



# Policy Brief

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A vehicle to articulate development issues and foster dialogue

## Professionalizing the Public Sector: Global Lessons and Good Practices for South Africa<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** Professionalizing the public sector is essential to achieving effective governance, transparent institutions, and efficient service delivery, which are foundational for sustained socio-economic development. Around the world, countries have employed various models to build skilled, accountable, and resilient public services, often through meritocratic recruitment, structured training programs, and institutional frameworks that promote integrity and performance.

This policy brief reviews key international examples, drawing insights from the experiences of Canada, Singapore, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and South Korea. The brief concludes with specific recommendations to provide instructive lessons for South Africa in its journey towards a more professional public sector, addressing both the challenges and opportunities that such reforms entail.

### 1. Introduction

The global push to professionalize the public sector stems from the need for effective public service that meets the expectations of citizens, advances national development, and supports democratic governance. In recent years, governments worldwide have implemented strategies to enhance public service professionalism, with benefits that include improved efficiency, increased public trust, and stronger institutional capacity. Professionalization encompasses not only skills development but also the establishment of robust ethical and accountability frameworks that reinforce the sector's integrity and service orientation.

In South Africa, a Diagnostic Overview conducted in 2011 by the National Planning Commission highlighted the urgent need to enhance the skills of public servants. It also noted a decline in the State's role in developing skilled professionals, such as through the closure of teacher and nursing colleges. This decline extends to the training of engineers, planners, and artisans. Efforts to involve professional institutes in the training, selection, and development of senior managers have largely been ineffective, with some institutes having limited influence over appointments to key roles in the public service.

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<sup>1</sup> This policy brief, drafted by the UNDP South Africa Country Office, provides a strategic roadmap for professionalizing the public sector by drawing on global lessons and best practices, aimed at enhancing governance, service delivery, and institutional capacity to foster socio-economic stability and accelerate SDG progress in South Africa. The views expressed in this policy note are those of the authors and do not represent the views of UNDP, the United Nations or any of its affiliate organizations. For more information, please contact the authors at the following email: [rogers.dhliwayo@undp.org](mailto:rogers.dhliwayo@undp.org) and [bongani.matomela@undp.org](mailto:bongani.matomela@undp.org).

According to the Diagnostic Overview, this decline has led to a reduction in the number of professionals available to the State and signals a looming crisis in the generational renewal of expertise, as experienced professionals continue to exit the system. Even when these functions are outsourced, the Government requires the technical knowledge to effectively commission and oversee contractors. South Africa faces longstanding challenges in service delivery, an absence of effective management information, low productivity, undefined roles and responsibilities, poor coordination, and a shortage of skills and capacity. To address these, a transformative and developmental State is needed, characterized by well-coordinated institutions staffed by skilled public servants committed to the public good and able to consistently deliver high-quality services for all South Africans, aligned with the nation's developmental objectives.

The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation's (DPME) *Towards a 25-Year Review (1994-2019)* underscores the persistent shortage of technical and managerial skills in the Public Service and the over-reliance on outsourced professional and technical services, which remains a challenge requiring targeted action. There is a need for the State to proactively strengthen technical and professional capabilities in public service while establishing clear career pathways for both managerial and technical positions.

In March 2021, President Cyril Ramaphosa affirmed that "only a Capable, Efficient, Ethical, and Development-Oriented State can deliver on the commitment to improve the lives of the people of this country." Building a capable, ethical, and developmental state is a strategic priority of the 6th administration and is reinforced as Strategic Priority 3 in the draft Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP). The *National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector* (Professionalisation Framework) aims to stabilize public administration by reducing inappropriate political interference and factional turnover, while fostering a civil service culture devoted to social development and transformation. This professionalisation push aligns with Chapter 13 of the National Development Plan, which advocates for strengthening the Public Service Commission (PSC), establishing an administrative head of the public service, and embedding a merit-based recruitment system.

For South Africa, adopting good practices from these global experiences could play a transformative role in addressing persistent public sector challenges and enhancing service delivery.

## **2. Good Practices and International Experiences in Public Service Professionalization**

### **a. Canada: Competency-Based Human Resources Management**

Canada has long emphasized competency-based human resources management in its public sector, placing a strong focus on merit-based recruitment, career-long professional development, and a transparent promotion system. The Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC) ensures that recruitment processes align with a set of core competencies tailored to the diverse needs of government roles. This approach limits favoritism and nepotism, strengthens accountability, and ensures that employees possess the qualifications and skills necessary to perform their duties effectively.

Canada's model also includes a comprehensive performance assessment system, where employee competencies are regularly evaluated, guiding decisions on promotions, training, and career

development. This emphasis on skill alignment not only improves performance but also fosters a culture of accountability and ethical responsibility within the public service.

*Lessons for South Africa:*

- Develop competency-based frameworks: Adopt clear, competency-based frameworks across all spheres that ensure each position is filled by candidates with matching skills and qualifications.
- Merit-Based recruitment: Prioritize merit-based recruitment to minimize political interference and improve overall efficiency.
- Accountability systems: Establish rigorous performance evaluations to reinforce accountability and transparency in promotions and hiring.

**b. Singapore: Continuous Learning and Development**

Singapore has built one of the world's most skilled and agile public sectors, largely due to its commitment to continuous learning and development. Through the Civil Service College and the Public Service Division, Singapore provides structured training programs tailored to the needs of its civil servants at various career stages, from entry-level officers to senior executives. The curriculum includes areas such as governance, digital transformation, and public policy, ensuring that public servants are well-equipped to adapt to changing demands and technologies.

In addition to its training institutions, Singapore has also instituted rigorous performance management and leadership development programs that cultivate a pipeline of skilled leaders. The country's approach has fostered a results-oriented culture, promoting high standards in service delivery and responsiveness to public needs.

*Lessons for South Africa:*

- Establish continuous development pathways: Model the existing national institution for public service training (National School of Government -NSG) to offer cutting edge continuous learning opportunities, but also programmes that seek to solve immediate public administration challenges being experienced by citizens
- Leadership Development: Building a strong leadership pipeline is essential. Develop structured pathways to mentor and prepare future public sector leaders, leveraging existing initiatives such as the Nyukela programme to foster leadership skills and readiness across all levels of public service.
- Adaptability and innovation: Focus on training that equips public servants with skills in foresight, data driven planning and decision-making; digital and policy innovation.

**c. United Kingdom: Performance Management and Accountability**

The UK Civil Service is known for its robust performance management and accountability systems, which set clear standards for public sector employees. With institutions like the Civil Service Leadership Academy and an established performance appraisal system, the UK ensures that employees are held accountable for their contributions to organizational goals. The UK government's rigorous performance management processes align individual goals with broader organizational objectives, rewarding high performance and identifying areas for improvement.

This culture of accountability has led to increased productivity and morale within the public sector, as employees understand how their work impacts national goals. Moreover, transparent hiring and promotion practices based on merit have helped to minimize corruption and build public trust.

*Lessons for South Africa:*

- Improve the current performance management development system: Create a standardized performance appraisal system that aligns individual performance with departmental and national goals and build both carrot and stick.
- Encourage and reward productivity: Working with all stakeholders, including trade unions, develop a rewards/incentive system for high performance to enhance motivation and reinforce a results-oriented culture.

**d. New Zealand: Public Sector Transformation and Flexibility**

New Zealand's Public Service Act 2020 introduced reforms that emphasize flexibility, collaboration, and responsiveness in the public sector. These reforms focus on a "joined-up" government approach that promotes coordination across various government departments, enabling New Zealand to adapt quickly to emerging issues, such as natural disasters and public health crises. This collaborative framework has enhanced the government's capacity to provide integrated services and respond to complex, cross-departmental challenges effectively.

New Zealand's approach demonstrates the importance of flexibility within the public sector, especially in an increasingly dynamic global environment. The country's emphasis on innovation and collaborative governance is particularly valuable for countries aiming to foster a responsive and adaptable public sector.

*Lessons for South Africa:*

- Promote cross-departmental collaboration: Encourage collaborative frameworks across departments/and spheres to provide integrated and effective services.
- Enhance flexibility: Introduce policy and regulatory mechanisms that allow the public sector to respond swiftly to changing needs.
- Innovation in governance: Create an environment that promotes experimentation and innovation in problem-solving, innovative ways of delivering services to the people; where innovation and inclusive digitalization (use of technology) but do so in an inclusive way that *leaves no one behind*.

**e. South Korea: Ethical Standards and Integrity**

South Korea's emphasis on ethics and integrity has been instrumental in building a professional public sector. The Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC) enforces ethical standards and anti-corruption measures that deter malfeasance and promote transparency. Public officials undergo regular integrity assessments, and the hiring process emphasizes ethical qualifications alongside technical skills.

South Korea's experience highlights the value of stringent ethical standards in professionalizing the public sector. By promoting transparency and enforcing strict anti-corruption policies, South Korea has strengthened public trust and accountability within government institutions.

*Lessons for South Africa:*

- Establish strict ethical guidelines and codes of conduct: Implement strong ethical standards to deter corruption and promote transparency in public service.

- Anti-corruption measures: Strengthen anti-corruption policies and ensure public servants are regularly evaluated and tested on integrity, on a continuous basis.
- Public trust: Foster a culture of accountability and transparency to rebuild public confidence in government institutions.

### 3. Policy Recommendations for South Africa

Building on these lessons, the following are instructive to help South Africa navigate the professionalization journey and wider public sector reform efforts:

- Develop a competency-based framework: Implement a standardized competency-based framework for public sector recruitment and performance evaluation to ensure job alignment with skills and qualifications.
- Strengthen the National School of Government (NSG): Enhance the NSG to provide ongoing professional development across career levels, drawing lessons from Singapore's Civil Service College to foster leadership, innovation, and lifelong learning in public service.
- Implement performance management systems: Improve the existing performance management development system to regularly assess performance, with mechanisms to reward high performance, take corrective actions, and identify areas for improvement.
- Encourage agility and flexibility: Create policy and regulatory mechanisms that allow the public sector to adapt to changing demands and encourage cross-departmental and sectoral collaboration, following New Zealand's model.
- Enforce ethical standards and anti-corruption measures: Develop and strictly enforce ethical standards for public servants, incorporating regular integrity assessments to deter corruption and promote transparency.

### 4. Conclusion

International experience offers valuable insights for South Africa's public sector reform. Examples from Canada, Singapore, the UK, New Zealand, and South Korea illustrate how professionalizing the public sector can lead to enhanced service delivery, accountability, and public trust. By adopting these practices, South Africa can work towards a skilled, responsive, and ethical public administration aligned with socio-economic development goals, in line with the Framework on the Professionalisation of the Public Sector. The Government of National Unity's commitment to building a professional, merit-based, corruption-free public service offers a solid foundation for driving these reforms with urgency and impact.

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