Planning, Plumbing, or Posturing?

Explaining the weakness of human resource development structures and policies in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring that education and training systems produce the amount and type of skills required by societies and economies is a seen by many governments around the world as an important challenge. In South Africa a national peak structure, the Human Resource Development Council, led by the Deputy President and consisting of representation of many key Cabinet Ministers and 'captains of industry', senior leaders from organised labour, community representatives, professional bodies, and senior experts from research and higher education, was established to ensure coordination at a strategic level. But there is little evidence of achievements of this Council or two national human resource development strategies have achieved very little. There are many institutional and bureaucratic problems with the functioning of the Council, and human resource development strategies in South Africa seem to be more about posturing to be seen to be doing something, than actual planning, with one brief period when a focus on 'plumbing'—or solving specific problems and achieving specific gains in terms of producing appropriately skilled people in identified areas. We show that the problem is not just poorly conceptualized national human resource development structures and processes. The problem, we suggest, lies in the very notion of national human resource development, which is too broad and unwieldy a concept to be useful to governments, and has led to a structure with such a broad mandate as to be completely unrealistic. It has led, in South Africa, to the creation of a very high level body that does not seem to be clear what it is supposed to coordinate or how. And it ignores the broader context for successful skills formation—improving the productive capacity of the economy through industrialization, as well as labour market and social policy that support occupational labour markets.

INTRODUCTION

"It is generally agreed", argues the United Nations Programme in Public Administration and Finance (1995, p. 3), that "that if overall human conditions are to improve, there must be increasing emphasis on human resources development." Around the world

governments are looking for ways to raise education levels at the same time as coordinating the supply of skilled workers with the needs of the economy and society. Peak bodies with representation from government, business, and labour are seen as a one useful way to ensure that policy is coordinated. In South Africa a Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) was created in 2010 as a key structure to link different areas of government work and different spheres of the economy. The Council was created to coordinate the implementation of the second national Human Resource Development Strategy (hereafter the *Strategy*) which was adopted in South Africa in 2009 (Republic of South Africa, 2010). The Council is described as, "..... the primary institution for HRD [human resource development] coordination..." under the 'stewardship" of the Deputy-President (Republic of South Africa, 2010, p. 10). Officially the Council must guide and shape the human resource development agenda; provide a platform for dialogue and consensus building; identify skills blockages and recommend solutions, based on the idea that:

> HRD Councils worldwide is to act as a unifying force and catalyst for performance excellence through people, fostering communication, coordination, integration and collaboration with and among stakeholders in human resource development and *providing expert leadership in performance improvement and evaluation* (Human Resources Development Council, 2012, p. 4, emphasis is ours).

The Council is also supposed to ensure that human resource development planning is aligned to "existing architecture for government-wide planning, namely the National Planning Commission in the Presidency" (Republic of South Africa, 2010, p. 11). Crucial here is the idea of ensuring that policies across government, particularly with regard to industrial policy, labour market analysis, and modelling of skills supply and demand, are aligned with each other. The *Strategy* suggests that Human Resource Development is "at the heart of contemporary public policy and development strategies."

In order to understand the history of human resource development policies and structures in South Africa over the past fifteen years, we reviewed various primary sources and 'grey literature' (listed in footnotes), drew on our personal experiences and reflections working in and participating in the structures and processes analyzed, and interviewed six members of the Council. Members were selected to ensure a spread of association with labour, business, research expertise, independent council members and government.

Our analysis suggests that human resource development in South Africa has been, and continues to be, more a matter of posturing than planning the development of individuals' capacities. We argue that while Human Resource Development Council is supposed to be a high level coordinative structure, there are no real mechanisms to create integration in the skills development system or to hold the different parts of that system to account, and weak interventions in the economy to create a requirement for skills. This leaves the Council as not much more than a very high-level 'talk shop'. One exception to this posturing position was a brief period when there was some successes described as 'plumbing'—or solving specific problems and achieving specific gains in terms of producing appropriately skilled people in identified areas.

The South African case, we suggest, gives insight into a weakness of much literature and policy on human resource development: starting from the idea of developing every aspect of human capacity, and emphasizing the need for 'joined-up policy', can lead to a focus with getting everyone talking together, ignoring the material context for 'join-upness' in the collective skill formation systems, what the 'cooperation' is aimed at, and

whose economic, political, and ideological interests underpin it. National human resource development seems to be too broad and unwieldy a concept to be useful to governments, and this conceptual weakness, as well as bureaucratic weaknesses in South Africa, explain the poorly conceptualized structures and processes.

APPROACHES TO COORDINATING THE SUPPLY OF SKILLS

The literature on countries which have developed successful skills formation systems (such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, and Switzerland), describes long historical processes which have involved employers centrally, as well as many other role players such as labour unions and other national bodies of particular importance in specific contexts (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). What is clear is the relationships between political and economic policy (including redistribution of wealth, social welfare, and labour market regulation) and skills formation systems (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Iverson and Stephens, 2008). For example, vocational education and apprenticeships, where they have been successful, have been connected with reasonably well-paying, respected, and protected occupational identities and jobs (Hanf, 2011; Rauner, 2007). As many policy makers have learnt the hard way, the systems in these countries are by their nature difficult to emulate, being embedded in a complex range of social relationships.

An alternative, more centralized model can be seen in the late industrializing countries, and specifically the 'East Asian Tigers', which are seen as having successfully developed skill formation systems to support their economic strategies. In these countries reform of education and training was driven by highly effective 'superministries' which dominated decision-making across government departments, to ensure "that the needs of economic development take precedence over those of other groups and objectives" (Ashton et al., 1999, p. 17). This was a mechanism "at the heart of government which perform the function of linking the output of the education and training system to the skill demands of the current and future economy" (Ashton et al., 1999, p. 17). They ensured that education and training were linked with economic planning at the highest level through centralization. It also seems that the interventions in skills in the late industrializing countries were focused and specific, not attempts to fix every part of the education and training system (Ashton et al., 2002, 1999; Park, 2013).

Ashton *et al* specifically attempted to understand which were the *institutions* that made development so successful. They suggest key factors in a 'developmental skills system' are that the state has good insight into skills requirements, and that it deploys a range of mechanisms to ensure a supply of skills. They argue that states which were successful in doing these two things showed flexibility and willingness to learn from mistakes, with a focus on goals, rather than on specific strategies. In these countries to a large extent the state could predict the demand for skills because it was creating this demand. This is changing in all the East Asian Tigers, as their economies have been liberalized to various degrees, although there are still strong institutions attempting to understand demand.

The strong and centralized states which drove industrialization are, like the complex social partnerships established over generations in the first group of countries mentioned, difficult to emulate. They depend on a particular political culture, but perhaps more importantly, they depend on strong state intervention in developing the economy.

Another approach, which many countries have started to adopt recently, is policies that are explicitly labeled as national human resource development strategies. In many cases, these are extensions or reforms of what were previously labeled as manpower planning (McLean, 2004). However, the new label is supposed to indicate policies that are broader in their scope, and include considerations previously excluded, such as human development. Mclean (2004, p. 269) suggests that national human resource development goes "beyond employment and preparation for employment issues to include health, culture, safety, community, and a host of other considerations that have not typically been perceived as manpower planning or human capital investment."

Lynham and Cunningham (2006, p. 119) similarly argue that

> … the purpose of HRD becomes to develop and unleash human expertise for national economic performance, political and social development, growth, and well-being by enabling and enhancing the learning and performance capabilities of individuals, family units, communities, other social groupings, organizations (of all types), and thereby the nation as a whole.

An extract from a United Nations (UN) resolution[1] on human resource development takes a similar approach:

> … in the development of human resources, an overall, well-conceived and integrated approach which is sensitive to gender considerations should be adopted, incorporating such vital areas as population, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, housing, communications, education and training and science and technology, as well as taking into account the need to create more opportunities for employment, in an environment that guarantees opportunities for political freedom, popular participation, respect for human rights, justice and equity, all of which are essential for enhancing human capacities to meet the challenges of development.

The logic is that if societies and economies depend on the development of all their human 'resources' for success, then all aspects of such human development become part of human resource development. Creating explicit national policies or strategies, and creating high-level structures to coordinate across different components of government and industry, is an important part of this logic. Such coordination, it is hoped, can try to fast-track the kinds of social pacts that have been developed over decades in the countries with successful skill formation systems, while maintaining democratic processes and a collective approach lacking in more centralized systems.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF HRD PLANNING

According to Unesco, the systems and policies which have been put in place for human resource development in South Africa are very good. The 2012 *Education For All Report* argues that among the forty-six countries examined in the study, "South Africa has one of the most comprehensive sets of policies and programmes addressing youth skills development. At least eight policies present priorities for skills development" (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2012, p. 208). The report goes on to argue that while

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[1] Extract from 86th plenary meeting, 21st December 1993, resolution A/RES/48/205 , Developing human resources for development.

institutional complexity "makes it vital for policies to be well aligned and the needs of the disadvantaged clearly integrated", "South Africa has made progress in this regard through its 2010 Human Resource Development Strategy." The Unesco report goes on to praise South Africa for having many departments and entities with

> …clearly defined roles in relation to the strategy, with indicators and activities related to each line department or subsystem coordinated via governmental forums – including a Human Resources Development Council – to ensure that planning is integrated and targets are reached. (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2012, p. 209)

Researchers have also spoken positively about South Africa's human resource development policies and strategies (for example, Lynham and Cunningham, 2006, 2004). This positive attitude is not shared by all researchers, however, suggesting that policy has been too narrowly focused on education and training, that interdepartmental cooperation across government has been very poor, and exchange of important information between the actors involved in the demand and supply of skills has been very limited (Kraak, 2010).

Posturing, not planning

There is widespread agreement that the first Human Resource Development Strategy South Africa (hereafter, *First Strategy*), released in 2001 to provide the framework for coordinating across government for the period 2001 – 2006, was a failure.

Its goals were ambitious, "including an improvement in the Human Development Index for South Africa, a reduction in inequality, and a higher position on the international competitiveness table" (Departments of Labour and Education, 2001, p. 4). But while it aimed "to ensure that the various components of the state work together in a coordinated way to deliver opportunities for human development", the Departments of Education and Labour which created the First Strategy did not interact with the rest of government in its creation. It had no implementation structure attached and no mechanism for coordinating its work across government.

Kraak (2010, p. 70) describes it as a disaster: "At best it remained a policy text with ambitious goals. At worst it was a non-event, having failed to become an effective instrument for improved coordination in the arena of education and training". He goes on to argue that "Apart from its public launch in April 2001 and the widespread dissemination of the strategy booklet, very little else occurred in the five years of the strategy (Kraak, 2010, p. 73). A government Task Team commissioned to understand what went wrong, suggests some of the following problems:

- No support outside of the Departments of Education and Labour, and therefore strategies and plans of national, provincial, and local government, as well as those of civil society, business and organised labour, were not aligned;
- No institutional structure to drive the *First Strategy* as an integrated programme;
- No clarity on roles, responsibilities and functions of different role-players and agencies at different levels;
- An overly broad focus on human development, lacking specific interventions;

-   No funding for the collection and analysis of data, and no measurement of progress in relation to strategic objectives[2].

In short, it was a 'strategy' with no mechanism to coordinate different role players involved, no meaningful indicators against which its achievements could be measured, no structures with a mandate to implement it, and no mechanisms to hold anyone accountable for its implementation; it was a 'wish list'. This, we argue, is a form of posturing, whereby governments releases documents that appear to be concerned with an area, but do not in any way facilitate the actual implementation of any of what they describe; others have referred to this as 'policy symbolism' (Sayed and Jansen, 2001).

Plumbing

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 2006, when the *First Strategy* elapsed, it was not replaced. Instead, government shifted from posturing to 'plumbing'. This took the form of an intervention to address perceived skills shortages in specific areas, known as the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA). JIPSA was widely seen as very successful at bringing together high-level stakeholders to focus on solving urgent and specific problems in the skills development 'pipeline', which is why it was sometimes referred to by the individuals involved as a plumbing process.

The context for this more focused approach was a slight shift in economic policy signaled by the government as the *First Strategy* reached the end of its lifespan. In July 2005, then President Thabo Mbeki launched the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative South Africa (ASGISA) as his flagship project. Government argued that on the back of the economic stability (which it understood as low levels of inflation and low deficit, and which was believed to have been created by responsible economic policy), there was some possibility for a shift away from austerity. Two key aspects of this were an expansion of social grants and a move towards a somewhat greater focus on industrial policy. While the changes were slight (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013), the new approach was generally welcomed (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). But policy makers and employers argued that ASGISA would fail without urgent intervention in skills. Here, the belief was that while the economy had started to grow, education was seen to be experiencing problems (Kraak and Press, 2008). The then Deputy President argued, "In a period of growth it is evident that we lack sufficient skilled professionals, managers and artisans, and that the uneven quality of education remains a contributory factor."[3] Similarly, the Business Trust (2010, p. 4) argued that it was "the shortage of priority skills which was holding up economic growth and employment creation". ASGISA itself gave considerable attention to post-basic education provision (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). The summary document argued for the centrality of education and training to growth, and suggested that the single greatest impediment to both public infrastructure and private investment programmes was a shortage of skills[4], both professional (such as

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[2] Marock, C., Soobrayan, B. Draft Report: Study to Ascertain How Best to Plan, Coordinate, Integrate, Manage, Monitor, Evaluate and Report on the National Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa. 2007. This study was commissioned by the Department of Education, under the auspices of a human resource development team which reported to a cluster of Ministers involved in economic development.

[3] Media Briefing by Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, 6 February 2006, Background Document: A Catalyst for Accelerated and Shared Growth-South Africa (ASGISA)

engineers, scientists, and managers; and technicians and artisans (Republic of South Africa, 2006, p. 9).

Instead of revising and replacing the much criticized *First Strategy*, the key role players, including the Departments of Education and Labour, and driven by the Presidency, as well as high level representatives of business and labour, turned to the work of JIPSA, which was established in March 2006. The initiative, which was designed as a short-term intervention, functioned for a period of four years, from 2006 to 2009. JIPSA was essentially a coordinative mechanism, highly focused on a key set of very specific identified priorities. It had very senior leadership: it was located in the presidency, and chaired by the then Deputy President, and its highest structure included representatives from government, business, organised labour, higher education, professional bodies and associations, and specialist agencies. Its work was carried out through a *Technical Working Group* which was chaired by an individual with considerable political authority, and also included representatives from key government departments, business and organised labour. This was supported by a small Secretariat, provided by the National Business Initiative[5].

In short, JIPSA was a specific coordination intervention to attempt to ensure that there would be the requisite skills available to drive its new approach to the economy, and it was generally seen as a successful set of "short term, decisive interventions" (Kraak, 2010, p. 75). It is seen as a demonstration that putting senior leadership behind a project, having a limited range of clear and focused priorities, and focusing on bringing different departments and stakeholders together where there were specific problems that affected them, enabled clear progress (The Business Trust, 2010). The fact that stakeholders agreed on plans was seen to contribute to smooth implementation, and in some instances, that additional resources could be leveraged. For example, for the goal of increasing the supply of engineers, business allocated additional bursaries, and made workplaces available for both technicians and engineers to get work experience. The Department of Education increased funding for engineers, and gave universities funds to improve their facilities. Similarly with artisans, because it was agreed that it was a national priority, additional funding could be sourced from the National Skills Fund[6]. Employers formed groups to look at training over and above their own needs. Large employers, especially state-owned enterprises, developed plans to absorb and train more artisans. The Department of Education then had to look at the role of the colleges in producing artisans. While obviously the successes cannot be only attributed to JIPSA, it was generally agreed that the programme led to the accelerated training of artisans in priority areas, significant increases in enrollments for engineering, and increases in numbers of technicians and technologists.

In short: JIPSA is seen to have be a success because it brought the right people together, was led by the highest level of government, and it created a sense of urgency around jointly solving a few key issues, with peer accountability and joint ownership. JIPSA is

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[4] This paper is not the place to critique the economic policy approach, but see Mohammed (2010) for an analysis of how the growth experienced in that period was in fact driven by financialization, did not lead to jobs, and was unsustainable and unsustained.

[5] The National Business Initiative is a voluntary coalition of South African and multinational companies that has invested in a number of areas including various aspects of the vocational education and skills formation systems in South Africa.

[6] A fund set up through a payroll levy; a small percentage of the levy is allocated to this national fund for priority areas.

described as "extra-bureaucratic" and "nimble" (Mouton, 2008a, p. v). The Secretariat was also seen as important. It provided co-ordination, administrative and project management support, policy analysis, research management capacity, and support for tracking and monitoring progress, and also enlisted expert advice from specialists and was able move flexibly between the social partners (The Business Trust, 2010).

The official focus on 'unblocking' problems rather than on addressing the systemic issues created some tension throughout the JIPSA process, because at various points there were attempts to deal with these issues (Mouton, 2008b). And in some cases systemic changes were in fact effected. For example, since JIPSA there has been a consistent process of tracking enrollments of apprentices, costing it so that the funding model has clearer norms, and so on.[7] Further, the closing report argues the JIPSA 'methodology' assisted in clarifying root problems in specific areas, and identifying viable courses of action; a key aspect of this 'methodology' was focused research and analysis (Mouton, 2008a). However, JIPSA also deliberately avoided bigger systemic and policy issues, and its focus on short-term and 'catalytic' interventions arguably made it easier to achieve success. What, then, was being done about the systemic and long-term issues?

A return to posturing?

JIPSA closed in 2009[8], and the second Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa 2010-2030 was adopted in the same year, and updated in 2010 (Republic of South Africa, 2010)[9]. The *Strategy* aims to achieve the following goals:

- To urgently and substantively reduce the scourges of poverty and unemployment.

- To promote justice and social cohesion through improved equity in the provision and outcomes of education and skills development programmes; and

- To substantively improve national economic growth and development through improved competitiveness of the South African economy.

The second *Strategy* attempted to build on the successes of JIPSA, and address the criticisms of the *First Strategy*. One key step was the creation of a Human Resource Development Council, as mentioned earlier led by the Deputy President and consisting of representation of many key Cabinet Ministers and 'captains of industry', senior leaders from organised labour, community representatives, professional bodies, and senior

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[7] DHET, National Artisan Development: Draft Proposed Funding Model, Version 6, 8 June 2011,

[8] Substantial changes to the national Cabinet were also introduced in 2009, when President Jacob Zuma took over from former President Thabo Mbeki in what was seen within the country as a fairly significant political change. Important to note for the purposes of this paper is that the Department of Education was split into a Department of Basic Education, responsible for schools, and a Department of Higher Education and Training, responsible for universities, colleges, the skills levy, and the sectoral education and training authorities constituted through the skills levy. The Department of Labour lost all responsibility for skills and training.

[9] There are a number of different version of the document available, and the one on the Human Resource Development Council website is undated (accessed 11 June 2014), but the differences between versions are not substantial.

experts from research and higher education (Republic of South Africa, 2010)[10]. This Council was created to oversee the coordination of the *Strategy*. The Council is supported by a full time secretariat housed and funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training, which also provides management, administrative, technical, and logistical support to it; the Minister of Higher Education and Training is responsible for the 'management of the strategy' (Republic of South Africa, 2010, p. 11).

Here is a forum where, in theory, instead of each government department implementing its narrow sectoral programmes, "all relevant policies, programmes, projects, interventions and strategies *are streamlined and optimised* to support overall government objectives rather than merely sectoral imperatives" (Human Resources Development Council, 2012, p. 2, our emphasis). Bringing high-level participants from a range of government departments as well as from other important stakeholders such as business and labour is seen to be one of the most important contributions that the Council is making. All of this was introduced in the context of ministries which had been reconfigured, a move towards more industrial planning, and a stated commitment to national planning.

However, we argue that this *Strategy*, even with the associated plan, is also closer to posturing than planning. It has almost no concrete achievements to date. Achievements listed in the Human Resource Development Council's review are all related to the establishment of structures, such as the Council itself and its associated structures, as well as the development of the *Strategy* itself and a 5-point plan. A 'Midterm Review' published by the Council indicates that the main achievements are the creation of structures (Human Resources Development Council, 2012). "Mutual learning" amongst Council members resulting from participation is also listed as an achievement (Human Resources Development Council, 2012, p. 23).

Four of the five Council members interviewed suggested achievements were very limited, and none, including the fifth interviewee who was positive, could list achievements other than putting structures into place, developing provincial HRD forums, identifying priority areas for intervention with technical task teams, directing funds from the National Skills Fund to the Secretariat of the Council, and appointing a fund manager. One Council member interviewed pointed out that even where there are achievements in different sectors, there is almost no way of telling whether they are attributable to the work of the Council, and this in theory allows the Council to exaggerate its successes— although in fact it does not as yet make concrete claims about successes.

In theory, the raison d'etre of the HRDC is to facilitate joined up activities that address challenges that requires and thus the extent to which the Council can assert that they have contributed to the change requires evidence that the solution was enabled because of this joined up approach.

This approach is given expression in the Council, which is a mechanism to coordinate the work of government, industry, and other social partners. One Council member emphasized the possibilities for high-level coordination and commented that, "Council holds a Minister accountable not just chief director or junior official." But others disagreed. One pointed out that "The council is an advisory body, it does not have

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[10] The following government ministers are members of the Council: Ministry of Higher Education (DHET), Ministry of Basic Education, Trade and Industry, Labour, Science and Technology, Public Service and Administration, Economic Development, Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, National Planning Commission, Home Affairs and Co-operative and Traditional Affairs (p.11).

power to ensure that Ministers implement or allocate budget resources", and another, "the implementing bodies are removed from the Council." In other words, the coordination work is supposed to happen in large meetings (over 50 Council members plus officials who are brought to meetings), which may happen three or four times a year.

In between meetings, Technical Task Teams, hereafter referred to as the Task Teams, were established in specific areas. They were intended to refine the understanding of the key problems in their area, investigate further, and develop recommendations. They are also supposed to develop action plans with milestones against them. These Task Teams are *ad hoc* and temporary bodies constituted under the Technical Working Group, and are the key vehicles though which the broad commitments in the *Strategy* and as well as in the National Integrated Human Resource Development Plan (discussed further below) are supposed to be translated into implementable recommendations. They include experts as well as stakeholders, sometimes at more junior levels than those represented on the Council.

Kraak (2013, p. 249) discusses the idea of task teams as important structures when "government enters a new policy area or when there is a great deal of confusion about the root causes and solutions to a problem". The idea is that such structures can have remits that cross departmental boundaries and include members from outside government, enabling them to operate outside of formal structures and constraints. By contrast, the Task Teams of the Council seem to have become just another role player in an already complex environment. One Council member interviewed suggested that it is not even clear whether or not the work of the different Task Teams aligns with each other or contradicts each other. It is also unclear what the implications are of decisions that may be taken on existing policies.

Interviewees suggested that a major problem which contributes to the HRDC failing to facilitate coordination at the level of implementation was the lack of vision and leadership from the Secretariat, which, four of five argued, seemed to see itself as a purely administrative structure, 'co-ordinating reports', according to one Council member interviewed. Lack of coherence in vision, lack of clear strategy, and lack of connection to the day-to-day work of government, were also cited as problems. One council member stated, in spite of being on council he is hard pressed to simplify what the priorities of council are and worries more that the public also lacks understanding of the councils work and role:

> I feel we have less traction than what the council should have. This is due to a disconnect between the council's work and the work of government departments. There is something about getting the council to 'bite' into strategy and policy of government at the practical level. Some individuals from particular interest groups will say the council has made achievements but that is because it has served their own specific interests through certain projects. It is true that part of the mission of the council is to forge partnerships. Partnerships matter but should align to a vision and not just be projects. It's not that there are no ideas or people doing good research but these projects are not a substitute for a coherent and well-articulated vision. What is needed is somebody to communicate the entire work of the council as a vision for the country. (Council member 4)

There have been requests by representatives to the Council for an action plan to be developed against agreed upon recommendations, which stipulates responsibilities and

time lines. These action plans would then inform the agenda of future Council meetings. But interviewees made it clear that the recommendations discussed at Council meetings are often broad in nature and the large number of issues that are covered in each meeting prevents substantive follow up of previous decisions. The consequence of this is that, whilst there is agreement that the Council will monitor and track progress against the Task Team's recommendations, there are no simple and clear actions which can be followed up on from meeting to meeting. This is largely because the secretariat is very operationally orientated and tends to be meetings driven, as one council member suggests:

> The HRDC tends to be meetings driven more than conceptually driven. The secretariat is weak and is not giving strategic direction. Disjuncture between an administrative driven secretariat. It has less focus on research as research is done under the working groups. What is being planned and what is been done is not necessarily aligning. The secretariat sees itself as taking minutes in the meetings but not creating a network of people or reference groups. In the meetings the secretariat does not shape the agenda . The council tends to be preoccupied with the presentations at meetings but has no capacity to monitor implementation as result some people bring their opinions to the meetings but have not done primary research. (Council member 3)

While 'lead departments' are identified, and while Task Teams table actionable reports, there are no clearly allocated tasks to specific departments. The Council has indicated that it will monitor achievements against key 'milestones' identified by the Task Teams for their respective areas, and the Task Teams have all now been disbanded. The Council is also committed to tracking whether recommendations are realized. However, thus far no reports on achievements have been developed, and there is no clear methodology for tracking such achievements or for understanding the contribution that these make to the intended impact. This is in spite of the council secretariat having a protocol on the implementation of decisions of council. There seems to be a lack of consistency amongst council members about how decisions are being implemented and monitored. One council member representing the government on council gave an elaborate explanation of how the protocol is supposed to work. But what comes out is further expansion of the protocol to include provinces with little clarity on how the actual monitoring is done. Rather than the protocol monitoring the decisions it is instead:

> A protocol for implementation has been development which is used hand in hand with the guidelines for how HRDC is supposed to function. These inform the secretariat about how measurement of decisions should be done. The protocol is used to look at the recommendations of a task team decisions for example: the TVET task team –the lead implementer is DHET/DBE and DOL. The secretariat communicates the findings to the respective department what the recommendations of the committee are. Most of the work of TTTs have time frames, so the secretariat follows those timelines. Currently the secretariat is meeting with all the implementing agencies. The other measurement approach is the provincial HRD Council task teams which the secretariat liaise with to receive feedback on implementation of HRD council decisions. Five provinces: KZN, Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga have active committees with senior people responsible for HRDC in provinces chaired by the Premiers. (Council member 1)

This approach stands in contrast to the JIPSA process. The Task Teams in JIPSA also continued once they had made recommendations, ensuring that progress updates were discussed in each meeting and that emerging challenges could be addressed by the

representatives at the meeting. Further, because JIPSA was dealing with a limited number of issues, and because it was an inherently *ad hoc* and temporary structure, its specific tasks did not require integration into the mainstream work of government. This is not appropriate for the large-scale and substantial steering of the work of government which is implied by the notion of national human resource development. A Council member gave the following example:

> The municipalities for an example have challenges of financial management: the council wants to intervene but battles to bring in SALGA, LGSETA, Universities etc ... but struggles to bring the relevant people to the table. Such issues cannot be resolved by the task teams without the technical experts. Some of the issues may require Treasury intervention through the budget and the project owner must develop an implementation plan. In some cases the identified skills requirements are not seen by business as critical areas, some Universities don't have capacity to offer courses identified as critical. (Council member 2)

The Task Teams in some instances have developed a life of their own separate from the logic and work of the departments. Instead of being 'nimble' extra-bureaucratic mechanisms (as JIPSA was described as) which can get things done, they seem to be an additional bureaucratic mechanism, or a mechanism which reinvents the work of the bureaucracy, without being aligned to the existing bureaucratic mechanisms, and with no accompanying structure to implement it, as the existing bureaucratic structures (departments in government) get on with what they were doing anyway, unless they have a specific interest in a Task Team. Of concern is the lack of synergy between the different Task Teams:

> In the work of the technical task teams there is a lack of synergy as some of the task teams have overlapping responsibilities. Some of the people from government need to be brought in to provide the technical support and specific feedback where required. A number of Ministers acknowledge that all government departments have something to do with skills training and are committed to advising council on their work. Some departments like treasury feel they have capacity to do certain work as they have the expertise internally to do work which is given to consultants. (Council member 2)

The 'programmes' which the Task Teams were developed to explore do not come directly from the *Strategy*. A *National Integrated Human Resource Development Plan* was adopted in 2014 (hereafter, the *Plan*). The *Plan* came into being four years after the *Strategy*, beginning at 2014 and covering the next four years, whilst the *Strategy* covers the period from 2010 to 2030. The *Plan* was developed when the Midterm Review established that almost nothing had been achieved, and so a planning process was instigated, in which management consulting firm Mckinsey played an important role, interviewing Council members, and attempting to develop focused priorities.

The *Plan* claims to identify and 'remove bottlenecks' in the 'skills pipeline' (language of JIPSA) and states that a "value chain approach will be adopted, addressing the key stages of development, namely early childhood development, schooling, technical and vocational education and training, higher education and training and the world of

work[11]". However, the *Plan* is not a plan in any usual sense of the word. It establishes five goals:

1. Universal access to quality foundational learning
2. Expanded access to the post-schooling system
3. Capable public sector with effective and efficient planning and implementation capabilities
4. Production of appropriately skilled people for the economy
5. Improved technological innovation and outcomes.

These five goals are supposedly based on eight 'commitments' made in the *Strategy* (Republic of South Africa, 2010, pp. 24–43), which state what will be done in every sector of education and training, ranging from overcoming shortages in "priority skills needed …. to achieve economic growth" and "urgently implementing skills development programmes aimed at equipping recipients/citizens with requisite skills to overcome related scourges of poverty and unemployment" to improving basic education and vocational education to improving science and technology capacities. The 'commitments' are not only about education and training, but also state improvements to state capacity, including establishing planning capabilities in government departments. While the Strategy as a whole has a twenty year life span, the 'commitments' are aimed at a five year period. Each commitment has a set of strategic priorities associated with it. The eight commitments are multiplied by about three 'strategic priorities', each with several activities, leading to 101 tasks that need to be accomplished (Kraak, 2010).

In an attempt to overcome one of the identified weaknesses of the *First Strategy*—that it was driven by the Departments of Education and Labour only[12]—and to ensure that in developing a second strategy it would draw together work across government, in the spirit of 'joined up policy', the Department of Education commissioned a review of the *First Strategy*. This happened in 2007, parallel to the JIPSA process. They also commissioned a review to identify relevant human resource development activities that were taking place in government. This review considered the key national and sectoral policies and extrapolated their implications for human resource development. It also contained a review of the plans of National Departments[13], as well as the nine provincial Growth and Development Strategies for the financial year of 2007/2008.

By starting with a consideration of the implications of the different government departments for national human resource development, the second *Strategy* presented an aggregation of key priorities identified across government, instead of being a plan developed by two departments only. However, this "additive linking of the separate line-

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[11] National Integrated Human Resource Development Plan (2014-2018), Human Resource Development Council of South Africa, undated, p. 5

[12] Marock, C., Soobrayan, B. Draft Report: Study to Ascertain How Best to Plan, Coordinate, Integrate, Manage, Monitor, Evaluate and Report on the National Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa. 2007.

[13] This included (note that many of these departments have since changed) the following: Education, Labour and Agriculture, Arts and culture, Communication, Environment and Tourism, Correctional Services, Defence, Health, Provincial and Local government, Trade and Industry, Police Service, Public Works, Home Affairs, Social Development, Public Service and Administration, Science and technology, Water Affairs and Forestry, Mineral and Energy, Justice and Correctional Services Sports and Recreation, Transport, Housing, as well as South African Management Development Institute.

function activities of the constituent parts" led to a long list of everything that government hoped to achieve, instead of an overall strategic focus which then feeds into the work of different departments. Further, the *Strategy* lists many activities that were part of line functions of departments, but does not identify those that really need cooperation between different departments[14].

In short, the key documents which are supposed to drive coordination across the nation are incoherent: there are eight 'commitments' defined in the *Strategy*. There are five 'goals' defined in the *Plan*. And then there are six programme areas, which are supposed to ensure that the goals of the *Plan* are implemented. Instead of the *Plan* being an actual plan to carry out an actual strategy, it seems that each new document simply adds a layer of complexity. For each goal the *Plan* provides an indication of who the lead government department will be (sometimes there is more than one) and who the supporting partners are (government, business and non-government). Performance indicators for the area are given. The *Plan* says that it will create a "clear set of protocols that clarify the roles, responsibilities and functions" for these lead departments and other partners." It goes on to say that once the Council has accepted any recommendation, "implementers will be required to include the work or project into their strategic plans and where possible, their departmental performance agreements."

So on top of the incoherence of the documents, there is no driver of the integration of government work, and no real way of holding different ministries to account. While the *Plan* and the second *Strategy* have clearer indicators and targets, there is no report that happens against the *Strategy*. Ministers discuss broad level recommendations at Council, but line officials in departments don't report directly to the Council. The *Task Teams* work on areas that are the direct work of government departments, without buy-in from the department in question, and without any sense of integration with the work of these departments. Logically, no one in departments then has accountability for the implementation of these recommendations. Despite the intention of aligning the work of the Council with that of the National Planning Commission[15], this has not really been done. There is no real relationship between the work of the Council and the Medium Term Strategic Framework—which is the framework that actually guides government work because it has budget attached to it—and has a relationship with planning commission.

The *Plan* states that the five goals support other key government policies such as the National Growth Path, the National Development Plan, and the Industrial Policy Action Plan[16], but does not indicate concretely how this is done, and a Council member interviewed argued that there are no concrete links.

> One doesn't get a sense that there is a clear rhythm and dynamic to the alignment of the deliverables, frameworks, plans and strategies. But if you think about this as a council bringing together various strands and departments by

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[14] Kraak, A. Review of Report: Human Resources Development Strategy for South Africa: 2009/10-2013/2014, Authored by Carmel Marock and Bobby Soobrayan, Singizi Consulting. 7th May 2008.

[15] The National Planning Commission is led by the Minister in the Presidency: National Planning and is made up of 25 policy experts who are commissioned to "draft a long-term vision of where South Africa wishes to be in 15 years' time" (Republic of South Africa, 2009, p. 22).

[16] The Economic Development Department. (2010). *The New Growth Path Framework*; National Planning Commission. (2011). *National Development Plan: Vision for 2030*; The Department of Trade and Industry. (2014). *Industrial Policy Action Plan 2014/15-2016/17: Economic Sectors and Employment Cluster.*

> driving a vision you would expect that targets and plans would be clear and linked to milestones determining progress showing where the work is in relation to the strategy. Things seem to just 'come up' they are not articulated within a vision. (Council member 4)

The *Plan* states that once recommendations are adopted by Council, the implementing agencies (in the main, departments in government) will be required to integrate "these decisions into their strategic and operational plans (p. 5), and the Task Teams are then dissolved. In practice this leaves it unclear who carries the responsibility of taking things forward. In some cases, such as where a government department is driving the Task Team—as happened, for example, with the Task Team on *The Alignment of Skills Planning to the National Growth Path*, the Economic Development Department is taking some of the recommendations forward and is actively working with the Department of Higher Education and Training to enable the other recommendations. However, it is unclear how recommendations emanating from this Task Team will be monitored, nor is it clear the extent to which the Council will be able to hold the various departments accountable to participating in these processes and planning their skills requirements. As one council member interviewed maintains:

> Some of the task teams take longer to complete their work because of internal problems within the task team. For example the task team on the production of academics has had some members withdrawing due to differences of approach in identifying the problem, others just did not have enough time to participate in the task team. Others have got different interpretations of the priorities. The council is an advisory body it does not have power to ensure that Ministers implement or allocate budget resources. (Council member 2)

In another example, the Task Team set up to explore how to increase the production and development of professionals concluded its work and made recommendations about what professional councils need to do in this regard. These recommendations were agreed to by Council. But it was unclear who is supposed to do what to make sure that these recommendations get implemented. While some work is being done in this area by the Department of Higher Education and Training, it is not directed by the recommendations of the Task Team.

The fact that this is a problem can be observed in a flurry of emails between the personal assistant to the Director of Technical Task Teams, who is the person at the Council in charge of these teams, and the former head of the *Productions of Professionals Task Team*, which we are privy to as one of us was a member of this Task Team. However, the structural problem—that the primary mechanism for developing priorities in different areas of work—is a set of *ad hoc* temporary structures with no relationship to line departments or any other official structure or organization—remains unresolved.

Skills development in context

In the absence of interventions in the economy, a broad focus on human resource development seems to enable a form of government posturing, whereby it looks like government is doing what it can for the economy, but in fact it is only intervening (to the extent that it is in fact effectively intervening) in the education and training system.

As pointed out above, there is a no clear relationship between South African policies to grow the economy and the process of determining priorities for skills formation. Instead of the whole approach of the Council being embedded in the development of the economy and society, there is one Task Team which was specifically created to

investigate the alignment of skills development to the needs of the National Growth Path. And the policies to grow the economy themselves, despite rhetoric about a 'developmental' state', are, according to Fine (2012), piecemeal and incoherent; while the South African government increasingly attempts to describe itself as 'developmental', in fact its industrial policies have remained weak, and macro economic policy has been characterized as "permissive management of capital outflows", in sharp contrast to the states which brought finance "under the dictates of domestic economic policy" (Fine, 2012, p. 119).

This is in contrast to the late industrializers, which introduced skill formation reforms in concert with, and to support, highly focused industrialization drives. Ashton *et al.* (1999), in their discussion of 'developmental skills formation systems' so-called because they were located in 'developmental states' in the Asian tigers (Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), show that what is key in all four of these countries is that the key agent of *economic change*, as well as the key driver of the development of skills formation, was the state. The state created specific government strategies, associated institutions, and institutional arrangements which supported the development of skills formation systems. In other words, what underpinned the development of these skills formation systems was rapidly industrializing and developing economies, driven by these developmental states. It was their industrialization strategies which *generated* distinctive education and training needs, and then developed highly focused and centrally driven strategies to meet these needs.

In short, the South African attempt at high-level national coordination of Human Resource Development is through a structure which is weak bureaucratically, with poorly conceived relationships between structures, mandates, and accountability lines. It is not a centralized ministry with power over others, but a collection of a whole lot of different ministries, with their own agendas and systems. The accompanying *Strategy* is simply too broad and diffuse to be implementable, and it operates largely in isolation from industrialization strategy.

Even if it was a strong and focused structure, the general approach adopted in South Africa tends to over emphasize the role of skills development in economic development. Most literature on these late developers does not cite skills development as a crucial factor in their development (Amsden, 2007; Chang, 2003, 1993). It is hard, counter-factually, to separate out the role that the state played in improving education systems, from, for example, the role of families and individuals who saw opportunities in the newly emerging companies. Ashton *et al* argue, though, that in all these countries skills formation was weak prior to industrialization, and cite, as evidence of the success of these skill formation systems, that none of the Asian tigers experienced acute skills shortages which hampered their industrialization strategies. Of course evidence of acute skills shortages is usually hard to establish, and such shortages are usually most talked about in countries that do *not* have industrialization strategies (like South Africa[17]). What the Asian tigers had in common was an analysis that their education systems would not be fast enough to respond to a rapid change in employer requirements. They all

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[17] Mark Levine (2013) cites the Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman, who shows that during the Great Depression, when aggregate demand and the country's job creation machinery had collapsed, workers were described as unadaptable and untrained, unable to respond to the opportunities which industry had to offer. A few years later, when preparations for World War II gave the economy a massive boost, the 'skills gap' vanished, and those same workers who had been described as 'unadaptable and untrained' before were easily employed.

attempted to *create* systems which would create the required skills. As development economist Alice Amsden (2010, p. 60) argues, it is often held as an

> … article of faith that a supply of better clothed, housed, and fed workers automatically creates the demand to employ it at a living wage. Yet if unemployment already exists, then to invest more in workers' human capabilities, whether in the form of healthcare, housing, and schooling, or of political freedom, democracy, and transparency (as the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen suggests), may create more perturbed unemployed job-seekers, rather than more plentiful jobs.

If the creation of demand for skills in the economy is a key lesson from the late industrializing countries, a key lesson from the countries with a history and tradition of strong skills development systems is that the factors which effect the trajectory of skills formation include the division of labour between firms, associations, and the state in providing and financing skills; labour market regulation; unionization; the nature and extent of employer organization and the role of industry peak bodies; and the relative powers of national governments and states/provinces; and the emeddedness of training in political and socioeconomic institutions such as collective bargaining and industrial relations, labour market regulation and social welfare policies, as well as corporate governance and financing, although there is much debate on the interactions and causal connections between training regimes and the related political-economic institutions (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012; Streeck, 2012; Thelen and Busemeyer, 2012). And these factors all interact with each other in complex ways; for example, the shape of labour market opportunities structures the incentives to learn (Keep, 2012, p. 14). These factors are precisely not addressed in human resource development policies.

So on the one hand the remit is too broad—and this suggests a weakness of the national HRD tradition, which focuses on human development as opposed to skills, because, as discussed above, more-or-less sees anything connected with human development as part of developing human 'resources' for the economy. The conflation of human resource development with human development is also unfortunate because it poses education and training as the solution to all manner of social problems. The role of skills in the economy is contested and debated, and the notion of 'skill' itself is, of course, socially and politically embedded, and shifts in time and place. There is no principled way of drawing any boundary around what the 'it' under consideration is.

It simply is impossible to have every high-level government official discussing every aspect of policies concerning the whole education and training system in relation to every other social and economic policy. Clearly, the development of the skills and knowledge of people needs to be considered in relation to, for example, science and technology, as well as industrial policy. But the danger is the creation of a large, high-level, expensive talk-shop, where what is discussed is either so broad as to be meaningless from the point of view of implementation, or so detailed as to be impossible for a coordinating structure to deal with.

On the other hand, factors which will genuinely affect the formation of skills—such as industrial policy, labour market regulation, and social welfare—are outside of the remit of human resource development policy.

This leads to an ideological focus on education and training policy, in which human resource development takes the lead, but no practical focus on ensuring that skills required to support demand are in place, and no practical focus on creating demand for

skills. And while a structure for high level coordination exists, it is hard to develop capacity to coordinate when you are trying to coordinate too much, and too many people are involved in discussions that concern them only very indirectly. This explains why despite participation in this structure across government at a high level, it is weak and unfocused. And while this could in part stem from poor planning and a weak bureaucracy, we suggest that it stems also from the inherent logic (or lack thereof) of the concept of national human resource development as a way of thinking about education, skills and development. The JIPSA process, described above, shows that South Africa can achieve focused interventions that make substantial improvements in skills formation when there is appropriate focus on the task at hand. The national human resource development approach is simply too broad and too diffuse to be a way of ensuring focused intervention in the skills formation system.

Finally, a problem with the notion of human resource development is that just as we don't give people houses to have well-housed human resources, and health care to have healthy human resources, we should not think of education as only about building our human resources. Rather, it is something that is people's right, not something they only get in their capacity as a resource.

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