Conference Report

International Capacity Development for the Civil Service - The Sustainable Digitalisation Agenda

Cape Town, South Africa
May 5-8, 2024

MGG.NETWORK

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Department:
National School of Government
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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The National School of Government of South Africa (The NSG) and the Managing Global Governance (MGG) network have been engaging in public sector capacity development for the implementation of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development since early 2018. The engagement is based on the understanding that the successful advancement of the Agenda 2030 is dependent on the support and involvement of civil servants on all political levels. Civil servants are responsible for translating the Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the domestic context (localising it), they facilitate and broker multi-stakeholder partnerships for innovative solutions and joint implementation, they design, provide and monitor public services, allocate resources and manage budgets.

Today, the implementation of 2030 Agenda is severely lagging behind. At the current rate, only 18 % of the 17 SDGs and the related targets will be reached by 2030. For 15 % of the goals, the situation is even deteriorating. An acceleration of the implementation is therefore urgently needed. At the same time, digitalisation and the complex nature of sustainability challenges demand a whole new set of competences to equip public servants as agents for sustainability transformations. Here, Schools of Public Administration and further training institutions for the public sector play a key role. They prepare young civil servants for their careers, but also offer advanced training courses for more senior staff. Through this, they can infuse the public sector with the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will be crucial for sustainable development.

Against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent advances in Artificial Intelligence, a special focus must be put on the opportunities and risks of digitalisation. Digitalisation is one of the "seismic shifts" of the 21st century, and it has the potential to benefit sustainable development across the ecological, economic, and social dimension in parallel. At the same time, digitalisation comes with severe risks and challenges for societies, public sector, and training alike. It is therefore time to bring together digital solutions and sustainable development objectives in public sector operations, reform – and consequently training to make use of digitalisation for enhancing sustainable solutions, and to enable the containment of potentially harmful impacts.

The conference took place in continuation of an established cooperation between the NSG and MGG/IDOS in several related MGG activities. Events included:

- Capacity Building for the 2030 Agenda, Brasília, Brazil, 26 February-1 March 2018

- HLPF Side Event and Workshop, Capacity-Building for the 2030 Agenda: The Role of Civil Servants in a Multi-Stakeholder Environment, New York, USA, 11-13 July 2018

- Training and Dialogue for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda with Schools of Public Administration (SPAs) and further partners of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Programme, Hyderabad, India, 24-26 April 2019

- Training Towards Sustainability for the Public Sector During and After the Pandemic, Online, 27-29 October 2020

- Training for the 2030 Agenda and the Future of the New York Programme of Action, Online, 2-5 November 2021

- Sustainability and International Training for Civil Servants, Mexico-City, Mexico, 9-12 May 2022

The conference had the following objectives:

- **Awareness-raising and knowledge creation** regarding the interconnection of sustainable development, digitalisation, and capacity development of the public sector (together with decision-makers in the public sector and related training institutions)

- **Competence development** through international **knowledge sharing & hands-on workshops** on experiences in South African and international training institutions regarding the interconnections of sustainable development, digitalisation, and capacity development (with digitalisation and training experts)

- **Peer-exchange** and network-building among core institutions to **advance a collaboration agenda** for 2025 and 2026

The conference brought together more than 60 stakeholders and representatives of national schools of public administration (SPA) and other training institutions to deliberate on challenges in training civil servants in the context of the 2030 Agenda and digitalisation. The first two days of the conference were open for participation from a wider set of stakeholders. Selected sessions were also hybrid so that online participation in the event was possible. The third day of the conference was reserved to a smaller group of institutions and MGG network partners who wished to deepen discussions and advance the joint collaboration agenda for capacity-development and sustainable development in 2025 and 2026.

Programme

Programme	
Sunday, 5 May	
10.00 am	Cultural Networking Programme
7.00 am	Welcome Dinner
Monday, 6 May	
9.00 – 10.00 am	Welcome and Opening Remarks - Prof. Busani Ngcaweni, The NSG, South Africa - Dr. Wulf Reiners, IDOS, Germany - Rixa von Somnitz-Moreno, German Embassy Pretoria, Germany
10.00 – 10.30 am	Setting the Scene: Exploring Interests, Expertise and Expectations *Facilitation*: Dr. Tatjana Reiber, IDOS, Germany
10.30 – 11.00 am	Break
11.00 – 12.45 pm	*NSG Master Class Series* Dr. Reevana Balmahoon, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), South Africa: Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Accelerating the Achievement of the SDGs" Dr. Kefiloe Masiteng, United Nations (South Africa Country Office): South Africa's Experiences in Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development *Responses by* - Serusha Govender, Chatham House, UK - Dr. Sven Grimm, IDOS, Germany *Q & A, moderated by:* Salim Latib, The NSG, South Africa
12.45 – 2.15 pm	Lunch
2.15 – 3.15 pm	Roundtable Discussion with National Schools of Public Administration *Participants*: - Alana Baker, OECD - Betânia Lemos, ENAP, Brazil - Dino Poonsamy, The NSG, South Africa - Prof. Dr. Harsh Sharma, ASCI, India - Zahrina Tamimi, LAN/NIPA, Indonesia *Moderation:* Dr. Tatjana Reiber, IDOS, Germany

3.15 – 3.45 pm	Break
3.45 – 5.15 pm	Exploring the connections between sustainable development, digitalisation and capacity development - Prof. Dr. Willem Fourie, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa - Tebogo Matlou, South African Local Government Association (SALGA) - Trevor Rammitlwa, National Electronic Media Institute (NEMISA), South Africa - Prof. Dr. Ingrid Schneider, University of Hamburg, Germany *Moderation:* Dr. Wulf Reiners, IDOS, Germany
7.00 pm	Dinner
Tuesday, 7 May	
9.00 – 9.30 am	Welcome and Short Introduction of Parallel Sessions & Workshops
9.30 – 11.00 am	*Parallel Sessions & Workshops: Capacity Development for Digitalization and the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda* - **Nitish Barole**, Youth for Resilience, India: AI for social impact: practical tools and tools for policy makers – Part 1 (only in combination with Part 2) - **Adriana Phillips Ligiero**, ENAP, Brazil: Building innovation capabilities for sustainability – Part 1 (only in combination with Part 2) - **Sergio Vázquez Meneley**, Center for Management and International Cooperation for Development (CGCID), Mexico / **Jessica Baier**, Engagement Global, Germany: Designing local development plans - **Dr. Izimangaliso Malatjie**, The NSG, South Africa: Capacity Development for Traditional Leaders
11.00 – 11.30 am	Break
11.30 am - 1.00 pm	*Parallel Sessions & Workshops: Capacity Development for Digitalization and the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda* - **Nitish Barole**, Youth for Resilience, India: AI for social impact: practical tools and tools for policy makers – Part 2 (only in combination with Part 1) - **Adriana Phillips Ligiero**, ENAP, Brazil: Building innovation capabilities for sustainability – Part 2 (only in combination with Part 1) - João Domingues, ENAP, Brazil: Building communities of practice to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda - **Dr. Sreerupa Sengupta**, Goa Institute of Management, India: & **Kealeboga Ramaru**, Heinrich Boell Foundation, South Africa: Gender mainstreaming in the public sector
1.00 – 2.30 pm	Lunch

Programme

2.30 – 4.00 pm	Open Space: 2030 Agenda in Action: Sharing Good Practices, Exchanging Experiences, Learning From Failures *Facilitation:* **Dr. Danai Tembo**, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa & **Reon van der Merwe**, Southern Africa Youth Forum, South Africa
	Parallel Internal Workshop: National Schools of Government
4.00 – 4.30 pm	Break
4.30 – 5.30 pm	Continuation of Parallel Sessions
7.00 pm	Dinner
Wednesday, 8 May	
9.00 – 10.30 am	Open Space: 2030 Agenda in Action: Sharing Good Practices, Exchanging Experiences, Learning From Failures *Facilitation:* **Dr. Danai Tembo**, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa & **Reon van der Merwe**, Southern Africa Youth Forum, South Africa
	Parallel Internal Workshop: National Schools of Government
10.30 – 11.00 am	Break
11.00 am – 12.00 pm	Continuation of Parallel Sessions
12.00 – 12.30 pm	Harvesting, Evaluation & Conference Reflection
12.30 – 1.30 pm	Lunch
2.30 – 5.30 pm	Networking & Cultural Programme District-6 Museum
6.00 pm	Closing Dinner

Participants

List of Participants

Ayala	Citlali	Mora Institute	Mexico
Baier	Jessica	Engagement Global	Germany
Balmahoon	Reevana	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research	South Africa
Barole	Nitish	Youth for Resilience	India
Chauke	Emanuel	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Colantoni	Lorenzo	Istituto Affari Internationali (IAI)	Italy
Dlamini	Tugela	Department of Science and Innovation	South Africa
Domingues	João	National School of Public Administration (ENAP)	Brazil
Field	Kulsum	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Fourie	Willem	Stellenbosch University	South Africa
Giri	Tuhinsubra	Research and Information System for Developing Countries	India
Govender	Serusha	Chatham House	South Africa
Grimm	Sven	German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)	Germany
Gumede	Linda	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Gupta	Sreerupa	Goa Institute of Management	India
Hadi	Nomtha	Nelson Mandela University	South Africa
Ismail	Faizel	University of Cape Town	South Africa
Kachelmann	Matthias	German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)	Germany
Kgomotso	Gule	KG Consulting	South Africa
Latib	Salim	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Lemos	Betânia	National School of Public Administration (ENAP)	Brazil
Li	Mingze	Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS)	China
Lucatello	Simone	Mora Institute	Mexico
Mahlangu	Thulani	GIZ SDG Initiative	South Africa
Makaula	Zuko	National Treasury	South Africa
Makamba	Makaziwe	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Makarine	Marembu	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Malatije	Izimangaliso	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Mansur	Juliana	Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV - EBAPE)	Brazil
Matlou	Tebogo	South African Local Government Association	South Africa
Masiteng	Kefiloe	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Mayimele	Bongani	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Mgaga	Palesa	University of Bloemfontein	South Africa
Mkhalipi	Bertha	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Mokgokolo	Dikeledi	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Molala	Mmakwena	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Montsho	Lopang	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Montsho	Nthabeleng	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Nkate	Jacqueline	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Nkambule	Zenzele	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Parenzee	Penny	University of Cape Town	South Africa
Patel	Ashraf	Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD)	South Africa
Phillips Ligiero	Adriana	National School of Public Administration (ENAP)	Brazil
Plasencia	Adriana	National Institute of Public Administration (INAP)	Mexico
Pooe	TK	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
Poonsamy	Dino	The National School of Government (NSG)	South Africa
Ramaru	Kealeboga	Heinrich Boell Foundation Cape Town	South Africa
Rammitlwa	Trevor	National Electronic Media Institute (NEMISA)	South Africa
Reiber	Tatjana	German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)	Germany
Reiners	Wulf	German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)	Germany
Santoso	Bagus	DEFINIT	Indonesia
Schneider	Ingrid	University of Hamburg	Germany
Shabier	Jorgos	MECIIS	South Africa
Sharma	Harsh	Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI)	India
Si	Peng	Tsinghua University	China
Sly	Khumalo	SA Business Journal	South Africa
Stewart	Benjamin	German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)	Germany
Tamimi	Zahrina	National Institute of Public Administration (LAN/NIPA)	Indonesia
Tembo	Danai	Nelson Mandela University	South Africa
van der Merwe	Reon	Southern Africa Youth Forum	South Africa
Vasquez	Sergio	Center for Management and Int. Coop. for Development	Mexico
Von Somnitz-Moreno	Rixa	German Embassy, Pretoria	Germany
Vuma	Tiego	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa
Wehnert	Ulrich	GIZ SDG Initiative	Germany
Westcott	Michael	The National School of Government (The NSG)	South Africa

By Jacqueline Nkate (The NSG), Tatjana Reiber (IDOS), and Wulf Reiners (IDOS)

1 Capacity development for the 2030 Agenda in the public sector is key to supporting the achievement of the SDGs

As attested to by the South African Voluntary National Review 2024, the successful advancement of the Agenda 2030 is dependent on the support and involvement of civil servants on all political levels. Civil servants are responsible for translating the Agenda and the SDGs to the domestic context (localising it), they facilitate and broker multi-stakeholder partnerships for innovative solutions and joint implementation, they design, provide and monitor public services, allocate resources and manage budgets.

At the same time, digitalisation and the complex nature of sustainability challenges demand a whole new set of competences to equip public servants as agents for sustainability transformations. Hence, Schools of Public Administration and further training institutions for the public sector play a key role by preparing young civil servants for their careers and by offering training courses for more senior staff. Through this, they can infuse the public sector with the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will be crucial for sustainable development.

2 International cooperation between public sector training institutions is key to fast tracking the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

The implementation of 2030 Agenda is severely lagging behind. Currently, only 18 % of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the related targets will be reached by 2030. For 15 % of the goals, the situation is even deteriorating. An acceleration of the implementation is therefore urgently needed.

Learning at country level is happening, but can and must be accelerated on the basis of inter- and transnational cooperation. In this context, peer exchange among training institutions is necessary to leverage the learning from parallel experiences worldwide. The exchange should focus on strategies for integrating and mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda into course programmes, bringing on board relevant authorities, and developing high-quality learning online. In terms of agenda setting, international conferences can help raise awareness how only a competent public sector can successfully implement 2030 Agenda, thereby highlighting the crucial role of training activities. Potential fields of cooperation also include the involvement of relevant multipliers. Executive leadership courses address senior officials whose political buy-in is essential for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Train-the-trainer formats qualify the faculty of training institutions and schools to integrate content and competences related to the 2030 Agenda into courses for civil servants. In terms of research and knowledge management, the joint development of relevant training material, publications and knowledge products play an important role too.

3 **Designing capacity development for the public sector: Focus on competencies, target needs, explore various formats**

Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda into course programmes is less about knowing the 17 SDGs and the 169 targets, but more about developing the core competences that civil servants need to design and implement activities to achieve these goals and targets. The preamble of the Agenda highlights the importance of localising the Agenda, of implementing it as a whole-of-society approach and of understanding the indivisible nature of the goals. Key competences are thus systems thinking and being able to think and act beyond silos, reaching out to a variety of stakeholders and facilitating joint multi-stakeholder initiatives as well as the competence to translate the agenda to local circumstances.

In order to design adequate capacity development formats, the specific needs of the target groups have to be addressed. This requires an analysis of the existing competences that civil servants already have, and even more an analysis of the gaps and needs. Instead of focusing on one-size-fits all approaches, contextualised understanding of the challenges should be the starting point for the design of the formats.

While traditional training face-to-face learning formats remain relevant, other formats for learning should be taken into consideration. With the pandemic, the number of online and hybrid formats has increased strongly. As adults mostly learn on the job and in informal settings, other forms of supporting learning such as mentoring, coaching, job rotation or communities of practices should be explored more.

4 **Getting digitalisation right requires multi stakeholder cooperation**

Digitalisation has the potential to benefit sustainable development across the ecological, economic, and social dimension in parallel, but it also comes with severe risks and challenges for societies, public sector, and training alike. To materialise the potential of digitalisation towards sustainable development, while at the same time mitigating the risks, multi-stakeholder cooperation is important to integrate diverse perspectives and needs. In this context, cooperation between the public sector and the private sector is of a special nature. Whereas the former is responsible for the common good, the private sector typically provides digital tools - and data – needed for sustainability transformations.
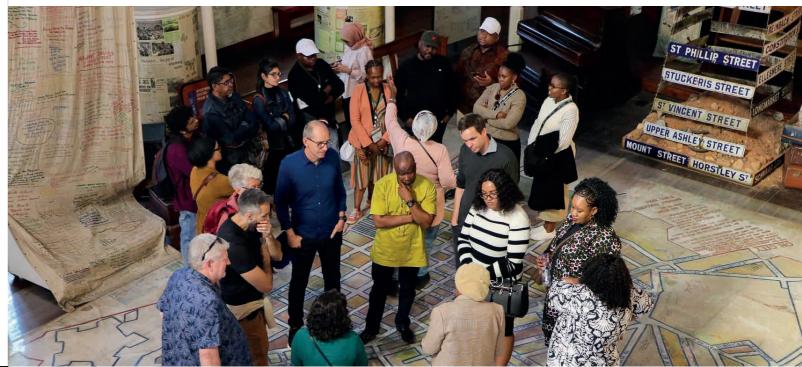
Here, the state should be brought back in to develop and enforce appropriate data governance regulations to make tech companies work in compliance with public interests, and not only their own economic models.

5 Digitalisation needs to be embraced by both the public sector and capacity development institutions

In the 21ˢᵗ century, the key challenge is not the digitalisation of public administrations, but rather the functioning of the state in the digital era. There is a need for a much better understanding of the social, environmental, and economic problems associated with digitalisation and at the same time, respect for fundamental citizens' rights, starting with privacy and data protection.

On the basis of regulation that sets clear rules for both state and private actors, public administrations should be empowered to make use of available data across all relevant fields (e.g. citizens, cities, land, sea) and other digital tools to improve service delivery. Training institutions for the public sector need to offer respective training opportunities, and update curriculums accordingly. At the same time, they should embrace new digital opportunities themselves, ranging from updating own data governance regimes and digitalising own processes to e-learning and hybrid learning formats with digital knowledge products.

6 There is a need for a better understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the public sector. AI should be adopted, but with caution

Artificial Intelligence opens up a lot of new opportunities, but also comes with risks and challenges. Whereas implications of a dynamically evolving field are not fully understood, generative AI like ChatGPT is already being used in public administration. However, most civil servants have limited understanding about advantages and shortcomings of its use, and related risks, including legal implications. One of the biggest challenges is that the data quality underlying AI tools can be poor, and large language models sometimes make up information that is factually wrong, referred to as 'hallucination'. Many AI models are black boxes, meaning that their setups are intransparent and, thus, unexplainable to some degree, making it difficult for users to understand how conclusions are drawn.

Crucially, current data that informs AI is often biased. Many languages, including official languages in South Africa as well as certain groups are misrepresented, or inexistent in the underlying data set. Thus, in the use of AI solutions, it is important to build on the principle that data sets are made accessible, representative, and continuously updated. Otherwise, the use of AI by the public sectors and its training institutions can unintentionally increase disparities in rural and underprivileged areas due to biases in data or unequal access to technologies. Also in terms of privacy concerns, the use of free versions of AI tools in the public sector may expose sensitive data to third parties. Finally, AI lacks the nuance of human understanding, empathy, and human emotion. Hence, decision-making should always be the prerogative of humans, and quick unreflected adoption of AI tools, or even over-reliance, must be prevented.

Networking, AI and diversity of participants and formats as highlights

The conference „Capacity Development for the Civil Service – The Sustainable Digitalisation Agenda" was received very well by participants. 92% of the respondents of the evaluation survey stated that they were (highly) satisfied with the overall quality of the conference. Regarding the promotion of the 2030 Agenda, 96% agreed that the insights they gained are useful for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and that their expertise for training and dialogue formats was deepened. Further 96% stated that the conference was successful in raising aware-ness and creating knowledge regarding the intercon-nection of sustainable development, digitalisation, and capacity development of the public sector. Participants particularly appreciated the focus on Artificial Intelligence.

The participants emphasized the diverse ways in which the conference had a positive impact on their professional lives. Particularly the opportunities for networking and knowledge-sharing were valued: All respondents stated that they expanded their international network and developed competences on sustainable development, digi-talisation and capacity development through knowledge-sharing and workshops. Participants also appreciated the diversity of the conference's participants and formats, highlighting in particular the open space, the interactive elements, the small group formats, and the workshops. Further, for 92% the set-up of the conference in Cape Town helped for a better under-standing of South Africa's opportunities and challenges of capacity develop-ment in the public sector.

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