

Planning and Implementation of Government Strategy for Projects in the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper investigated from the strategic perspective the problem of planning and implementation of projects in the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET) in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The paper argues that lack of coherent link between the planning and implementation of strategy in the Department of Economic Development, Environmental and Tourism is the cause of the department's failure to succeed in promoting economic growth, tourism and the use of environmental management to guide and monitor sustainable development in the province. It is argued that while strategies in the Department are well articulated and elaborated on, they are never translated into concrete and concerted actions to meet the needs of the citizens in the province. This paper therefore used both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to obtain data from relevant units within the LEDET in order to establish the problem of the disconnection between strategic planning and implementation. The paper concluded that the implementation of the strategy can be improved through communication with stakeholders, allocation of sufficient resources, employee empowerment and introduction of appropriate change management processes.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning and implementation are two inseparable concepts in public and business sector operations. As mere concepts of academic constructs, strategic planning and implementation sound simple, possible and easy to practice. But the reality of public service administration and business operation has revealed that planning and implementation of strategy for government projects and programmes is the most complex and difficult task (Aaltonen and Ikavalko 2002). To a large extent, government strategies are either not implemented as prescribed or do not achieve the expected results (Bigler 2001). Strategy planning and implementation is to be concerted efforts among managerial levels from senior, middle and frontline employees (Ahearne et al. 2014; Vermeulen 2014). Equally, planning and implementation differ in terms of the environmental context of thought and application. Planning for provision of goods and services in the business environment would always differ in context from providing such service in the public administration environment. Current arguments in the public administration environment provide for a public management approach which conceptualizes public service from a business perspective. This approach emphasizes that the processes of public admin-

istration should be strictly subjected to administrative strategic planning to ensure economic efficiency and effectiveness of the utilisation of public resources. Such strategic planning therefore hopes to assist public sector managers to attain optimum allocation of public resources for the achievement of the set objectives and goals (Morison and Wilson 2013: 2; Kleinbaum and Stuart 2014; Bansal and DesJardine 2014). Stewart (2014), on the other hand, argues that implementation of strategies in organizations may be hampered by poor planning and public sector resources to achieve intended goals and objectives. This paper therefore provides an analysis of relevant literature on strategic planning and implementation in order to provide a conceptual incision for the empirical data analysis of the planning and implementation operations of the Limpopo provincial Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET) in South Africa. The paper seeks to establish and highlight the potential causes of the disconnection between strategic planning and implementation of government projects. The mandate of this department is to enhance the provincial economy through tourism, Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise (SMME's) development and facilitation of investment environment (Mahlatji 2013: 2). Inevitably, only appropriately well-aligned strategic planning and im-

plementation would ensure successful functioning and execution of projects in this department.

Planning and Implementation of Government Projects

Government projects are mainly planned and implemented for public gain. Strategic planning is therefore significant in ensuring that public budgets are used effectively to achieve the objectives set in strategic plans (Young n.d; Dutton and Duncan 1987; David et al. 2009; Barkley et al. 2011; Rubin and Willoughby 2011). However, governments have always run the risk of over-indulgence with strategic plans that end up gathering dust on the shelf. Post-apartheid South Africa too has had a period of overemphasizing strategic planning and plans above implementation. Like all other developing countries South Africa is forced by multi-lateral developments agencies to produce the Vision 2013 or 2050 strategy (Schram 2014). All government departments had mandates to develop their strategic plans, with the result that a rush ensued wherein the planning became the end result, especially because departmental strategic plans became a requirement for government to approve departmental budgets for projects. But this observation does not hope to underestimate the value of strategic planning and plans.

Louw and Venter (2006) maintain that strategizing assists organisations to manage their resources and capabilities, values and goals in a manner that is highly effective. The Green Paper on National Planning (South Africa 2009: 10) asserts that proper planning of governmental projects would strengthen the relationship between the state and its own citizens. That happens mainly when government departments are able to deliver services that are required by the citizens. Public Administration has established that most governmental programmes and projects fail mainly because of the incompatibility of plans strategized and implementation. In Botswana, for example, as recorded in Masters Dissertation findings by Mapitse (2010: 1-6), the National Development Plans (NDP) has been in place since independence in 1966, but there has always been a problem of projects-cost overrun emanating from mediocre planning and implementation (Botswana 2003: 53). It is indeed the planning and implementation of strategies that

determine the effectiveness of the way in which governments programmes are rolled out to the communities.

Legislative Frameworks and Departmental Strategies

The Constitution of South Africa, 1996 does not clearly stipulate a distinctive strategic planning process that government departments are required to follow. It, however, mandates all departments to promote public participation, accountability, transparency, and good financial management as well as efficient, economical and effective use of financial resources (South Africa, 1996). There are similar legislative frameworks such as Public Financial Management Act 1 of 1999, Treasury Regulations and the Medium Term Strategic Framework (2009-2014), which mandate governments department in South Africa to develop strategic plans that will justify their reasons of existence as well as their funding. The strategic plans will serve as a corridor within which implementation process will unfold. Like the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Public Finance Management Act 1 of 1999 does not provide for specific strategic planning process to be followed by government departments, but it promotes accountability in the use of public funds, discourages fruitless and wasteful expenditure and calls for departments to take control of public funds when planning, in order to fast track service delivery (Mahlatji 2013: 9). The Treasury Regulations, on the other hand, require the accounting officers to prepare strategic plans for the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework based on a three year period. Of significance to such plans is that they should have medium-term expenditure estimates detailing measurable objectives, expected outcomes, programme outputs and indicators. The Medium-Term Strategic Framework assists in setting up strategic objectives that can be broken into targets for the first five years. Government has a responsibility to ensure that there is capacity to meet such objectives.

To this extent, strategic planning and its implementation is more about the availability of resources (Kono and Barnes 2010) and therefore lack of such resources threatens the viability of strategy and implementation. In the government sector, this eventuality is highly possible considering that the public sector plans and

estimates are based on what the government anticipates about tax to be collected. That is, a democratic South Africa's legislation on strategic planning and implementation does not provide for a nuance approach that would avoid the conventional trap of the mismatch between plans and practice. The next section discusses the research methodology that was adopted to collect empirical data on the basis of the results of which the foregoing observation was tested.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research method of data collection. In addition to consulting secondary data sources in the department, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from a selected population sample of employees in the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET). The semi-structured interview questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The primary purpose of the interviews was to investigate both the problems of planning and implementation in the department as well as the causes and effects of the disconnection between the planning and implementation processes as seen by the public functionaries.

Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 30 employees in the department's Senior Management Services and Programme Managers divisions. This sample consisted of four categories of employees as follows: Senior-General Managers, General Managers, Senior Managers, and Programme Managers. While the plan was to interview 30 respondents, only 26 respondents participated in the study. A lower participation rate in this study was experienced from the Senior Management Service level (Senior-General Manager and General Manager Level). This was mostly because of their busy schedule to avail themselves for planned interviews. Data analysis was biased towards qualitative techniques, with some quantification. To a large extent, qualitative analysis involved descriptions, classification and attempt to make connections. Other pieces of data were tabulated into frequencies for the computation of percentages. Given that the study set out to be biased towards qualitative approaches, the number of interviewees should be a serious consideration as to affect

the quality of results. The results of the survey are presented hereunder.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the interviews was to identify the problems of planning and implementation in the department as well as the causes and effects of the disconnection between the planning and implementation processes. The presentation of findings in this study entails the biographical information, because the problems of planning and implementation and the effects of the disconnection between planning and implementation process are sometimes ascribed to individual personalities and embedded prejudices, rather than the challenges of complexities alone.

Biographical Data of Respondents

The biographical data assists both the reader and the researcher in understanding the type of respondents and the validity of data to be obtained. Biographical information probed in this regard included gender of respondents, age groups, marital status and position held in the organization. Gender representativeness in organization is a critical matter of discussion in the South African working environment. Judging by the long period of apartheid and disparity in the working environment characterized by inequality and racial discrimination in work place environment (Sebola 2009; South Africa 1998), South Africa prioritizes the need for equality in work place through Employment Equity Act of 1998 and the Affirmative Action Policy (Mello 2004; Penciliah 2005). In this instance, there was a need to establish the extent to which the demographics are balanced in these units of investigation. The sample consists of 31% female and 69% male, a composition that is to be expected in a democratic South Africa following years of apartheid discrimination, especially at the senior management level.

These statistics reveal that gender balance in government departments such as the LEDET is way out. Considering that this study targeted respondents at managerial level, one would have expected a more advanced gender balance in the managerial positions of units in the department because of government's emphasis on gender equity scores. There are more males respon-

dents than females, and there is a distinct possibility that the gender imbalances could imply two things: namely, *firstly* that the department is failing to comply with the policy of affirming previously disadvantaged individuals in the name of women. *Secondly*, it could be that there is a shortage of suitably qualified women ready to take managerial positions in the units of the department concerned. To a particular extent this finding links with most of similar studies that revealed that women are still not yet adequately represented in leadership positions because of the cultural stereotyping that prevented them from accessing formal education.

Additionally, knowledge about age groups in working environment helps us to understand responses from different perspectives as determined by experience. Current governments are emphasising the need to invest in young generation and often introducing policies that will force the experienced (older) generation into early retirement in order to provide space for the youth. And yet where it is impossible to absorb the youth in senior public service positions, the youth complain of generational mix so that experience can be shared in the service. The age group of respondents in this regard revealed the relative majority of 42% are 46-55 years old, followed by 35% of the 36-45 year olds, 15% of the 20-35, and then 8% of the 56-65 year olds. Overall, the total majority of 85% are respondents that are not youth, which is defined officially by ages below 36 years. In general, the middle age categories have dominance in the sample. With the current arguments of generational mix required by South African youth politicians in the public service, the department seems to be doing well in this regard. Considering that the study targeted respondents at managerial levels the perception to be drawn from this is that there is a good general mix in the department.

Lack of skills and capacity in public services is a major concern and it is often identified as a cause of poor implementation of government projects and programmes. The origin of the recruitment process in the public service used to be highly rooted on matric qualification and continuous work training as a solution to improving service provision by the officials employed to carry out such tasks. Forty-two (42%) percent of the respondents hold a Masters qualification, 31% have an honors degree and 23% holds diploma and/or bachelors' degree. A rare occur-

rence of 4% (which is 1 respondent) of the sample holds a doctoral qualification. Overall, all respondents held qualifications from a diploma and above. What could be drawn from this data is that the units in the department show to be highly equipped in terms of educational attainment by the personnel at management level. However it is argued that there is no empirical evidence showing the significance of the relationship between educational level and organisational performance. It is generally argued that attainment of education in the relevant field of work strengthened the personnel's chance of coping with the challenges of work.

Finally, the position held in the department is crucial for understanding the opinion of the respondents. The position occupied by individuals in the organisation determines both their level of influence in organisational strategy and their knowledge of organisational operations. Considering that this study focused mainly on collecting data from the Senior Management Services and Programme Managers divisions in the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, it was therefore important to understand the representivity of the sample in terms of clusters of their occupation within the organisational hierarchy. The sample is evidently dominated by programme managers, who constituted 65%, compared to 23% and 12% of senior managers and general managers, respectively. As already stated, the four senior-general managers that were targeted could never avail themselves for interviews. Considering that the majority of the sample consists of general managers and senior managers, who are actually the ones involved in both strategic planning and implementation processes, renders the lack of participation of senior-general managers less serious as a limitation to the study. It is indeed the Senior Management Services and Programme Managers units that deal with the strategic planning of the business operations of the department. The data collected from these individuals is therefore important for researchers to make a scientific conclusions based on their assertions.

Problems of Planning and Implementation of Strategic Plans

The strategic planning in an organisation requires the top management to be able to define the strategic direction of the organisation

as well, as creating a favourable environment for implementation (Nartisa et al. 2012). Such is possible only if those involved in the strategic planning of the organisation adopt feasible plans that will be easy to implement by those at operational levels. In probing the problems of planning and implementation the semi-structure interview questionnaire *firstly* probed to find out if there are indeed strategic problems and what they are, *secondly* the constraints related to strategic problems and implementation and *finally* problems relating to implementation of strategies.

Problems of Strategic Planning

A highest number of the respondents (22 out of 4) in his regard confirm that there are critical problem areas in the strategic planning process of the department. Only a few of these regard problems as not being serious and that could presumably be the Senior Management Services because their duty is to sell the strategy to programme managers and not to critique it. Respondents were required to provide what they perceive as problems facing the department strategic planning and they identified five factors. Respondents' mentioned a variety of limitations of the strategic planning process in the department. Poor planning (30%) and lack of understanding (30%) of the strategic process topped high as a problem followed by poor coordination (23%) of strategic plans within the department. There are only few participants that mentioned poor communication (8%) and poor participation (4%) as a limitation. And yet, no response from three participants (12%) was obtained who could probably be the senior managers and general managers because they will not regard their own strategic initiative as being faulty. There is moreover a good correlation with all items named by the respondents as limitations of the strategy planning of the department.

Constraints to Strategic Planning in the Department (LEDET)

Strategic planning has been made difficult by the volatility of the business environment (Grant 2003). Unlike in the private sector environment, it is the changing political landscape that may threaten the viability of the strategic plans of particular public departments. Thus far

however is argued that the existence of strategic planning in public service for more than twenty years never guaranteed its effectiveness (Nartisa et al. 2012). The participants in LEDET therefore identified four factors as realistic constraints faced by their department. Often some strategies fails at formulation levels if such is not aligned to the feasible environment of implementation. Of significance in this aspect is that participants placed highly the lack of sufficient resources (46%) followed by poor communication (30%) as critical limitation of the strategic planning process in the department. Those are followed by lack of alignment to policies (12%) and lack of capacity (12%) in the department. and only one respondent (4%) did not respond. Looking at the educational attainment of participants in this study, it could be argued that lack of capacity as mentioned by participants in this study does not relate to capacity in terms of skills acquired, but instead relate to lack of capacity in terms of both human and financial resources. It is also notable that strategic planning and implementation without putting it in the context of departmental policies and governmental strategic priorities may render strategic plans by departmental units useless.

Implementation of Strategies

Implementation of a strategy is associated with a technical problem encountered by any organisation. It is argued that it is at implementation level that organization realizes that strategic implementation is difficult than planning. In is indicated that the organizational goals seem to be unrealistic during the implementation phase especially when the strategies are not communicated to all stakeholders (Wouters et al. 2009). Furthermore, it was discovered that lack of knowledge, skills and capacity (Ambe and Badenhorst- Weiss 2012) also contributes towards failure to implement the strategy. In this instance, the majority of respondents (20 out of 6) maintain that the department faces problems of strategic implementation. Only few participants indicated that the implementation of strategies does not experience major flaws as such. Often in this instance it is argued that the strategies are crafted by the top management while implemented by those at operational level with little knowledge of how those strategies were planned. The participants in this study identi-

fied four factors as the problems that compromise the feasibility of their strategy in the department. The inference that can be drawn from this statistics is that limited resources (35%) and poor understanding of plans (38%) to be implemented are major cause of strategic implementation flaws in the department. This is followed by the inability by the directorates (4%) within the department to meet their deadlines (8%) and set targets and the instability of municipality's plan to be aligned with those of government. and, 15% did not respond. This therefore becomes clear that the department is incapable of achieving set goals and targets of strategy mainly because of problems associated with incapacity and lack of available resources for implementation.

Effects of Disconnection between Strategy and Implementation

A strategy that is not linked to an implementation plan is doomed to be a failure and such failure is likely to affect negatively the performance of the department (Harrison 2003: 1; McIlquhum-Schmidt 2010:2-3; Paradza et al. 2010:1-17). The probability of a successful strategy is not an easy aspect on the implementation level (Wouters et al. 2009) where the dreams are to be transformed into reality. Mbele (2010) on the hand argues that above all the most critical limitation of strategic implementation is resources implications. The disconnection between the strategy and implementation would always an adverse effect on the manner in which the department must provide service to the public. Most participants in this regard agrees that there is a disconnection between the strategy being planned and the implementation process and therefore leading to adverse results in intended achievement of the departments objectives. There is a notable similarity of responses however of what causes these disconnections with the previous variables probed in the study. Most participants still relate the cause of these disconnections to poor alignment of resources with plans to be implemented and poor communication channels of the strategy within departmental directorates.

Disconnection between Planning and Implementation Strategy

The participants were required to provide whether they are of the opinion that there is a

disconnection between planning and strategy implementation in the departments and to name the effects of such disconnection to their own department. Almost 77% of the respondents agreed that there was a disconnection between planning and implementation of strategy in the department, compared to 23% who found no fault. The relative majority of the respondents argue that most time is spent on strategic planning which its implementation is limited by factors such as incapacity and financial resources. There are however varying responses as to whether these disconnections lead to adverse or positive effects on the departmental operations. On other hand, there are those that view the strategy of the department in positive light and those viewing it from a negative perspective.

Positive Effect of Strategy

All strategies developed and planned for implementation are meant to achieve good results. The advantages of having a planned strategy is that it takes into consideration the good facilitation of relevant and aligned implementation plans and assessment of capacity requirements to implement to those plans (Hughes n.d:1-20). In this instance the participants presented three effects as the positives of their strategic plan. The participants regard their strategy as being positive to their organisational motive. It is clear from that the participants feel that their departmental strategy is contributing positively to the organisation in terms of projects prioritization (38%), ensuring effective communication (31%) and providing functional direction (27%). and, one respondent (4%) did not respond. It can however be argued that the participants in this regard are positively commending the strategic document without necessarily refereeing to its implementation effect which throughout this study showed to be providing negative results. As it could be argued in other instances the strategy might not be able to achieve all desired results due to factors inherent or external to the strategy, but there are other set objectives that could be achieved through the same strategy.

Negative Effects of the Disconnection of the Strategy

The strategic planning is talked of in most of the cases, however little is said of its effective-

ness in achieving desired results (Todes 2012). As argued strategies have no value in and of itself, but its value lies in the energy (Hopkins and Hopkins 1997) and commitment put by the human and financial resources. The participants in this instance presented three negative effects of the disconnections within the department. The majority of the participants named non-realization of targets (58%) as the most effect of the disconnections between strategic planning and implementation. The failure to meet targets is mostly associated with inadequate budget and leadership change. Such affect the implementation of plans, austerity measures and loss of skilled personnel. The second major effects mentioned are poor planning (23%) and lack of capacity (4%). whilst four respondents (15%) did not respond. Such is associated with poor co-ordination during planning and adequate monitoring conducted during the implementation process to assess if the planned targets are achieved. Lack of capacity by planners and implementers has been cited many times throughout variables investigated in this study.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that public departments in South Africa such as the Department of Economic development, Environment and Tourism are not always able to achieve their anticipated objectives because of the lack of coherence of the strategic plans. That ultimately led to difficulty in implementing projects and programmes meant for public good. This study demonstrated that there are three critical areas that threatens the implementation of strategic plans in the department and those includes, inefficient resources, lack of capacity and poor communication about strategy to be implemented. It is therefore concluded that the solution to these could be the development of strategies based on available resources, strengthening capacity within the department and creating a conducive environment for effective communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this study, this study recommended the following. namely, strategizing on the basis of allocated resources, strengthening capacity and effective communication. These are aspects that are mainly com-

ing through in all aspects that have been investigated in the study.

Strategizing on Basis of Allocated Resources

In more instances governments make their strategies based on anticipated tax collections. That ultimately makes some of their anticipated objectives to be unrealistic. This is unlike in the private sector where strategies can be well linked to the available budgets. Even in that instance the private sectors objectives are not often met as planned. It is therefore not only significant, but also advisable that government strategies be linked to available committed budgets and human resources. It is only an organisation that can draw sufficient sponsors, champions and capable personnel that will learn new things and achieve stipulated objectives. In government departments, therefore, allocated financial resources should serve as a yardstick to measure the capacity of the strategy to produce desired results. Better planning and effective utilisation of resources will result in better output, that is, delivery of quality service and improved performance in the department.

Strengthening Capacity

Lack of capacity appeared from time to time across the study investigation as a critical limitation of strategy implementation in the Department studied. Considering the new democracy and its side effects such as token appointments based on political nepotism and allegiance it is likely that the appointed human resources might be incapable of executing their functions. Not only is the human potential a threat to strategic implementation, but also the financial capacity is required for successful strategy implementation. The department should as a matter of principle ensure that there is both financial and human resources capacity by the department.

Effective Communication

Effective communication is highly significant for successful implementation of government projects. The strategy need to be communicated effectively among all stakeholders in order to better the understanding of all stakeholders including top, middle and operational level management. It is indeed highly difficult for employ-

ees at operational level to implement the strategy that was never clearly communicated to them. In a department such as LEDET that is even worse because the department is indeed running three departments combined in one (Economic development, Tourism and Environment).

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