

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN STRENGTHENING THE SOUTH AFRICAN CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

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OUR INTEREST IN THE COG

- Literature confirms that SA COG is similar to other COGs in that it has tended to emphasise the importance of silo bridging, collaboration, change or transition management and implementation coordination.
- Some COG challenges are, however, unique to SA, and are related to the unique make-up of the SA state.
- As far back as 1998, the PRC (Chapter 2) commented about the unwieldy nature of govt:

“The wholeness of government is weakened, indeed threatened in South Africa by both structural and functional defects.

Structurally, the national machinery is too fragmented. There are too many departments with too narrow a focus. The whole machine is headed by too many ministers supported by too many private offices, directors general and their support staff.

This in turn has created major problems of coordination.

In addition, every separate department is potentially another self-regarding vehicle for thrusting policies at provincial and local government.”

PRC Report, p.37.

OUR INTEREST IN THE COG (2)

- PRC mentioned that the COG, particularly the Presidency, needs to play a key role in improving inter-departmental coordination & IGR, but that there was a “*vacuum at the centre of government*”.
- Subsequently the Offices of the Pres & Dep Pres were merged and the Cabinet Secretariat was converted into a strengthened Cabinet Office. PCAS also later established with Mr Mr Joel Netshitenzhe initially serving as both the head of PCAS & CEO (DG) of GCIS.
- However, by 2012, when the NPC produced their report, coordination challenges re-surfaced. The NPC lamented that:

“The challenge of improving coordination runs throughout all sections of government. Too often, departments pursue competing objectives, there are gaps where no department takes responsibility, or areas where departments could be more effective if they worked together and drew on each others’ strengths. Coordination problems can be particularly acute where the coordination has to take place both between departments and across spheres.” NDP, p.429.

- NPC suggested that:
 - A distinction be made between “routine” & “strategic” coordination, with the former being done by officials in departments themselves, while the latter should be done through the cluster system and The Presidency.
 - Where coordination breaks down, the Presidency should bring different parties together to mediate agreements.

OUR INTEREST IN THE COG (3)

- Indications are that “routine” coordination is still not happening optimally, e.g.:
 - FOSAD’s GSCID cluster has appointed a task team to look into the planning & reporting burden experienced by Programme 1 units.
 - Initial review by Programme 1 of NT of the key plans and reports to be produced, found that there are at least 79 of these that are required in a FY. It also found that 67% of these plans and reports are extensive and cumbersome, and that at least 27% of these plans & reports have no clear impact on decision-making.
 - Project now under way to conduct a deeper analysis and to make recommendations on how to streamline or rationalise these requirements.
- Re “strategic” coordination, despite the focus on a well-functioning cluster system, there have been at least 3 reviews of the system in the recent past (that we are aware of) that have made similar findings, e.g:
 - There are challenges in agenda setting (all too often items are included that are not of a strategic transversal nature or that do not require strategic coordination).
 - Attendance problematic: Officials attending the meetings are often not sufficiently senior level & they change too often.
 - Secretariat support is weak.

OUR INTEREST IN THE COG (4)

- During GTAC's support to the Presidency in 2021, it also became clear that coordination (and capacity) challenges within the Presidency "family" and within the broader COG, are ongoing.
- Also, we noted that the COG has grown exponentially since 1994 but has also become increasingly fragmented with limited impact on SA's development challenges.

ROLE OF THE COG INTERNATIONALLY (1)

- What is a COG, 'strategic centre' or 'strategic apex'?
 - We can think of this as the “brain” of the system of government.
 - Reliance on the brain to set the direction of government has become more complex, not least because of the continued proliferation and fragmentation of govt, competing or overlapping mandates & territorial battles.
- Despite agreement on the importance of this “brain”, conceptual battles surround the definition of these terms.
- Kelly (2009 & 2010) stated that the COG is formed by the intersection of the political, policy and operational domains of government.
- She found that these tend to be *“a loose conglomeration of agencies; most suffering institutional identity crisis; mistaking power and muscle for strategy; [are] highly competitive; often causing more harm than good; [and that] undermine line agencies.”*

ROLE OF THE COG INTERNATIONALLY (2)

- There is also no standard set of responsibilities that make up a COG:
 - The UK's Institute for Government's (IFG) study of 6 countries defines the strategic centre as the support system that is provided to the elected head of state and which provides direction and focus, helps him or her to make policy decisions and ensures implementation priorities are realised.
 - IFG determined the **head of state** and the **budgeting function** as the only two constant elements in this support system across each of the six countries (IFG 2011).
 - In the OECD's review of 35 OECD countries and an additional 4 economies, the COG is defined as *“the ministry or general secretariat of the presidency, the office of the Prime minister, and the cabinet office, although these functions can in some cases be performed by units based in other parts of the government (e.g. finance, planning, budget office)”* (OECD 2019).

ROLE OF THE COG INTERNATIONALLY (3)

- Rather than any set structures, the literature reveals that the shape of the 'strategic centre' and its shifts over time are informed by four key drivers, namely:
 - changes in the political environment,
 - the need for responses to arising issues and crises,
 - personal relationships and political dynamics, and
 - historic institutional arrangements.
- Governments respond to these drivers by creating a plethora of special purpose institutional arrangements within the COG but there is no common location for these or mechanisms for their integration into the overall government system.

SITUATION IN SA

- In SA, there is also no definition or common understanding of the COG.
 - The NT and the Presidency began to debate (in 2009) the make up of the COG (Clifton 2011).
 - Even though the NT, in its setting up of GTAC, defined the COG as consisting of the DPME (yet somehow strangely not the Presidency!), DPISA, DCOG, and the NT, this debate is still ongoing.
 - From time to time, anecdotally, other entities with central and/or cross-cutting roles (or even by virtue of being located centrally) have sometimes been included in the COG, such as the PSC, GCIS, NPC, NSG, StatsSA and even the DWYPD.
 - This ambiguity, of which functions are central vs. which are in the COG, has never been clarified.

SITUATION IN SA (2)

- A rising trend since around 2001 is the establishment of formal and informal special delivery units. Although these units are mostly created to compensate for breakdowns in the policy-implementation cycle (Kelly 2009), this is not always the case. They tend to be set up to tackle issues as varied as planning, implementation of major or special sectoral projects and to resolve the proliferation of ‘wicked problems’—although there is no guarantee these always achieve their intended aims.
- Kelly observes the following conditions for success of delivery units:
 - Highly visible political backing and location close to a political sponsor.
 - Commitment to a tightly defined remit.
 - Adoption of the right hiring strategy, organisational structure and leadership model.
 - Ensuring cross-government ownership of the delivery unit’s results agenda.
 - Putting routines in place to review effectiveness and refresh operations.
- She found that many governments have become disillusioned with their delivery units and are quietly axing them.

SITUATION IN SA (3)

- SA has similar delivery units that are located within or close to the COG, for instance at national level, Operation Vulindlela, which has been set up by The Presidency and National Treasury to support structural economic reforms; and to monitor progress.
- At provincial level, an example is the Delivery Support Unit (DSU) located within the Branch: Policy, Research and Advisory Services of the Gauteng Office of the Premier. Its role is to convene, coordinate, monitor/oversee, unblock and assist those departments in the province that are responsible for service delivery to deliver on their mandates.
- In addition, in SA several “war rooms” have been set up at both the national and sub-national levels to deal with specific challenges.

BACK TO INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

- Scholars define the roles played by the COG in various ways.
- For instance, the COG provides “services that range from strategic planning to real-time policy advice and intelligence, and from leading major cross departmental policy initiatives to monitoring progress and outcomes” (OECD 2015).
- Further, OECD countries share common responsibilities in various permutations for the preparation of Cabinet meetings, policy co-ordination, transition planning and management, strategic planning, government programmes, monitoring of government policy, relations with Parliament and several other lesser priorities. Some of these functions are shared with other parts of government such as relations with subnational governments. (OECD 2019).
- Likewise, as most governments are highly departmentalised due to their specialised functions and tend to compete with each other (Lencioni 2006), the **COG needs to work across silos and break this competition.**
- Tett (2015: 247) notes that “Mastering silos is not a task that is ever truly completed. It is always a work in progress.”

BACK TO INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES (2)

- Though the definition of the COG and the roles it plays differs across jurisdictions, the one thing that scholars agree upon is that **relationships are key**.
 - Relationships within the centre are competitive, evolving and often tense. This suggests a need to clarify the basis of this relationship by articulating division of responsibilities or specialisation, as well as the key mechanisms for coordination.
 - The relationship between line and central agencies is ill-defined and often seen as obstructive or damaging; the evidence suggests these tensions are seeded in sociocultural norms as much as operational challenges.
 - Relationships between central agencies, ministers and ministerial offices shape the operating style of central agencies. Key questions include perceptions of the employment relationship between minister and [the Senior Executive/Management Service], the policy role of ministerial offices, and the level of collegiality expected in cabinet.

BACK TO INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES (3)

- The literature suggests that every time the COG sets up a network, transversal or matrix management arrangement or special delivery unit, whether formally or informally, the competencies of the individual leaders involved should also be considered. These individuals need hard and soft skills related to:
 - Policy advice
 - Conflict resolution
 - Relationship-building
 - Cross boundary working ability
 - Troubleshooting and problem-solving of complex problems
 - Ability to withstand extremely high pressure, more so than encountered in other parts of government

BACK TO INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES (4)

- Special consideration also needs to be given to the balance between the political and administrative aspects of government.
- This is partly due to how the COG is set up, as sometimes it can be headed up by either a political appointee or government employee.
- In OECD's research of its 35 member countries, this split was roughly half-half, with the former able to play a critical role in linking the administration with the political structures whilst the latter is more able to navigate the bureaucratic structure effectively (OECD 2015: 50-51).
- Certainly, in the literature, the tension between the 'responsiveness' of the political component of a structure and the 'neutrality' of the administrative component is acknowledged.

CONCLUSION

- To conclude, GTAC finds a high level of similarity in the challenges faced by the COG in other countries relative to SA's own experiences.
- To increase the COG's impact locally, there are several lessons to be learnt from the literature and GTAC's experiences. These include the following:
 - Increasing the size (budgets and personnel) of the COG will not necessarily solve challenges of coordination across government – the return on investment may be much higher if the investment goes towards both the 'hard' and the 'soft' skills of COG leaders.
 - There is merit in periodically taking stock of the functions and capabilities that COG departments have (or should have), and eliminating overlaps as well as filling gaps.
 - These functions and capabilities can be inferred from a clear identification of the roles and responsibilities of the COG, taking into account historical realities as well as current and anticipated future challenges.
 - There is no 'one size fits all' for the institutional configuration of the COG, but locating most if not all of the COG functions within The Presidency, may create an unwieldy strategic centre which must be avoided. Galvanising coordinating mechanisms such as the cluster system may be more effective.

CONCLUSION (2)

- The international lesson that coordination works best when it is introduced at the level where the challenge is experienced, remains valid. The cluster system should focus on strategic coordination while operational coordination should happen at lower levels. This will not happen by itself and cannot be relegated to the IGR units of departments – COG departments can raise awareness on this and should lead by example.
- It has been a recurring finding in GTAC's work that the culture of operating in 'silos' and the 'fixation on rank' militates against collegial collaboration. This requires focused interventions targeting the culture of the government administration and the prevalent leadership styles. 'Command and control' has its place when a crisis or emergency has to be managed, but a more collaborative style, characterised by collegiality, is generally more effective when dealing with other cross-departmental or high priority initiatives.
- Much has been said and written about the political-administrative interface locally and abroad, but it is clear that the two dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. This requires an understanding and appreciation of the roles that both political appointees and public servants play. This is key to the professionalisation of the Public Service.
- Networking with, and learning from, international counter-parts on how the COG can increase its reach and impact will be valuable given the critical role that it plays in the state administration.

CONCLUSION (3)

- These lessons can possibly be the foundation for a joint plan of action by COG departments.
- As a start, it will require an open and honest discussion of the challenges and opportunities that COG departments face in increasing their impact.
 - Hence we welcome your contributions to this debate!



DISCUSSION

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