and schools and ultimately to full community participation in most of the schools – and

so to real school development within a developing world context' (Prew 2009: 824). Among the noteworthy findings of the study was that:

Involvement of the micro-communities in each school in Soshanguve seemed to be closely related to the functionality of the school. Dysfunctional schools were generally closed institutions where community members were not welcome...the schools with low levels of community involvement also indicated lower matric (exit exam) pass rates... (Prew 2009: 840)

These important conclusions highlight the need to think broadly and creatively about the nature of the challenges facing township schools in particular, and to consider interventions that offer communities a constructive and central role in improving education.

There are many successful examples of solution-oriented approaches to current challenges that involve dialogue within communities, and between communities and external stakeholders. Among these is the Letsema Circle Trust (*letsema*) is a Sesotho word meaning 'call others to work together with you'), founded by Dr Mamphela Ramphele. Although the trust's emphasis falls primarily on community health, it provides a model that can be emulated in various other spheres – including education – to encourage proactive citizen engagement and agency in communities, rather than depending on the government for service delivery.

Improved access to learning facilities and materials

A second issue that requires further amplification in the final NDP is the inequality of access to infrastructure and materials. While the bottlenecks within the system are known and certainly have been calculated into the thinking that informed the draft plan's proposals, they need to be stated more explicitly, otherwise the risk exists that implementation and measurement strategies by bureaucrats may not give due attention to the potentially disparate impact of access inequality.

In his analysis of the influence of socio-economic circumstances on educational outcomes, Servaas van der Berg (2006) shows that not owning a textbook, or sharing one with other learners, is 'associated with worse scores on reading', while the presence of certain kinds of equipment in schools (including computers, overhead projectors and photocopiers) 'played a positive role' in educational achievement (Van der Berg 2006: 11). A report released last year by the Equal Education Campaign (EEC 2010) shows that in 2007 only 7 per cent of ordinary public schools in South Africa had functional libraries. These were almost exclusively located in former Model C schools that were able to 'stock and staff these facilities through their own resources' (EEC 2010: 1). Comparatively, in townships like Khayelitsha in Cape Town, only five public libraries served a community of more than 700 000 residents, and only five school libraries existed among 54 schools. It is likely that access may be even more limited in informal settlements and rural areas. Indeed, the challenges are more profound and greater for learners from underprivileged backgrounds.

The Equal Education Campaign (EEC 2010: 42) further estimates that when 'all costs, including library admin salaries, are taken into account, the nationwide provision of functional school libraries would amount to R2.22 billion annually for the first decade'. Innovative solutions will have to be found in an economic context that, in all likelihood, will see a tightening of purse strings in years to come. One proposal made in 2010 by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) was to investigate the option of sharing resources between different schools and communities (Kgosana 2010). This would allow for disadvantaged communities to benefit more from the facilities available in affluent areas when these are in close geographic proximity to each other. Related costs, such as for transportation, maintenance and safety measures for learners could be taken up by other stakeholders. This proposal is also consistent with the notion of multi-stakeholder co-operation through the 'National Education Pact' that the NPC has proposed (NPC 2011: 280). A major challenge, however, would be to mobilise and co-ordinate these partnerships in a country where social trust between most communities has been virtually non-existent for centuries.

Human resources considerations

A third observation relates to the NPC's proposal to deploy multidisciplinary professional teams over an initial six-month period to turn around the fortunes of 20 000 underperforming schools (NPC 2011). This proposal, although well intended has a number of limitations to practical implementation, and if not properly thought through could fail, or worse, generate unintended negative consequences.

The proposal envisages the deployment of 5 000 to 6 000 multidisciplinary professional teams, coming from government, academia, think tanks and retired educators from better performing schools, to assess the functionality of each school, develop a turnaround strategy and oversee the implementation of this plan. Each school will require a team of three to five people, and each team will work with two schools in one year.

The viability of this proposal is likely to be undermined by current capacity constraints. Assembling a team on this scale with the skills required will be very difficult to do. Even if this were possible, the time span of six months might be insufficient to fully understand unique school dynamics and the community-specific environment within which they are located. A misdiagnosis as a result of insufficiently qualified team members, and/or too little time may be even more damaging than no action at all.

Individual incentives to participate in these multidisciplinary teams are likely to be low, particularly for highly skilled and experienced educators whose expertise is already in demand elsewhere in the private sector. The NPC has proposed that participating professionals could be remunerated at reduced rates of between 40 to 50 per cent of their normal charge out rates in exchange for a six-year contract (NPC 2011). Put simply, the fate of turnaround for underperforming schools will rest largely on individual goodwill and institutional investment. This also places a question mark over the proposal's sustainability.

Nonetheless, these questions should not detract from the NPC's important recognition of the need for technical and professional intervention to boost school functionality. However, external interventions arguably would have more impact when focused on building capacity at the level of district management, which could then provide better support and leadership to schools (Bloch 2009). Available funding could also be directed towards filling vacancies at the district level. This may also mitigate the risk of multidisciplinary professional teams alienating district support staff. This has a historical precedent. In recent years, national task teams have been brought in as 'outsiders' to 'rescue' the poorly performing Eastern Cape Education Department. This experience has shown that such interventions have the potential to degenerate into political turf wars (Majavu 2011).

The focus on science and technology

The NDP advocates strongly for targeted skills development in the areas of science and technology, but at the same time notes a crisis in the humanities in South Africa, as published in a report by the Academy of Science of South Africa released in August of 2011 (ASSAF 2011). Entitled 'Consensus Study on the Future of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, Prospects and Strategies', the report warns of the diminishing quality and uptake of humanities studies in South Africa. This finding has not gained traction with the NDP. According to ASSAF, funding for the performing arts and humanities remains limited; and an over-prioritisation of investment in specific skills can lead to a skewed development agenda. Critics suggest that South African educational policies and solutions have tended to be overly based on (often temporary) international trends, while leading to the recurrent and total overhaul of one system in favour of another, as was the case with outcomes-based education (Bloch 2010).

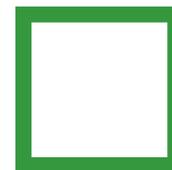
Conclusion

If South Africa is to achieve its 2030 developmental targets, as outlined in the NPC's draft NDP, strategies that will raise the quality of educational outcomes will have to be prioritised as a matter of urgency. This sense of urgency is apparent in the NPC's recommendations with regard to the improvement of skills and education. In this enthusiasm to accelerate the pace of change, great care should be taken to ensure that unilateral, top-down, technical approaches are not being enforced on highly divergent contexts. Strategies should be holistic, incorporating inputs from government departments other than just the DBE (such as Social Development, Sport and Recreation, Health, and Housing) and from communities themselves. The draft NDP document has introduced a number of new ideas, but the linkages between these will have to be made more explicit in the final document. This brief has aimed to highlight some initial proposals in this regard, with particular reference to the development of holistic strategies, access to teaching resources and materials, and strategic interventions to turn around outcomes in some of the country's worst-performing schools.

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