Smart Implementation of Public Service Administration Reform in South Africa: Experiences from the Governance Support Programme

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Executive Summary

Cooperation between South Africa and Germany in the area of governance and administration reform started in 1994. Since then, a number of Technical Cooperation programs have been implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German government.[1] In one way or the other, these programs targeted public service administration on the national, provincial, or local levels with the aim of supporting the reform of public-sector institutions and, eventually, the improvement of service delivery to the citizens of South Africa. In addition to focusing on the further development of technical capacities, emphasis was increasingly given to fostering cooperation and collaboration among government institutions over the years as well as between state and non-state actors as well as the private sector.

Available facts and figures prove that, overall, South Africa has achieved substantial results since 1994 with regard to improving public service delivery, especially for poor households, although one has to acknowledge that the existing service-delivery level was very low at the time democracy was implemented in 1994.

However, governance challenges remain evident. Among these, the lack of adequate collaboration and coordination between the different spheres of government and a certain attitude of "silo-thinking" continues to present obstacles for the government-wide, evidence-based planning and implementing of policies and strategies in a just, inclusive, and demand-oriented way for all citizens. The vision of transforming the public service

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[*] The article is a joint effort of colleagues working in the initiatives that are described in the following text.

1 GIZ implements the program on behalf of BMZ.

administration into a responsive, transparent, and development-oriented service provider has not yet been achieved.

Our hypothesis, thus, is that the situation requires a partnership approach that focuses on forging alliances among stakeholders that aims at identifying innovative ways to address governance challenges related to the delivery of public services. Such an approach requires a high level of flexibility in project management and the willingness to take risks and endure setbacks. The core principle of engagement is to stay engaged with a wide array of stakeholders, to enable partner organizations to step outside their own limited spheres of jurisdiction, and to work with others on neutral grounds in order to find new opportunities or solutions.

This case study seeks to illustrate this management approach and philosophy by discussing examples in the area of governance and administration, such as (1) developing a common approach for a government-wide monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, and (2) introducing community media support. The two examples portray the wide range of themes that technical cooperation supports in governance and administrative reform. In the following, we try to demonstrate that the content of cooperation changes, but that there are a few underlying principles of how the cooperation is molded that remain the same. We argue that these principles of engagement are crucial for overcoming implementation challenges and for achieving results.

In order to supplement the knowledge and experience of the national and seconded GIZ advisors working on the respective initiative, data and information from official sources is presented. In addition, limited interviews with former counterparts and national personnel have been conducted. All of them have had several years of experience in working with GIZ and are no longer actively involved in GIZ-assisted programs.

Extracting the lessons learned from the two examples, we put forward and conclude with five statements, which can give food for thought and guidance when supporting reform processes in the area of governance and administration and beyond. Although extracted from the specific experience of working in South Africa, this essence has indeed greater validity.

It might sound like a truism that the fundamental cognizance is to acknowledge there is no blueprint to support governance reform. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand the specific partner country context. A cornerstone of successful reform is mutual trust, and building this requires endurance. Flexibility is crucial, as is the ability to detect the right moment for change and to use it through the right incentives. Com-

prehensive challenges need comprehensive approaches, which include all levels and all relevant actors. Last but not least, the ability to create secure and neutral spaces where partners can engage freely with each other to explore new ways enables the fostering of trust.

Our comparative analysis of the two case examples reveals five principles of engagement that constitute smart implementation for us:

1. An in-depth understanding of the political and institutional context is paramount in order to accompany national stakeholders in change processes. Beyond understanding the context, advisors need to be able to operate and maneuver within it. This requires skills regarding adeptness to the context that go far beyond analyzing it.
2. A prerequisite to working with partners on transformative change processes is mutual trust and a long-term horizon of engagement.
3. Active presence in the partner's environment is crucial to detect the right moment for offering methods and instruments (e.g., workshops, dialogue series, technical advice, organizational development support) that can bring the process forward.
4. Openness and flexibility to include all relevant stakeholders at all levels is a requirement for creating new alliances that become change agents. The notion here is to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. Predetermined exclusions of actors or processes can jeopardize the effort and need to be negotiated. The established long-term trust relationship allows advisors to address such issues with partners.
5. Creating safe and neutral spaces for deliberation and for exploring new ways in addressing challenges is a unique and powerful offer that technical cooperation can provide to national change processes. The role of the advisor here is to be a neutral intermediary and broker of interests.

Introduction to the case study

The Governance Support Programme (GSP) is a partnership program agreed to between the Governments of South Africa and Germany. It is technical cooperation program jointly steered at national level in a partnership between the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG), the National Treasury (NT), the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), and GIZ, the latter being responsible for the imple-

mentation of the German development contributions on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The GSP implements projects and activities at the national, provincial, and local levels and provides technical, policy, and process advice to support the South African government in addressing systemic shortcomings. The objective of the GSP is that public institutions have improved their service delivery, in cooperation with the private sector and civil society.

With the end of Apartheid in 1994, South Africa embarked on the mammoth task of transforming public service administration into a responsive, transparent, and development-oriented service provider for all citizens. The protagonists of the new administration took up their responsibility with high levels of energy but only limited hands-on experience in how to run a public service, let alone in how to transform a system based on racial segregation and discrimination into one that is inclusive, customer-oriented, and based on democratic values. In addition, the political pressure to address the overwhelming social disparities and deliver on such high expectations in due time was tremendous.

Development cooperation between Germany and South Africa in the area of governance and administration started in those early days, as a high-ranking counterpart recalls: "When Madiba[2] visited the foreign embassies in Pretoria asking for support, the Germans were immediately ready and offered to engage. They haven't left us since then."

Another common feature is the multi-level approach in program design. Most programs targeted public service administration at the national, provincial, or local levels, with a particular implementation focus in the two provinces of Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape. The overall aim of engagement is to support the reform of the public administration and improve service delivery to the citizens of South Africa. During the last decade, support to strengthen cooperation between state and non-state actors as well as the private sector was taken aboard to enable achievement of the ultimate aim as a matter of joint effort.

Available facts and figures prove that, overall, public service delivery in South Africa has made substantial progress since 1994, especially for poor households. Access to formal housing increased from 65 percent to 78

2　The former South African president and icon of the struggle against Apartheid, Nelson Mandela, is commonly called Madiba.

percent, electricity from 58 percent in 1996 to 85 percent in 2013, and access to piped water and sanitation facilities from 82 percent to 90 percent, respectively (Statistics South Africa, 2011). However, unemployment rates, especially among young people, remain high: Officially, 25 percent of the workforce is unemployed, while at the same time employers complain about a lack of skilled workers (BusinessTech, 2015). The future holds even bigger challenges, since economic growth has slowed significantly since 2008 and only amounted to around 0.7 percent in 2016 (Statistics South Africa, n.d.). The general economic and financial forecast paints a quite bleak picture of South Africa impeding on the government's ability to provide more and better services to more people. At the same time, it can be observed that a number of major governance challenges remain, or even worsen, such as the political influence on administrative decision-making processes, the weakening of checks-and-balances mechanisms, inadequate collaboration and coordination between the different spheres of government (silo-thinking attitude),[3] and, consequently, insufficient government-wide, evidence-based planning, implementation, and monitoring of interventions. These governance and management challenges constitute major obstacles for implementing policies and strategies, and eventually contribute to undermining South Africa's endeavor for a just, inclusive, and demand-oriented service delivery to all citizens. The vision of transforming the public service administration into a responsive, transparent, and development-oriented service provider has yet to be achieved.

South African–German development cooperation operates in this space and has to deal with these challenges continuously. Our hypothesis, thus, is that the situation requires a partnership approach that can be characterized by a high level of mutual trust and the willingness to also cooperate on topics that are politically sensitive. Such a partnership requires a high degree of flexibility and the readiness to take the risk of being innovative in implementing projects while at the same time enduring setbacks and staying engaged, despite the fact that implementation might not yield immediate tangible results. It also needs the ability to forge new alliances by enabling partner organizations to step outside their own limited spheres of jurisdiction, engage with relevant stakeholders on neutral grounds, and think afresh. Finally, it needs creative thinking to identify incentives (i.e.,

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3 The list does not aim to be comprehensive.

the right trigger points) that encourage partners to step out of their comfort zones and try different approaches. Such an approach requires trustful relationships on the personal as well as institutional levels in order to enable GIZ, as an external partner, to operate in a space characterized by the governance challenges outlined above.

This article argues that the role that GIZ has been playing over the last 20 years in South Africa as a true partner is not just due to acting as an appreciated partner that is valued for providing technical expertise when required, but in particular for its soft skills as a neutral intermediary and broker of interests between stakeholders. The importance of this partnership approach has been confirmed in interviews and discussions with counterparts, who have long-term, tacit knowledge in cooperation programs. As one partner concluded: "GIZ's partnership approach helped me, in the space I occupied as Deputy Director-General and Director-General, to grow professionally and personally."[4]

This case study seeks to explore the hypothesis highlighted above on the essentials of the South African–German partnership through two concrete examples gained from cooperating in the area of governance and administration. We have chosen initiatives that have been implemented during more recent years and are still ongoing: 1) the support of a common approach for a government-wide M&E system, and 2) community media support in the Eastern Cape province.

Although the two examples portray the wide range of technical cooperation areas in governance and administrative reform, we strive to prove that the approach and attitude to cooperation and means to overcoming implementation challenges remain the same, that is, the "what" might be different, but the "how" remains the same golden thread running through the examples.

Examples

The examples we have chosen illustrate the varied and rather technical challenges with which our partner organizations are confronted. However, although the subject matter ("hard issues") differs in each case, the con-

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4   In the course of writing the article, we conducted interviews with counterparts who had been working with different GIZ programs during the last 20 years.

textual conditions ("soft issues") hindering progress are similar in both cases. Thus, the approaches applied for overcoming the individual challenges bear similarities.

(1) Support of a common approach for a government-wide M&E system

In 2005 the South African Cabinet approved the development of a government-wide monitoring and evaluation system as a "system of systems" drawing on existing M&E systems and data on the public sector and the country. The objective was to improve evidenced-based planning and implementation of policies for public service delivery. Nevertheless, by early 2011 it became apparent that the focus on M&E had caused a proliferation of systems and that coherence and integration among these systems was lacking. This lack of well-functioning monitoring systems and practices led to the deficient implementation of policies, which negatively affected the delivery of public services. Furthermore, in the absence of structured and planned program evaluations, it remained difficult to assess the impact of policies and make informed policy decisions. As a consequence, the effects of efforts to improve public service delivery, or the understanding of its strengths and shortcomings, remained unsatisfactory.

The above situation was exacerbated by contestation between different national ministries regarding mandates for the whole of government M&E system(s). For example, the DPME, the DPSA, the NT, the Public Service Commission (PSC), as well as the Offices of the Premier in the provinces individually monitored the ministries and required them to report. Municipalities had an added burden of reporting to the DCoG at the national as well as the provincial level. GIZ was a partner to all these departments as well as to the National School of Government – the state-owned public-service training institute – and received numerous requests to assist these departments in building their M&E capacities and systems.

Against this background, the need for consolidation and coordination around M&E was apparent, as was the need for GIZ to support this process in a manner that facilitated a common process toward M&E systems development. Soon it became evident that crucial "soft-issues" hindered the progress of developing government-wide M&E systems. These challenges were the competition for roles and mandates, a lack of communication and coordination between the different actors, as well as a lack of trust in the competence of others. As a consequence, this silo-thinking atti-

tude was consolidated, that is, there was planning and implementation of individual initiatives without considering other stakeholders. These implementation challenges had to be overcome first to level the ground for the development of a joint vision and common approach.

The partnership approach of GIZ – following the principle of forging alliances among stakeholders aiming at identifying innovative ways to address existing challenges – proved to be key in this situation. As the case study shows, GIZ advisors engaged with a high level of flexibility in project management and with endurance. They acted as neutral brokers and, by doing so, created neutral grounds to enable partners to cooperate with each other outside their own limited spheres of jurisdiction. In other situations, they provided hands-on technical and/or process advice and, by doing so, furthered the decision-making process among partners. This mix of different roles was possible due to the high level of trust, which derived from the fact that the engagement was long-term.

When GIZ received the requests from its government partners to render support to improve their M&E systems, a first step was to convene a meeting with all parties involved to map already ongoing developments and compile the individual requests for support. The meeting took place at a GIZ office and was facilitated by a GIZ advisor. In this way, a neutral space was created that offered the actors an opportunity to engage freely and on eye-level with each other, without any of them taking a more prominent role or being inhibited by government protocol. The mapping exercise clearly revealed the fragmentation of the different M&E systems and, consequently, the need for a single department to take the lead in coordinating a harmonized approach was raised. But the meeting also revealed institutional challenges that needed attention in order to take the process forward, for example:

- There was uncertainty about which of the government institutions had the mandate to coordinate M&E for the entire public administration. The DPSA and the PSC "accused" the DPME of "mandate creep," that is, questioning the fact that the DPME holds the mandate to coordinate. However, after a facilitated discussion among stakeholders, the meeting designated that the DPME would lead the process going forward toward a coherent M&E system while respecting the particular mandates of other departments.

- Training programs of the National School of Government[5] were discredited as not being sufficiently tailored to the demands of public service and as being insufficiently aligned with the new outcomes approach introduced by the South African National Development Plan.
- GIZ had to acknowledge that it had itself contributed toward the fragmentation of the M&E system by previously supporting individual departments and provinces in developing their own systems. To address this problem, GIZ proposed to partners that, from then on, all requests for M&E support should be handled by a single body, which was called the "core group." Partners endorsed this proposal.

The meeting and decisions taken were an eye-opener and underlined the clear additional benefit for all actors to be able to engage with each other on a neutral platform and to think and work outside their own areas of jurisdiction ("think outside the box") about matters of common concern. At first sight, although individual partners might have lost their prior individual benefits, the new approach provided more transparency and coherence while still being flexible enough to accommodate individual demands in the core group. The major incentive, however, was that partners realized that, through the new approach, they would all benefit from the envisaged capacity-development support.

A matter of concern voiced by all partners centered on capacity-development needs in the area of M&E. Hence, the issue was discussed during the first meeting of the core group, and the stakeholders decided to develop an integrated capacity-development program on performance monitoring and evaluation and to establish the program as a formal and funded program of the DPME. This agenda was perceived to best create a collaborative spirit among actors and to provide a good incentive for other departments and provinces to join. Again the process to develop the outline and to agree on a framework for the program was facilitated by GIZ advisors. The main objectives of the core group were to obtain an agreed vision about collaboration and mutual benefit, ownership of content, and "acceptance" of the DPME leadership. Following this agreement, GIZ, endorsed by the core group, acted not only as facilitator but also provided complementary technical support, including:

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5 The NSG was then the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA).

- interviews with key officials and analysis of their operational plans as well as consultations with departments of the core group to define current and planned (over four years) performance monitoring and evaluation projects with budgets and identified capacity and resource shortfalls;
- development of an integrated capacity-development program on performance monitoring and evaluation that was refined and prioritized through sequenced workshops with the key stakeholders;
- development of an implementation plan for the integrated capacity-development program on performance monitoring and evaluation that was agreed to by all in the core group; and
- adaptation of the integrated capacity-development program on performance monitoring and evaluation to the format provided by the DPME in order to serve as a formal program of the department.

By constantly engaging bilaterally with individual partner organizations and at the same time offering space for group discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of each partner organization and joint learning loops to find the best way forward, GIZ was able to foster trust and mutual understanding among the stakeholders in the process. Furthermore, it was able to increase its own acceptance as a valued, neutral, and trustworthy facilitator.

In the first year, most activities under the program were supported by GIZ staff. GIZ advisors (both national and seconded staff) continuously provided opportunities for interdepartmental cooperation, sharing of knowledge, joint decision-making, and advocated for the inclusion of the DCoG, which is responsible for local government and had turned out to be an important but missing stakeholder. In this time span, the GIZ advisors, to a certain extent, stepped out of their roles as neutral facilitators and "honest brokers" and took a more active advisory role. The partner organizations appreciated this flexibility because they saw the immediate benefit of an invigorated group working together to spur the process. The services that the GIZ team offered served as oil in the machinery, allowing the negotiations and coordination process to run smoothly. This was possible due to the high level of flexibility in project management and the willingness of GIZ advisors to smoothly switch between the different roles of facilitator and advisor providing hands-on support. The risk that partner organizations might feel offended was regarded as being minimal in this case because of the high level of trust between advisors and counterparts.

As the program was adapted to the DPME format, it automatically became a permanent (three-year) program of the DPME and, as such, was included in the DPME budget process, ensuring its financial and institutional sustainability. M&E capacity-development activities took place through and in the program. The core group met on issues of program implementation and its monitoring. As a practical example: Training programs of the National School of Government were reviewed by the core group and adapted according to the combined needs of core group departments. New training programs for the induction of senior managers on monitoring and evaluation methodologies were developed jointly. Thus, a feeling of ownership and responsibility in DPME was fostered.

Until today, the core group continues to exist under the leadership of the DPME, with GIZ as an observer. The focus of GIZ's support now lies on the development of supportive software ("Cloud"), which will enable partners to compile and utilize data based on agreed quality standards. In the development of the government-wide M&E system, the initial focus was on national and provincial government, and the integration of local government data into the system lagged behind. Currently, GIZ is supporting its partners to harmonize M&E systems with a particular focus on the monitoring of local government performance, governance, and service delivery.

The provision of technical expertise, currently with a focus on software development, continues to go hand in hand with on-the-job training for counterparts on how to use and maintain these systems and utilize the software. The current role of GIZ advisors is rather that of "classical" technical supporters. Emphasis nevertheless continues to be given to fostering the exchange, joint learning, and joint decision-making between the different spheres of government and policy-making national departments.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that the inclusive partnership approach, combined with a high level of flexibility in project management and endurance over a long period, was key to success in this case. The engagements of long-term national and international experts who ably translate state-of the-art expertise to the South African context were a further key factor for success.

(2) Support to improve communication between the state, the media, and citizens in the Eastern Cape province

In South Africa, gaining access to information for citizens is a tricky matter. Print media is predominantly privately owned, and the media market is highly commercialized. Newspapers range from major weeklies and dailies to regional and local papers. Their common denominator is that they are owned by major media houses. In this context, the space for democratic transformation faces two main challenges. Firstly, commercial pressures skew content in mainstream media. Alternative voices of marginalized groups are thus highly underrepresented, and the relevant information for socially excluded groups to participate in the democratic processes of the country is lacking. Secondly, the relationship between the government and the media has deteriorated and is encapsulated by the disputes about the media's roles, expectations, and norms in South Africa's transformation process. The narrative is moving toward "media being anti-government," and thus is facing real potential policy changes in the areas of media freedom and media regulation. In recent years, South Africa has thus deteriorated in its status from a "free" media system to a "partly" free system (Freedom House).

Community media remains a powerful tool to negotiate and maneuver in the space outlined above. Mostly owned by individuals having an interest to "plough" back into their community, these small newspapers often publish in vernacular and focus on stories from and in the local space. Yet, also on the local level, the relationship between the small community newspapers and local municipalities remains strained. Any perceived negative reporting by newspapers was "punished" by withholding government advertising, or the threat of such actions. Municipalities did not generally see the often vernacular style in newspapers as being a way for meaningful engagements with citizens. If at all, the communication from municipalities through the newspapers was for announcing big meetings, events, or council schedules. Considering the above-listed challenges in the broader media market, the relationship between the community media and local government, in a way, also missed a point: It was a real opportunity to increase information access for citizens in impoverished communities.

In the Eastern Cape, GIZ has supported community papers for many years to improve their professionalism, ability to engage communities, and to report on local governance and civic matters. Much of this support was channeled through the Eastern Cape Communication Forum (ECCF), a

civil society organization providing training and advisory services to community journalists.

The objective of the GSP is to improve the service delivery of the public sector, in collaboration with the private sector and civil society. This objective necessitated that capacity development be provided to public, private, and non-state organizations. Since 2013, GIZ has, against this background, adapted its strategy and shifted the focus of its support solely to community media to improve meaningful engagement between citizens and municipalities, where local newspapers are key instruments for this engagement. However, it is obvious that core "soft-issue" challenges hindered this shift to fostering meaningful engagement and that these hindrances had to be overcome first. These hindrances include the lack of existing and open communication channels between the different actors; a lack of understanding between newspapers and government communicators of each other's working environment and decision-making processes; a lack of understanding of how a sound relationship can assist in advancing each other's objectives; and outright mistrust between the different actors.

Having in mind the "soft-issue" challenges, governmental partners and newspapers sought GIZ support to focus cooperation on the following objectives:

- support to local newspapers to improve on professional content reporting while seeking innovation and efficiency in operations;
- engagement with municipalities, particularly among municipal officials responsible for communications, to see the opportunities of working closely with regional and community newspapers to engage citizens;
- support to newspapers and municipalities to develop mutual trust and cooperation arrangements; and
- implementation of a pilot project on improving communication with citizens in two municipalities in the Eastern Cape, using newspapers as well as new information and communication technologies.

Realizing the potential of using media more effectively to communicate and ensure accountability, partners called for a shift by GIZ toward strengthening the work of newspapers, the ECCF, as well as municipalities to support improvement of the communication function in municipalities and capacity development for relevant officials as well as professional journalism by newspapers. Support to the ECCF thus continued, and com-

munity journalists were trained in understanding municipal processes, procedures, and relevant legislative framework.

The initial idea of a strategic move toward bringing government communicators and media closer together and improving accountability through a pilot project was developed in conceptual discussions between the provincial Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and GIZ. At that time also, the national Department of Cooperative Governance (responsible for systems and structures in municipalities) had proclaimed its new program on "Back to Basics," which had a strategic and prominent focus on service delivery and a central focus on citizens and civic affairs. In this context, the momentum and the window of opportunity for a concrete support initiative on communication and accountability in this highly contested space arose.

The first obstacle to master was to get the buy-in and steering from provincial and municipal partners. Situated in the interface of communication and governance was the Provincial Communications Core Team consisting of Communications Managers of CoGTA, SALGA, and the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), the latter being a new partner to GIZ.

In the first discussions, it became quite clear that the GIZ approach of linking state and non-state actors on governance and accountability was new to the provincial office of the GCIS. Firstly, the GCIS demonstrated a certain level of suspicion and criticism toward community media. Secondly, they brought forward the objective of using this pilot project as a means to "get the positive stories" about governments' achievements to communities. From the beginning, the initiative was thus situated in a difficult space, whereby the main provincial partners showed signs of the above-listed challenges. During the course of planning and implementation, the GIZ advisors were required to continuously stay engaged by raising concerns and opinions. In essence, this space allowed GIZ to engage in a way that is emblematic of the broader situation in terms of state–media relations. What was clear was that provincial government partners recognized the need for improved engagement, but that the "how" of engagement was not understood.

In this context, GIZ decided to also engage directly with the national GCIS officer responsible for the GCIS coordination of all the provinces. The GIZ advisor met with the national officer personally and explained the approach and the intention of the pilot project to him in detail. The

national officer communicated his support to the initiative to the provincial GCIS office. Through GIZ's engagement with the national level at the right point in time, the pilot project received the necessary endorsement from higher-level authorities and the go-ahead for practical implementation on the provincial and local levels.

Moving forward, the details of the pilot project on improving communication were conceptualized and agreed upon in the Provincial Communications Core Team. The GIZ advisor was invited to its meetings on a regular basis, and thus was able to become an accepted and trusted partner. In this space, GIZ and core provincial government partners agreed on two selected pilot municipalities. The pilot project sought to address how media, community development workers, and municipalities can better educate, empower, and engage communities, without harming the authority of municipalities and independence of the media.

The first activity in making the agreed upon pilot initiative operational was to lay the foundation for better interpersonal relations between municipal officials and community journalists. GIZ staff suggested carrying out a joint exposure and study trip to Germany for participants from the municipalities and the media. The idea was supported by the Provincial Communications Core Team. It was agreed that implementation of the pilot project would commence upon returning from the study tour.

In the planning phase of the study tour, the abovementioned contested space of media and the state became obvious on a practical level. To ensure a balanced approach toward bringing the two actors of government communicators and community journalists together, GIZ decided on a particular selection process for delegates. Non-state delegates, that is, community journalists, were selected in collaboration with relevant sector organizations such as the ECCF and the Association of Independent Publishers in a competitive application process. This ensured that participants were selected using fair and transparent criteria with independent input, thus obviating the perception of "driving an agenda" through arbitrary selection. Representatives from the state side, that is, government communicators, were discussed with the Provincial Communications Core Team and directly nominated.

However, a setback in the process was experienced when government officials contested the selected community journalists, particularly a senior journalist who was perceived to be hostile toward the provincial government. GIZ decided to meet this contestation with an open discussion between partners on the objectives and principles of this initiative, namely

to create space for frank and professional discussions on differing views, to bring participants out of their comfort zones and to challenge preconceived perceptions by discussing new and different perspectives, and eventually to form new relationships based on trust.

As a means to introduce the underlying objectives of the initiative to the delegates, GIZ hosted preparatory workshops where all delegates had the first opportunity to engage with each other. In the very first discussions, both sides already touched on the very points that often hindered collaboration on a day-to-day basis. These included accusations of bias toward anti-government "agendas" by newspapers, the threats by government to withhold advertising (and thus revenue), and the distribution of local newspapers in the communities. The atmosphere for new, creative thinking during the study tour was set once GIZ also presented a case study on media in Germany and the experiences of a German journalist who had worked in a number of countries. The study tour created a space in which both parties felt they were on neutral ground. Discussions were always very open, and a deeper understanding of each other's work circumstances was created.

The study tour was successfully completed, and new alliances between actors on the local government level were forged. Upon return, GIZ moved toward the practical implementation of the agreed upon pilot project in two municipalities.[6] The personal links created with delegates who operate in the geographical area of selected municipalities, either as journalists or responsible government communicators, helped to access the municipality. Nonetheless, GIZ advisors had to still facilitate the buy-in of the political leaders (the mayor, speaker, and whip) of pilot municipalities. This required the GIZ advisors – together with representatives from both parties – to present the project ideas to members of the Municipal Council. During this process, it became obvious that anchoring the initiative in the Provincial Communications Core Team had its limitations, as this was a bit removed from the daily operations of – and differences in – procedures in municipalities. GIZ adapted its strategy and established a Project Committee – consisting of participating municipalities and representatives from SALGA and GCIS – responsible for the specific municipalities and

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6 In further engagements, one of the two selected municipalities displayed an increasing lack of commitment and ownership. Despite various attempts to resuscitate a previously stable relationship, GIZ and provincial partners decided to reduce the number of pilot sites to one.

surrounding areas on the operational level. With their inputs on the operational decision-making process, the pilot proceeded.

Multi-stakeholder engagement remained a core principle in getting the pilots off the ground: Citizens in respective municipalities were engaged through a data collection (survey) process, in which they indicated what kind of information they required most in their municipality, in which form they preferred this information to be presented to them, and through which channels they would like to receive it. At the same time, the municipality was engaged through an assessment of the status quo of communication practices. Through interviews with various municipal officials and Community Development Workers (officials who interface with communities on an ongoing basis on service-delivery matters), institutional bottlenecks in the flow of information were identified and recommendations on how to address them developed. In the interview process, community media in the respective geographical areas were asked to assess their levels of capacity and reach, potential challenges, and existing links to the municipality. Furthermore, relationships to other international partners supporting freedom of the media in South Africa were established, for example to Hivos, an international organization that, through its program "Making All Voices Count," addresses the very same challenges of citizen-media-state relationships. Using this opportunity, GIZ brought together one of the pilot municipalities and Hivos through its South African implementing partner MobiSAM (Mobile Social Accountability Monitor). By implementing a mobile-based communication mechanism, Hivos and MobiSAM will further continue GIZ's already concluded work and thus increase sustainability. The new relationship between these actors and the pilot municipality rests upon the trust and understanding that GIZ had established.

How does the selected mode of operation make for smart implementation? Lessons learned from the case studies

The two case studies depict different cooperation areas in governance and administration reform in South Africa. In the first example, the provided support led to the development of a government-wide monitoring and evaluation system for improved planning and implementation of public services, and the second fostered cooperation between municipalities and community media for better public participation. Also, the partner land-

scapes of both examples differ, as do the technical challenges that the partner organizations face. Finally, the technical expertise GIZ provided to support its partner organizations was quite distinct and very much depended on the matter at hand as well as the concrete partner requirements. Despite these differences, one can, however, detect similarities, which run like a golden thread through both cases. It is the contextual conditions, referred to here as "soft issues," that hindered progress in both examples, which are similar. Thus, the approaches applied to overcome the individual challenges also show similarities.

There is a tendency of a rather inward-looking and delimiting attitude of partner organizations. This hinders cooperation and coordination with actors who are not part of the sphere of jurisdiction or in the structural group (e.g., ministry, unit, or state versus non-state). Sometimes this is further aggravated by a behavior of compliance. Duties are accomplished because the order was given, although the wider meaning, benefits, or risks as well as consequences are probably not understood. Together these factors promote silo-thinking of stakeholders. In addition, this constitutes a restriction, which makes innovative thinking and exploration of new avenues difficult. In more pronounced circumstances, this might even lead to feelings of mistrust, which undermines the chance to find common ground and develop joint approaches to shared challenges. This might be the case, even though the goals that the different actors or stakeholder groups pursue are quite similar. The examples on the difficult interactions between the local media and municipalities in the Eastern Cape and the challenges of initiating a joint monitoring framework speak to this. These characteristics are not exclusive to the South African context. They can rather be detected in most partner countries, although obviously with differing degrees and nuances. The advisors confronted with such settings and corresponding attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders, however, have to be aware of them and understand them to be as important as the technical challenges, capacity constraints, and know-how deficits that might exist on the side of partners.

Considering the two cases described above, the following essence of how to best support governance processes can be extracted and translated into generally applicable practices on how to support and implement reform processes in a "smart" way. We feel that these lessons learned are not unique to the South African context, but can be used in a general way when supporting governance and administration reform as well as reforms in different sectors in partner countries.

There is not one blueprint to transformation and reform. It might sound like a truism, but it cannot be taken seriously enough. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach. Supporting transformation and governance reforms will, as in any other sector, not be successful if it follows a linear approach. Rather, the support provided has to be iterative and flexible and has to allow for repeated learning loops to account for the fact that transformation and reform are long and non-linear processes.

While working on developing country-wide M&E systems, it became obvious that the smart implementation approach had to be found through a concerted effort by all partner organizations involved. GIZ became a learning partner, too, and had to understand that only by adapting its own approach – from supporting several individual partners simultaneously to supporting one joint program (the "single mechanism") – could it promote progress. This shift in mindset enabled a joint learning process, which fostered ownership and mutual understanding.

In the example from the Eastern Cape, GIZ adapted its project steering structure several times to overcome bottlenecks, accommodate partner needs, and foster ownership, that is, from steering together with the ECCF as the only partner, to steering with a "loose" group of partners on the provincial level (CoGTA, SALGA), to using an existing government structure (i.e., the Provincial Communications Core Team), and finally to establishing a project steering committee on the implementation level.

It is important to note that what at first might have looked like a trial-and-error approach of learning through mistakes and successes was rather a deliberate choice to be flexible and to adapt the approach whenever it was necessary in order to stay close to the situational requirements and responsive to the partners' demands. Partner organizations appreciate this as a counterpart, retrospectively reflected in more general terms during the interviews for this article:

> GIZ's approach was not as such selling one model or one approach. It was much more trying to work through the "mess" in the most supportive and thoughtful ways, which were context-sensitive and trying to traverse the space between the politics that were there and the international relationships and the expert issues. Requests were accommodated in the concepts always, and initial nets spun wider to bring something in which did not fit in initially.

Understanding the country and reform context is key. Each transformation and reform process needs to be grounded in the particular context in which it takes place. Content issues of reform might be comparable among countries, but the politics in negotiating them and thus their pro-

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cess or outcome is not. Advisory services can only add value to these processes if they are grounded on the specific context in which a partner organization operates. The fact that GIZ combines international and national advisors in its program teams allows for insider and outsider perspectives in understanding this context. It enables the teams to utilize tacit knowledge of the partner countries' challenges and cultural sensibilities, augmented with international experiences. In this way, the teams are better prepared to see the whole picture of the partner countries' socio-economic and political context. Furthermore, this knowledge can be maintained beyond the lifespan of one program cycle (i.e., approximately three years), because national advisors often stay employed with GIZ in their own countries, whereas international advisors tend to change posts more frequently.

The perspective of a long-term engagement enables advisors to be there, to first listen and observe, and then to advise. A former national advisor captured this attitude by explaining how GIZ employed a partner-oriented approach:

> More room was created by just relaxing on time frames and making deadlines a bit more open. By giving this space, partners became aware that we are of support. Partners began seeing us as the only ones understanding their context. We were not coming in the room saying "Our matrix says we have to do xyz," but we came and said "So what is the big picture here?" Partners came with tasks from the minister and asked us to help them think through. They wanted our "thought processes." We supported them in finding their feet with regard to the task at hand. In a nutshell: It is creating space and having the right conservations.

Building trust is a long-term affair. Building a trustful relationship with counterparts and the partner organization as such requires continuous and long-term engagement and support. As shown in the examples, GIZ's cooperation is designed as a long-term affair that centers on direct engagement between advisors and partners. The examples show the huge benefit of advisors working closely and continuously with their counterparts. By doing so, they can flexibly follow the demand, give hands-on support if needed, and either engage bilaterally or create space for group exchanges and learning. At the same time, they are able to build the level of mutual trust and recognition necessary for effective partnerships. As one counterpart who participated in the development of a joint M&E framework recounts while looking back: "The additional benefits were that I developed personal relationships with the advisors. They were sound-

boarding through their own experiences and perspectives. They carried global experience and understood the bigger picture."

The ability to build trust among partner organizations also requires a certain attitude of openness toward the demands of the partner organization and counterparts as well as flexibility in accommodating these and mastering unforeseen challenges. As a counterpart summarized it while looking back on her working experience with GIZ advisors:

> I always could pick up the phone and ask for insight. The advisor became a very trusted person. The GIZ colleagues were always approachable and did not behave in a high-handed way. They were extremely supportive always and flexible to accommodate the uncertainties and changes, because it always was unpredictable, and things did not work in "ZOPP"[7] blocks.

Use windows of opportunity and set the right incentives at the right time. If the partner countries' context is properly understood and cooperation is grounded on a trustful relationship, the identification of the right point in time to utilize an opportunity is not rocket science. In the example of supporting a joint M&E framework, the shared experience of being stuck in a rather unsatisfactory situation (i.e., a multitude of uncoordinated M&E approaches) created a push (window of opportunity) for all partner organizations involved, despite their reservations. The fact that all actors also had similar capacity needs was then turned into an incentive by creating a joint program on capacity development. This eventually brought different actors together to jointly steer the program (the "single mechanism") and contributed to their ownership.

Multi-level and multi-actor approaches allow for seeing the whole picture and fostering ownership. In the Eastern Cape example, the challenge was clearly located on the municipality level. However, the GIZ advisors from the beginning engaged provincial institutions and at times even national institutions in the project. They worked with different spheres of government and with state and non-state partners simultaneously.

Cooperation and communication with institutions on different levels were crucial to overcome bottlenecks in the implementation process. It enabled the advisors also to understand the broader context and relate this

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7 "ZOPP" is the abbreviation of "Zielorientierte Projekt Planung," a planning method developed in the 1970s by the then GTZ, that is, one of GIZ's predecessor organizations.

to the individual initiative they were working on at a specific point in time. It gave the advisors the ability to make connections, as recalled by a national advisor on a similar case:

> Often, national government partners were designing and rolling out a process. And then we often discovered that there is a time-lack in communication and orientation of the provincial partners. But we could do the translation, because we were connected to both the national and provincial partners. We could take up the role as a translator taking the national policy into the implementation space. So it is this skill: to understand the broader context and the specific issues on the level it needs to be translated to. That is the important skill.

Create a secure space where partners can engage freely. If trust and mutual understanding is lacking and creating bottlenecks in the process, it proves to be worth the effort to create a situation in which they meet with each other beyond their own limited areas of jurisdiction and on neutral ground.

As described in the example on supporting the cooperation between community media and municipalities in the Eastern Cape, a crucial element of success was to create common ground on which diverse partner organizations could interact with each other and overcome their prejudices. A joint study trip became the icebreaker, as counterparts were taken out of their own comfort zones and explored unknown space together.

Beyond the mere educational effect of increasing "technical" knowledge, study trips foster personal relationships. This is especially fruitful if people traveling together come from different spheres of the partner landscape, for example media and public service, civil society, and government. Study trips create joint learning opportunities, in which partners can experiment and get to know each other outside their normal spaces. As one counterpart recalls: "Exposure trips to Germany were powerful. They were a way to make people think outside the box and allowed people to ask questions. It was the right people traveling together doing hard work together and learning together."

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