

Administering right medicine for Stats SA's delinquency



INSIDE STATISTICS

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THE EVOLUTION of accountability in the body politic of statehood has catapulted statistics as a decision support and accountability system to the high table of decision-making.

The evolution of statistical practices offers a public window through which the lived tapestry of social, political and economic conditions in space and time can be observed, known, understood, acted upon through a forward-looking plan and publicly mobilised through a political programme for changing the living conditions of the populace for the better.

Early on in my career, I was clear about the pecking order of priorities in statistical practice.

I ordered them as follows: first and foremost to be a chief statistician you had to be a statistician and excellent at what you do; second, you had to master technology and understand its role in the life of a statistics office and system; and third, you needed to appreciate the complexity of statistical production systems – it's all about inbound and outbound logistics.

Imagine a machinery required for a population census where you are expected within a period of two months to recruit in excess of 150 000-strong, select and train them for a period of two weeks, deploy them over three weeks to 15 million households across the length and breadth of South Africa, pay and decommission them.

Thus, with remarkable speed, within six weeks the tornado has come and gone. This is a mammoth task.

Fourth, you need to get the administration right, and fifth, finally ensure that you understand the politics without being embroiled in the politics.

Steering clear of politics

Importantly, steer clear of partisan politics – they can be very seductive.

South African legislators ensured that there is a law that draws the boundary and defines the interaction between statistics and politics. This law has served us well for 17 years and is now under review.

In time, particularly after having had in shame to visit the Auditor-General of South Africa for three successive years on Stats SA's audits, I realised that I had to re-order the priorities.

End of audits each financial year was a painful experience as I would try as hard I could to convince Shauket Fakie that his audit outcomes could not be right in respect

of Stats SA.

After a number of disappointments from qualified audits, I found myself asking a different set of questions.

Jacob Rytten, a renowned and distinguished statistician and octogenarian who retired from Statistics Canada, muses about the role of statistics in modern public life and it was not about statistics that I listened attentively, but about administration.

He said to me that Martin Wilk, who was his former boss – remembered as possibly the best statistician in Canada – argued consistently that it is through your good administration that your worth will be admired.

From then on, Statistics Canada played a crucial role in setting and contributing significantly in the development of state-wide management practices.

It was this part that I realised was the medicine I needed for Stats SA's habitual delinquency.

What did we do then? We paid attention to project management and focused on

It is through state-wide administration models that Stats SA delivers value and change, which it has shown through successful public private partnerships.

growing our own timber through training, for implementing planning and following project-management practices.

We established a programme office for content-based co-ordination of planning. This strategy paid off and thus elevated administration to second priority. Suddenly, qualified audits disappeared. What about the first priority? This went into understanding politics...

I recall hazzarding that the day the State of the Nation Address drew evidence from the national statistics system, we will know that we have paid the right attention to national priorities.

By the time we prepared for Census 2011, our priorities were focused on the essence of the National Development Plan (NDP), and after its adoption, the results of the census were retooled to focus the nation's attention on the NDP.

We have subsequently and consistently, as we keep the nation informed through numbers, focused the effort on the targets of the NDP, thus making the political imperative top level and the first priority that should keep the nation awake.

Three days before they are published, the auditor-general usually convenes a meeting with the executive authority (minister) and the head of department (director-general) to consider audit outcomes.

That should represent a definitive outcome.

But this I confess with great trepidation, because for once in the 2012/13 outcomes the white smoke from the "conclave" had turned to black the next day, much to our surprise and disappointment.

The then-minister in the Presidency, Trevor Manuel, would ask the auditor-general whether the auditor-general was responding to the coffee he was served the previous day and wondered what could have been added to it which made the white smoke from the "conclave" to so dramatically turn black just overnight.

My finance staff could not believe this and took it so personally that the tears were just unstoppable. This is how committed the organisation is to duty.

It was again on Monday, July 24, where Minister Jeff Radebe and I were briefed by the auditor-general on Stats SA's audit outcomes.

The "conclave" has now become habitual for Stats SA's released white smoke. What is so important about this?

As I stepped out of the "conclave", there were ladies who greeted me with great enthusiasm, telling me about what they had heard from others about how majestic, beautiful and unique the Isibalo House of Stats SA is.

I said to them the design idea was home-grown and its central feature was to unapologetically imbue African mathematical achievements of yesteryear and inspire the conquest of the future through science. They applauded.

This spirit ran through the project right from the beginning when Stats SA entered into a public private partnership (PPP) for this new building, which it occupied in September last year at Freedom Park.

It took under 40 months from the start of negotiations to sod turning, building and occupation. This was a massive modern and state-of-the-art building.

Partnerships the way to go

The project covered 65 000 square metres of lettable space and it is located in more than 100 000 square metres of terraced land. What is more important is not only the speed of completion of the project within 23 months, but what is centrally its governance amid a litany of governance imponderables plaguing our land.

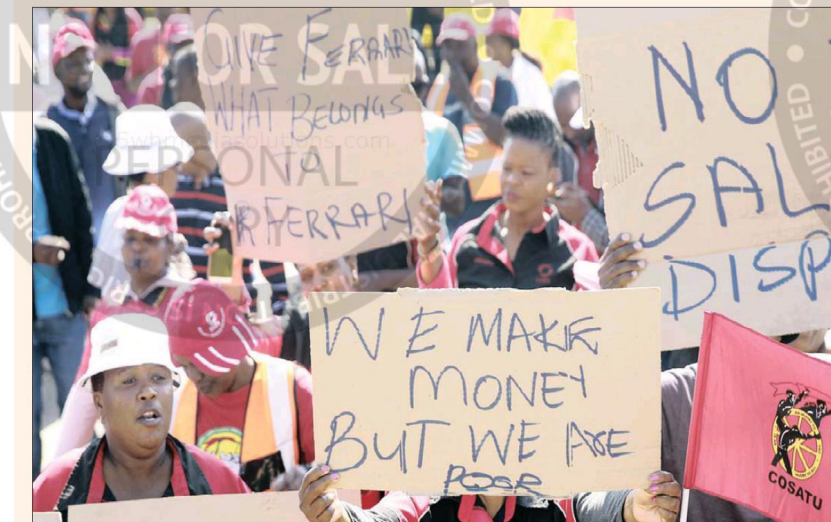
The PPP was led directly from a hawk-eyed position of the deputy director-general of Stats SA.

This was complemented through combined efforts with the Department of Public Works, the National Treasury, Tshwane Municipality, the SAPS and the Department of Environmental Affairs.

Stats SA has unequivocally demonstrated that PPPs are possible to deliver.

In a murky world, where the construction industry is replete with allegations perceived and real of corrupt practices, Stats SA with its R1.4 billion building has come out of this project with a clean audit.

This was not achieved through arm-



Reserve Bank workers in Pretoria North depot go on strike.

PHOTOS: JACQUES NAUDE

chair delivery.

It took the deployment of the right people from Stats SA to this project and they consistently demonstrated a profound ethic and commitment to the interests of the peoples of South Africa and the state.

But above all, it took a mind that refuses to forget to remember – project director

Akhtari Henning provided that distinguished leadership and has thus given PPPs a good name. PPPs are the way to go and they are doable.

So, indeed, Martin Wilk was correct in his injunction to Rytten and Fellegi that yes, statistics count for a lot.

However, it is through delivering state-

wide administration models that the Statistics Office and System delivers value and change.

Stats SA is up to the task and Parliament all round, without exception, supported the Budget vote of Stats SA.

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