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Manuel's New Deal for SA

Long-term strategy, accountability key to radical shake-up of how government works

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RADICAL proposals unveiled by the government last week aim to put an end to the short-term planning and lack of co-ordination that have seen good policies founder through botched implementation, costing the taxpayer billions in wasted spending.

The green paper on the National Planning Commission released by Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel sets out a vision involving independent experts and strategic thinkers determining the country's long-term planning priorities, which will guide decisions and policy choices made in the short term.

A policy document issued by Collins Chabane, the minister responsible for performance monitoring and evaluation as well as administration in the Presidency, spells out how his unit will work with the planning commission and across the government to ensure that whatever is decided gets done the way it should get done, measured against clear goals.

Debate on the proposals is to get under way this week. Leaders of opposition parties in Parliament were briefed last week and both documents will be tabled in the National Assembly on Tuesday.

Fierce debate is expected in the government, the tripartite alliance and broader society over the proposals. Manuel is encouraging a "national discussion" involving all South Africans, and for the government the proposals offer an opportunity to get all citizens behind an agreed national plan of action.

Until now, the government has focused on five-year plans of action linked to the mandate given by voters at each general election and based on the ANC's election manifesto promises.

But challenges such as climate change, energy supply, food security and structural inequalities demand longer-term planning. Broad agreement on where the country needs to be in 25 years would inform policy choices and trade-offs made in the short term, introducing a coherence to planning that has been lacking until now.

A detailed review of the government's performance over the past 15 years shows that more people have homes and access to water, sanitation and electricity, while more children are in schools than before.

But despite budgets ballooning, the quality of services delivered has been patchy and in some cases has deteriorated. Education takes up a huge chunk of the budget, but schools are producing pupils who, at the age of nine, struggle to read and write properly. This means that the government – and taxpayers – don't get enough bang for their buck. And, more significantly, the

country's long-term prospects are jeopardised.

On Friday Manuel said the National Planning Commission would consist of about 20 experts – leaders in their fields drawn from outside the government – to focus on drawing up a national strategic plan.

They would be supported by a secretariat, and the expertise of institutions such as the Human Sciences Research Council, think-tanks and development finance bodies would also be harnessed.

This work will feed into a ministerial planning committee appointed by President Jacob Zuma to provide political guidance, while Manuel would be the link between the planning commissioners and the cabinet, which would take the decisions.

While ministers on the planning committee may have some additional responsibilities, this would not amount to a two-tier cabinet, Manuel said.

Responsibility for ensuring that the plan is acted on will lie with Chabane and his Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Unit – working across the government and in tandem with social partners such as big business and NGOs.

When agreement has been reached on what needs to be done in any given area, a set of outcomes will be identified. Chabane's unit will then see that these are achieved – watching progress, identifying weaknesses and coming up with ways of dealing with obstacles to implementation.

Where there are problems, a delivery unit will be sent to deal with them. This would be a small team of experienced officials able to untangle blockages at national, provincial or local level, Chabane said.

This unit would also analyse why things went wrong and develop models for improving delivery that could be followed in other areas.

Outcome and output measures would be developed for the entire government, and these would inform performance agreements between ministers and officials, including MECs, with the president.

Report-back meetings would be held every six months to evaluate progress, Chabane said.

Details of the long-term plan will take some time to develop. While he indicated no time frame, Manuel said the aim was to encourage wide consultation and only then get down to the detail of mapping out a long-term vision for the country.

Meanwhile, Chabane's unit will get to work setting targets in the five key areas identified in the government's medium-term strategic framework: education, health, crime, jobs and rural development.

● Read the green paper and discussion document at www.gov.za