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The resurgence of national development planning and the challenge of alignment

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in the number of developing countries producing national development plans. This has led to an interest in how governments seek to implement their plans by aligning government policies, budgets and sectoral plans with their national development plans. The expectation is often for plans to bring about major changes in policies and budgets, but many national development plans are designed to play a more incremental role in signalling priorities and influencing thinking rather than bringing about specific policy changes. In doing so, they mirror the emphasis budgets place on narrative explanation alongside budgetary allocations. This paper uses the case of South Africa's National Development Plan to look at how budgets and sectoral plans respond to signals from the plan and how they in turn reshape the role that the plan plays.

Alignment can take many different forms depending on how departments respond to the signals in the national development plan. These signals cover a wide range of actions, priorities and objectives. Different signals come to the fore at different times and in different policy contexts. This enables departments to be selective about how they incorporate the national development plan into their own activities. In doing so, other government documents both respond to signals from the plan and themselves send signals about how to interpret the role and significance of the plan at different points in time. This means that a national development plan evolves over time through the way it is echoed and reframed in other policy documents.

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Acronyms

ANC   African National Congress

DA   Democratic Alliance

DBE   Department of Basic Education

DPME   Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

MTEF   Medium-Term Expenditure Framework

MTSF   Medium-Term Strategic Framework

DoH   Department of Health

NDP   National Development Plan

NGP   New Growth Path

NPC   National Planning Commission

SOE   State-Owned Enterprise/Entity

SONA   State of the Nation Address

1   Introduction

The past 15 years have seen a resurgence in national development planning as governments in developing countries seek to reassert influence over their countries' developmental trajectory and the strategic choices involved. In many cases, the resurgence of national planning also represents a shift in the power within government towards counterbalancing the influence of finance ministries, which had taken on increased responsibility for strategic choices during the decades when national planning was out of fashion, but have sometimes been criticised for giving priority to short-term fiscal controls over longer-term policy objectives.

As this second wave of national development planning matures, attention is turning to what effect these plans are having. Without a realistic understanding of how national plans can impact on policy formulation and implementation, the optimism that accompanied their production could give way to scepticism about what they can deliver.

When governments think about implementing their national development plan, they tend to focus on aligning sectoral plans, policies and budgets with the national plan to demonstrate how it will be implemented. Alignment refers to achieving consistency across different documents so that they all contribute towards the objectives of the national development plan. However, there is little clarity on what alignment looks like or how it is achieved. There are two dominant ways to judge the extent of alignment. The first treats it as a compliance exercise based on a hierarchical view of planning and looks to see how much of the national plan is taken forward in other government plans and policies. The second looks for areas of significant change in policy. The problem with both approaches is that they set a very high, and perhaps unrealistic, bar for assessing the influence of a national plan. They take an abstract and linear view of the role a plan should play, which is at best a simplification of reality and at worst does little to capture the way governments operate and use their national plans in practice.

Both approaches emphasise policy change over other ways that planning can influence policy. However, part of the logic of long-term planning is to bring greater stability to decision-making, and a national plan could legitimately prioritise policy stability and continuity over change. This view of planning is consistent with observations that policy change and budget reallocations are usually slow and gradual (Schick, 1983; True et al., 2007), and with observations that policy consistency can be important for improving service delivery outcomes (Balabanova et al., 2013; NPC, 2012: 44) and encouraging private investment and growth (Cavallari and Romano, 2017; Polzin et al., 2019). This overlaps with literature on adaptive management (Andrews, 2013; Ang, 2016), which highlights the need for policies to develop iteratively rather than through predefined shifts.

In this paper, I consider a different way of thinking about alignment by looking at the signalling effects of a national plan and how actors respond. Signalling refers to the messages contained

in a plan, rather than the specific decisions a plan might make. These signals might relate to priorities or approaches or issues to be addressed and can influence how sector plans and budgets approach policy. I aim to show that alignment is reflected in how ideas are picked up, discussed and reformulated in other government documents. Other plans will also play a signalling role and so may in turn send signals about how they view the role or priorities of the national plan. This allows for iteration and enables reflection and dialogue through the planning process.

Box 1 Summary of key concepts: alignment and signalling

Alignment implies consistency across government documents so that they all contribute towards the national development plan. There are two dominant ways to judge the extent of alignment. The first treats alignment as a top-down compliance exercise to see how much of the national plan is taken forward in other government plans and policies. The second looks for areas of significant change in policy. Both approaches emphasise changes in policy over other ways that planning can influence policy.

An alternative way to view alignment is to focus on the signalling effects of a national plan. Signalling refers to the policies, priorities and approaches discussed in a national plan, rather than the concrete decisions made in a plan, and how the rest of government responds to these signals through the budget and lower-level plans. The budget and lower-level plans in turn play a signalling role, and send signals about how they interpret the role or priorities of the national plan.

I explore these issues by looking at South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) and how it has been incorporated into other areas of government planning and budgeting. The NDP was released in 2012 and received broad political support despite significant contestation over some elements of the plan. South Africa provides an interesting case because of the level of political contestation over planning and budgeting, and the relationship between these two activities, but also because of the volume of policy documents: alongside departmental, provincial and municipal plans, there are broad policy announcements made by the President and detailed budget documents produced by the National Treasury. There is, therefore, a substantial set of documents that can be analysed.

My objective is not to assess the NDP or its implementation, but rather to use examples of how alignment has been approached in government speeches and documents to illustrate different ways of thinking about alignment and the implications for how the resurgence in development planning influences policy-making and budgeting. I show that the nature of alignment varies across different kinds of document, over time, and between sectors or types of policy issue. I argue that

focusing on how alignment is approached through responding to and interpreting signals provides an understanding of planning that is more grounded in the complex and contested realities of policy-making.

The paper starts by looking at the resurgence of national development planning and debates over the role of national development plans. It highlights the growing tendency for development plans to be broad and visionary rather than detailed and technical. This informs a discussion in the following section of how governments approach the process of aligning government policies, plans and budgets with their national plan. The discussion highlights the limitations of a top-down compliance-focused view of alignment where budgets and sectoral plans are expected to implement what is specified in the national plan. It suggests it is more useful to look at how a national plan can signal priorities and approaches and how the rest of government responds to these signals. The second half of the paper focuses on applying this approach in South Africa by looking at how government policy, budgets and sectoral plans respond to the priorities signalled in the NDP.

2 The resurgence of national development planning: its changing nature and multiple purposes

In the period of decolonisation following the Second World War, national development planning was an accepted part of statehood and 'almost as important a symbol of national sovereignty as a flag, written constitution or seat at the UN' (Chimhowu et al., 2019: 79). Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, was strongly committed to national planning. His view that the 'idea of a planned society … is accepted now by almost everyone' (cited in Roberts, 2021: 3–4) was uncontroversial at the time. Even colonial powers shared this view. The colonial High Commissioner of Malaysia wrote in the country's first Draft Development Plan that 'a country that is becoming a nation must have a policy and a plan' (cited in World Bank, 2017: 2). While the plan was a symbol, it was also viewed as a tool for change. In India, 'the idea of planning … was closely linked to overcoming colonial exploitation and to redeeming the pledge of the anti-colonial struggle to the people of India' (Patnaik, 2015: 10).

However, national planning became increasingly discredited, partly due to negative associations with centrally planned economies (Chimhowu et al., 2019: 76–7). In an influential critique, Wildavsky (1973: 128) argued that 'planning fails everywhere it has been tried', thus obscuring huge variation in approaches to and experiences of national planning. For Wildavsky, the persistence of national planning showed it existed as an irrational act of faith, making planning 'not so much a subject for the social scientist as for the theologian' (ibid.: 153). A more sympathetic view would suggest planning continued because governments found it necessary to plan. When India abolished its Planning Commission, 'a note prepared for the Indian Cabinet in 2014 described the Commission as a "relic" of a long-gone era when central planning was favored by governments around the world' (Roberts, 2021: 2). Yet, planning continued even when it was discredited. The abolition of the Planning Commission has been accompanied by the creation of a new institution, the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), 'responsible for developing "a shared vision of national development priorities"' (ibid.: 11). In practice, therefore, the real debates have been about how to approach national planning and how to label it rather than whether to plan.

The past two decades have seen a significant resurgence in national planning as 'the number of countries with a national development plan has more than doubled' (Chimhowu et al., 2019: 76). The resurgence of development planning suggests there are reasons (other than theology) why governments are drawn towards national planning. Chimhowu et al. (ibid.: 77) describe the resurgence of national planning as 'a reaction to the dominant trend of the past three decades, namely that of economic liberalization, marketization and deregulation', as governments have

sought to establish their ability to shape their countries' futures. The resurgence has been led by governments rather than donors, though in many countries it has built on planning done through donor-led poverty reduction strategy papers (ibid.: 87).

There is some evidence that the approach to planning has changed, though the core features of a plan remain the same. Chimhowu et al. (2019: 78) define a plan as 'any time-bound national plan with a set of coherent economic and socio-political objectives that transcends sectors and articulates a vision for national development'. This has echoes of Wildavsky's definition (1973: 147–8) that says 'planning is not a policy [but] a way to create policies related to one another over time so as to achieve desired objectives'. Thus, a central feature of a national plan is the focus on coordinating across sectors. What varies is the way that this is done, and particularly whether a plan aims to direct the details of individual policies from the top-down, or facilitate a more complex process of engagement, including from the bottom-up (see Table 1). In this context, it is notable that in the 'new national development planning' that Chimhowu et al. describe, plans have become less focused on defining specific activities and more focused on setting out a broad vision.

Table 1 The multiple roles of a National Development Plan

Top-down roles	Bottom-up roles
Introducing new policies and approaches	Validating existing policies and approaches
Signalling priorities for other plans	Responding to signals in other plans
Coordinating policy	Drawing together different policies
Identifying priorities	Promoting debate about priorities
Conferring legitimacy on government	Legitimising departments or policies
Directing government	Mobilising society

3   The myth of alignment

One of the central concerns in debates over the value of development planning is consistency across policy instruments, and particularly how national development plans are aligned with budgets and other government plans. This section emphasises the limitations of a compliance-based view of alignment in which the top-down role of a plan for introducing changes in policy dominates the assessment of the impact of planning. It then explores the benefits of a less linear and less hierarchical understanding of alignment that focuses on the signalling effect of plans in elevating priorities.

Development plans attract attention because they promise so much – comprehensive visions for a country's development, prioritisation and sequencing of key activities, perhaps even a bespoke recipe for national development. They may set targets and indicators to monitor progress. They may also seek to guide the allocation of government resources. These features may be particularly appealing where society is divided or government chaotic, where a clear plan appeals precisely because it is unachievable.

The breadth of what national development plans cover and what they promise makes them of interest both inside and outside government. This in turn means many people seek to influence the planning process. On the one hand, this is a self-perpetuating cycle – the level of interest taken in the plan demonstrates its importance and the breadth of its appeal. On the other hand, the higher expectations are raised, the harder it is to meet them, which increases the risk of the plan and the planning process becoming discredited. Thus, the scope and ambition of a national development plan give it its relevance – but also create the potential for disillusionment that could ultimately undermine the relevance of national planning.

One of the challenges is how this level of ambition influences expectations of alignment. It leads to expectations of major change as government reconfigures itself around the plan. However, the actual effects of alignment may be small or difficult to identify. For example, greater clarity on key priorities could reduce the need for policy changes or new legislation, which might provide greater scope to work on improving performance incrementally, or it could lead to increased motivation that improves performance. The level of engagement involved in developing a national plan could result in more junior staff having greater exposure to discussions about strategic

priorities, which might enhance their motivation or career ambitions.[1] These effects (and their negative counterparts) may be more widespread and more significant than those that could be seen through a focus on identifying definable policy changes brought about by a plan.

Many critiques of planning have highlighted the failure to achieve alignment around a clear, overarching set of priorities as one of the major weaknesses in national planning. For Wildavsky (1973: 142), the broad scope of national planning was its undoing. He highlighted that 'one of the most notable characteristics of national objectives is that they tend to be vague, multiple and contradictory', and that planning 'does not work because no large and complex society can figure out what simple and unambiguous things it wants to do, or in what clear order of priority, or how to get them done' (ibid.: 147–8). Munro (2014: 63) highlights that this lack of clarity may be a political necessity more than a technical shortcoming, as 'inconsistency often reflects bureaucratic and/or political turf battles within the government'.

Even where plans were thought to work well, they were often broad and imprecise. Spence (2021: 76) suggests that Asian national plans are 'best thought of not as plans but priorities for policy and development and statements about the direction of the economy'. Under such approaches, 'the goal was to solve coordination problems via providing a mechanism that helped expectations to converge' (ibid.: 76). The level of detail found in these plans varied. The first national plans produced in India were 'visionary', with planning later become more 'technocratic' before shifting back towards the visionary (Sen, 2020). Malaysia used 'indicative planning', with the plan setting out 'broad directions ... to be operationalized though legislative, fiscal and other policy measures' (World Bank, 2017: 9). In China, Yuen Yuen Ang highlights the importance of signals for how national priorities are taken forward at the subnational level with some priorities deliberately being left vague to allow scope for experimentation (Ang, 2016).

Thus, a national plan is rarely the culmination of a disciplined process of prioritisation and the benefits a national plan delivers may not be due to its precision or its clarity. A plan may seek to frame the problem or influence the policy narrative; if it does not provide absolute clarity, it could still contribute to building consensus. A plan could play a useful role in exposing and thereby helping to resolve inconsistencies or, by obscuring these differences, it may play an equally important role in enabling inconsistent positions to coexist.

Recent literature has therefore focused more on the process of planning than the content of the plan. Chimhowu et al. (2019: 84) suggest that 'the process of building national consensus is as important as the content of the plan itself' (Chimhowu et al., 2019: 84) and that 'plan documents

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1   The opposite is also possible. The plan could be used to legitimise changes that might not otherwise happen. It could lead to a disruptive set of new initiatives or to government's attention being spread too thinly to cover additional activities introduced in the plan, or the plan could be used to justify a lack of change, with rhetorical commitment to the plan being used to legitimise inaction. Although Wildavsky considered the possibility of such negative side effects, he did not consider their positive counterparts.

are no longer an end in themselves but are seen as part of a process of communicating and negotiating national ideals with internal and external audiences' (ibid.: 87). In this view, national development planning's role is more about signalling than dictating priorities. As Munro highlights, national development plans 'provide signals to other actors ... about the government's tone, policy priorities and intended policy tools' (Munro, 2014: 63).

A focus on signalling allows for variation in how different parts of government respond to a national plan and therefore differs from a focus on the top-down role of a national plan in providing directives that other parts of government are expected to comply with. Other plans will also play a signalling role and so may in turn send signals about how they view the role or priorities of the national plan. This allows for iteration and enables reflection and dialogue through the planning process.

This signalling role has been emphasised in literature on spatial planning. Spatial planning in the Netherlands has focused on 'indicative planning' that 'frames argumentation and facilitates negotiation' (Balz and Zonneveld, 2018: 2). This framing may influence other government plans. It recognises that governing involves 'a complex system of plans' produced by a multitude of agencies focusing on different priorities and timeframes (Hopkins and Knaap, 2018: 275). These plans will not always be aligned, leading to what Hopkins and Knaap call a 'cacophony of plans' with competing messages and priorities (ibid.: 275). Higher-level plans can play a 'signalling effect' by highlighting priorities or issues to consider and thereby influencing the content of other plans (ibid.: 275). This approach views 'plans as a means of interaction among disparate organizations, rather than seeing a plan as the result of such a process' (ibid.: 276). Alignment then becomes a process rather than an act of compliance. Rather than imposing consistency, plans have a 'signalling effect' in framing priorities, narratives and the terms of debate (ibid.; Fischer and Forester, 1993).

Box 2 Signalling, planning and budgeting

The debate over alignment between plan and budget tends to centre on the costing and financing of the national development plan and whether costs are reflected in the budget. If national planning is now more focused on mapping out a vision and mobilising the state and society around these, then financing may not be the most important consideration. Focusing on the signalling role of a national plan implies that the central issue may be how far the budget responds to signals from the plan, rather than whether the plan is accurately costed and financed.

4 Signalling and the alignment of plans and budgets

This focus on signalling also helps us to think about alignment between planning and budgeting. Budgetary processes have increasingly focused on how effectively resources are used rather than just the allocation of resources with increased attention being given to the narrative explanations that accompany budgetary decisions as the focus of public financial management has shifted 'from inputs to outputs' (Schick, 1983: 6). The new wave of national development planning complements this shift as planning now connects more with the narrative of the budget than with how resources are allocated. Signalling thus focuses our attention on how budgets respond to, accommodate or adapt signals from the national plan, and on the signals budgets in turn send about the role of national development plans.

Chimhowu et al. (2019: 83) suggest that 'financing is the weakest area in most plans', particularly in cases where the plan is produced outside the ministry of finance, while noting that this does not necessarily detract from their role in signalling.[2] A World Bank report (2017: 27) on planning in Malaysia highlighted the 'gap between the plan and implementation' and attributed the gap to 'a disconnect between planning, on the one hand, and budgeting on the other'. Budget officials can face 'an impossible task' in balancing out competing priorities and mandates, in 'assessing spending programmes against a diverse range of measures – national development plans, poverty-reduction strategies, vision documents and political party manifestos [which] often have competing requirements, and there is rarely clarity on how they should be ranked' (CABRI, 2006: 2). This challenge of aligning plans and budgets has also been noted in particular sectors. A study of alignment between planning and budgeting in the Kenyan health sector noted challenges arising from 'institutionalized separation between planning and budgeting processes' (Tsofa et al., 2016: 274–5). However, if we are focusing on the signalling role of a national plan, the issue may not be that the plan is uncosted but rather how far the budget responds to signals from the plan.

An uncosted plan ostensibly leaves the authority of the finance ministry for budgetary allocations unchallenged, but in setting out priorities it also provides scope for departments to challenge those allocations. Any 'budgetary reform is likely to upset the balance of power between guardians and spenders, and so affect budget outcomes [by altering] the actual strategies available to budget actors' (Kelly and Wanna, 2000: 36), and so the resurgence of national

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2   There is a long-standing debate in the public finance community over the relative merits of separating planning and budgeting or merging these functions under a single organisation (Allen et al., 2016; Hadley et al., 2019; Krause et al., 2016; Wilkes and Westlake, 2014). Arguments for merging these functions often cite the need to maintain fiscal control over recurrent and capital budgets and encourage prioritisation of government policy agendas to levels that can feasibly be delivered within the available fiscal constraints, while arguments for separation argue for the need to counterbalance the short-termism that is typically associated with budgeting.

development planning is likely to have some impact on budget processes even when plans are uncosted. Hadley et al. (2019: 32) note that the work of budget officers in controlling the spending demands of departments can be 'heavily determined by individual country circumstance and systems', and this context is likely to affect both how budget officers engage with a national development plan and the way it impacts the budgetary process.

Chimhowu et al.'s (2019) focus on lack of financing as the major obstacle to implementation would fit better for an earlier generation of planning that concentrated on specific fundable projects. If national planning is now more focused on mapping out a vision and objectives and mobilising the state and society around these, then the financing mechanisms may not be the most important consideration. The key is to look at the plan in terms of the role it plays. Very few people would read such a document from beginning to end. Even if they did, each reader would interpret it differently. The plan achieves influence through the way it is echoed and reworked in other documents. These other documents mediate between the plan and its implementation through a process of alignment, but this alignment can take many forms, which differ from the top-down exercise typically imagined. A focus on signalling therefore helps us better understand the relationship between planning and budgeting in the context of the resurgence of national development planning.

5   South Africa's National Development Plan: origins and pursuit of alignment

The rest of this paper focuses on the case of development planning in South Africa to illustrate the ways that different actors engaged with the NDP and how this has changed over time. In this section, I explain the context of the NDP, how it was produced and the formal decisions that were made about how it should be implemented. In subsequent sections I explain my methodology for examining signalling and apply this approach to a sample of documents.

South Africa released its first[3] long-term national development plan in 2012 following a period of consultation on a draft released in 2011. The plan was produced by the National Planning Commission (NPC), made up of prominent individuals from different sectors of society including business, academia and civil society. It was first presented in parliament and then submitted to cabinet, where it received government approval. The plan 'achieved a remarkable degree of consensus across the country's political spectrum' (Naidoo and Maré, 2015: 408). The main opposition party, the centre-right Democratic Alliance (DA), was particularly vocal in its support, but stakeholders across business, civil society and the media also expressed their support for the plan. The biggest area of opposition was in regard to how the plan approached the economy, particularly from the left including trade unions and some factions of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), for proposals that were seen as being insufficiently radical.

Government's approval of the NDP led to a focus on the process of implementation. South Africa was a bit of an outlier in Africa, prior to the adoption of the NDP, as policy-making was done 'without the guidance of an overarching framework such as a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper or national development plan' (Foschler and Cole, 2006: 37). As illustrated in Figure 1, South Africa used five-year plans with a relatively low profile under the less-than-catchy title of the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) and its economic equivalent, the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF). The NDP was integrated within this existing planning system. It became the guide for these other plans, which then became the 'building blocks' of the NDP.

The NPC (2020: 4) envisioned 'that the NDP would be implemented through the alignment of planning within and beyond government'. The main vehicle for guiding this process of alignment

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3   South Africa has had other national plans before the NDP. The first government of the democratic era started with a cross-cutting Reconstruction and Development Programme. There has also been the more economically focused Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy, and there have been regular five-year plans referred to as MTSFs. Whether the NDP is qualitatively different or merely an extension of these other documents is a matter of debate, but it is the first of these to be widely referred to as a national development plan. For example, the Foreword to the 2013 Estimates of National Expenditure (supporting documents to the annual budget documents) described the NDP as 'the first long term plan for South Africa'. The terminology matters here given my focus on the resurgence of the explicit activity of national development planning.

was the integration of the priorities of the NDP into the regular machinery of government planning through the MTSF. The MTSF is intended to inform the preparation of departmental strategic plans and other plans across government. The guidance for departmental planning was revised to emphasise that 'it is important for institutions to align their priorities, expressed in their short- and medium-term plans, with government's broad strategies and policies [and therefore] focus on programmes and policies which contribute to the achievement of the NDP priorities' (DPME, 2019: 25). This process was referred to as 'alignment' and envisioned primarily as a top-down exercise with the priorities of the NDP cascading down into the broad range of government plans and policies and thereby facilitating its implementation. Scepticism about government's ability to implement the plan led to a focus on breaking the plan down into lists of specific activities that could be monitored through the existing outcomes monitoring system as a way of demonstrating commitment to implementation.

Figure 1 The formal process of alignment

Source: NPC (2015: 30)

This process was, in turn, intended to align with the well-established budgeting process run by the National Treasury. South Africa's National Treasury is 'a preeminent institution' within the South African government (Pearson et al., 2016: 6; see also Krause et al., 2016) and probably the central department with the greatest influence over the activities of line function departments. However, it also divides opinion according to Pearson et al. (2016: 1), with some seeing it as highly capable and effective at controlling the spending demands of other departments and 'others see[ing it as] an elitist institution which imposes top-down austerity and restricts a genuinely developmental agenda'. Through its responsibility for budgetary allocations, the National Treasury took on 'a complex coordinating role' (ibid.: 15) before coordinating capability developed elsewhere in government and 'the Treasury thus ascended to the position of central coordinator' (ibid.: 31). There were many conflicting expectations of the impact the NDP would have on the role of the National Treasury. Some expected it to reduce the National Treasury's influence over economic policy and budgetary decision-making, while others focused on its role in bringing greater coherence to policy making and thereby perhaps strengthening work done by the National Treasury.

In practice, as an uncosted long-term plan the NDP tended not to encroach on the influence of the National Treasury. The NPC did not have the mandate, technical expertise or inclination to challenge decisions on how resources were allocated. Departments could draw on the NDP to signal the importance of their activities and argue for extra resources, but the NDP did not provide a clear case for reprioritising or increasing expenditure. The NDP tended to focus on improving the way things were done and the quality of government activities, rather than what was done or in what quantity. This brought it into line with the National Treasury's focus on making better use of existing resources and, as I illustrate in the empirical analysis later in the paper, the National Treasury focused on this angle in how it framed the NDP in budget documents.

Structural changes were also introduced over a period of time to facilitate alignment with the NDP. The guidance for budget submissions was adjusted to highlight the need for budgetary allocations to be assessed against the priorities of the NDP. The NPC was combined with monitoring and evaluation in the renamed Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), and the responsibility for overseeing departmental strategic planning was transferred from the National Treasury to the DPME. These changes were designed to ensure the key tools for coordinating government activity – through budgeting, monitoring and strategic planning – were aligned to advance the implementation of the NDP. However, while these structural changes may provide a framework through which policies and budgets could be aligned around the NDP, it does not tell us what such alignment might look like, which is the focus of this paper.

Alignment is supposed to streamline the work of government. However, it is a complex task. DPME's Revised Framework for Strategic Planning lists the policies and legislation that '[set] the basis for government planning and for monitoring the performance of, reporting on and evaluating the results of the plans' (DPME, 2019: 17). It lists 12 pieces of legislation, starting with

the Constitution, followed by a further 15 policy documents. These are the generic ones that apply to all areas of government work. There are also specific ones for particular sectors. The numbers may overstate the complexity as some of the documents are more about the process to be followed than the content but, nonetheless, they highlight that alignment involves balancing and reconciling the requirements of multiple policy documents, rather than a linear exercise of implementing the plan.

The NPC (2020: 5) has expressed dissatisfaction with the rate of progress: specifically, that 'progress towards achieving the NDP's main goals has been slow compared to what was expected'. Its assessment was that 'the alignment of planning in government with the NDP is largely nominal, and the alignment of budgets and broader macro-economic policy with the Plan is unclear' (ibid.: 66) and that 'planning has become a compliance exercise that occupies large quantities of time but delivers limited developmental impact' (ibid.: 67). In a paper commissioned by the NPC, Gumede argues that 'the development plans/visions of countries viewed as developmental states are usually clear, concise and robust [and that] this cannot be said about the NDP' (Gumede, 2019: 12).

However, as discussed above, South Africa is not the first country to grapple with the challenge of alignment and of integrating its national plan into the work of government. In focusing so much on the plan's clarity of direction and the need for implementation, such critiques obscure the level of disagreement over the function of a national plan. Alongside differences of opinion on the merits of the plan, there have been different interpretations of its role. For some, it was a technical document, but for others it was a moral calling, or a vision of a future the country should strive to achieve, or a roadmap to achieve that future. By contrast, others saw it as a basis for discussion about the trade-offs that need to be made and the different priorities and interests that need to be considered in making those trade-offs (Friedman, 2017). One study cautioned that 'the notion of "implementing" the plan should not risk narrow interpretation as a technocratic exercise capable of singular authoritative execution' (Naidoo and Maré, 2015: 408). These conflicting views of the role of the plan imply very different ways of thinking about implementation and alignment.

6 Methodology

In an effort to broaden our thinking about alignment and examine the 'signalling effect of plans', the final part of this paper focuses on how speeches, plans and budget documents respond to the NDP and how their responses change over time. The standard alignment question is about how much of the plan is being implemented. I look at it the other way round and ask how different actors engage with and respond to signals from the plan in key public documents. This means looking quantitatively at the frequency of references to the NDP, and qualitatively at the nature of those references, and considering variation over time. This includes considering whether the NDP only features at the beginning of the document or whether it is discussed in the context of specific activities, and also the purpose behind references to the NDP.

Governments produce a huge quantity of policy documents and South Africa is no exception. The large number and length of government documents provided a rich set of texts to analyse, but also meant I had to be selective. I focused on the most high-profile policy documents for the government as a whole and for specific departments. Most of my analysis has focused on the national level because of time constraints and greater difficulties in accessing documents at the provincial level.

I start with the major annual speeches made by the President and Minister of Finance – the State of the Nation Address (SONA) and the budget speech – which are both policy and political speeches that provide an overarching account of government policy. I then go on to look at the departmental level through references to the NDP in departmental strategic plans. To restrict the strategic plans to a manageable number, I focused on the health and school education sectors. Strategic plans tend to be highlighted by departments as major policy documents and are developed through extensive planning processes within those departments. Without subjecting them to the same level of analysis, I also drew on examples from other documents in the budget process, particularly the Estimates of National Expenditure and departmental budget speeches by the Minister of Basic Education, to illustrate the similarity of the way they approach alignment with the NDP. Beyond government documents, I also look at references to the NDP in the election manifestos of the two main political parties.

Table 2 Key documents in the analysis and why they were selected

Documents selected	Department or organisation	Frequency	Sample analysed	Purpose of analysis
SONA	The Presidency	Every year	All speeches since 2012	High-level, high-profile statement of policy
Budget speech	National Treasury	Every year	All speeches since 2012	High-level, high-profile statement of public expenditure*
Departmental budget speech	Department of Basic Education (DBE)	Every year	Speeches for the DBE	Departmental explanation of the budget
Estimates of National Expenditure	National Treasury	Every year	General overview and documents for the DBE	More detailed information on budgetary decisions for individual departments
Departmental strategic plan	Produced by each department	Every five years	DBE and the Department of Health (DoH)	Detailed discussion of departmental priorities and activities
Election manifesto	Political parties	Linked to elections	ANC and DA	Public statement of priorities by political parties. Includes the perspective of the opposition party

* The Budget Speech also introduces revenue policies, but the analysis in this paper focuses on expenditure, particularly in the health and school education sectors.

Both health and school education are concurrent functions over which there is relatively broad agreement in government on the priorities and approach needed to improve services; however, education was given higher status in the NDP. Focusing on these sectors enabled me to avoid a direct conflict of interest. In a former role working in the Secretariat to South Africa's NPC, I was involved with the drafting of the NDP but was not directly involved with these sectors.[4] This avoids the risk of me assessing alignment against my own interpretation of what was written in the plan or on my experience of the relevant departments. While my thinking and interest in

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4   From 2011 to 2015, I worked in the Secretariat to the NPC. My role as a policy analyst focused on sections of the plan related to public sector governance. Following the completion of the plan, I was also involved in discussions about the approach to implementing the NDP.

this topic is inevitably influenced by my former role, the data I use here is drawn from publicly available documents, most of which have been written since I left. The reasons for focusing on these sectors is discussed in greater detail in the analysis below.

For each document, I started by searching for key terms ('National Development Plan', 'NDP', 'Vision 2030'). This enabled me to assess the frequency of discussion of the NDP and identify sections of text that I could analyse in greater detail. I counted these references to look at how the level of attention to the NDP shifts over time, which is not an indication of alignment but provides some indication of the plan's status and how it changes.[5] I then went on to analyse the sections of text where the NDP is mentioned in order to look at how these references approach engagement with the NDP and the way they respond to signals from the NDP, and in turn send signals about how they interpret the role and relevance of the NDP. These are long documents, and every line of text cannot be scrutinised within government. The sheer breadth and complexity of government activity leads to a degree of incoherence and variation within documents as well as between documents. This is why I draw on a range of documents when citing examples.

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5   The counting of mentions of the plan is inexact as sometimes the plan may be mentioned multiple times in the same sentence or paragraph. I have sought to count separate references to the NDP rather than each individual use of the term. Sometimes this means counting paragraphs and sometimes it means counting individual sentences. There is some subjectivity in how distinct references are defined, but this does not affect the broad trends in the level of attention given to the NDP.

7 The signalling effects of the National Development Plan: tracing alignment through government policy and budgetary processes

The high-level task of alignment is relatively simple. The NDP has been unpacked into five-year plans through the MTSF for 2014–2019 and 2019–2024. The MTSF was also revised following the Covid-19 pandemic to combine government's existing priorities with its approach to tackling and recovering from the pandemic. The MTSF therefore provides a vehicle to adapt the NDP and how it is aligned with other priorities. Over time, we may expect to see other departments making fewer references to the NDP and referring more directly to the MTSF as the most appropriate route for aligning themselves with an updated interpretation of the NDP. However, the links between the MTSF and the NDP tell us little about the challenge of alignment as both documents fall under the jurisdiction of the DPME. While the MTSF may unpack the NDP and identify priorities to focus on in consultation with departments, the real challenge of alignment comes in how priorities and perspectives from the NDP are incorporated alongside existing government priorities, activities and budgets. These trade-offs are made elsewhere, including in the budgetary process and in departmental planning as well as in major public or political communications. In the following sections, I therefore trace references to the NDP through national and departmental planning, policy and budgetary processes.

7.1 Policy signalling and the role of the State of the Nation Address

In looking at the prominence given to the NDP, we need to distinguish between policy documents, which are typically written by officials even if they are signed off by ministers, and the more political modes of communication. The most prominent moment for political communication is the annual SONA, when the President addresses the nation through parliament. This speech has a much higher profile than government plans. It is shown live on television and reported widely in the media. Much of the bureaucracy watches to see how far its priorities are covered. In theory, the speech will either be derived from or provide direction to government plans. In practice, alignment is never this neat and there will be differences of emphasis.[6]

The NDP featured in the SONA every year from 2012 to 2017 under President Jacob Zuma. At the time the speech was made in 2012, only the draft plan had been released and had not yet been adopted by government. The discussion of the NDP was therefore broad, focusing on the NDP's identification of 'the elimination of poverty and [reduction of] inequality as critical points

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6   The speeches analysed here can be found at https://www.gov.za/state-nation-address

that must be attended to' and then linking this to a discussion of the New Growth Path (NGP). The objective was presumably to address the challenge of how the NDP fitted with the more interventionist approach to economic policy in the NGP, which had been released a year earlier.

The next speech in 2013 came after the NDP had been accepted by government as the overarching guide for government policy. This time, the discussion of the NDP was more forthright, referring to the NDP as a 'roadmap' for a broad range of sectoral areas and specifying that 'the activities of departments must be aligned with the National Development Plan'. This narrative was put across even more strongly in 2014. As it was an election year, there were two SONAs and both focused on how the NDP had been used to guide government priorities. The pre-election SONA stated that the MTSF 'has been designed as the first five year building block of the National Development Plan, from 2014 to 2019' (February 2014). The 2015 SONA continued this focus on implementation stating that 'we have in the past year introduced some innovative programmes to implement the National Development Plan'. These early speeches focused on reassuring the country that government was taking steps to implement the NDP, thus sending signals about the role of the NDP.

In subsequent speeches, the engagement with the NDP became more selective, with discussion of the NDP highlighting how it fitted with newer policy initiatives. The 2016 SONA highlighted the importance of economic growth, linking the NDP to the ANC's priority of 'rapid economic transformation' by stating that 'a resilient and fast growing economy is at the heart of our radical economic transformation agenda and our National Development Plan'. It also sought to link the NDP with the work of a separate commission, the Presidential Review Commission on State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), designed to look at the governance of SOEs on the grounds that 'to contribute to the successful implementation of the NDP, [SOEs] must be financially sound [and] properly governed'. The 2017 SONA, the last by President Zuma, suggested a declining focus on the NDP. It still referred to how government is 'guided by the National Development Plan (NDP) [in] building a South Africa that must be free from poverty, inequality and unemployment', but other forms of prioritisation were also introduced with reference to a 'Nine-Point Plan to reignite growth'.

President Zuma was replaced by his Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, who ran as an anti-Zuma candidate. President Ramaphosa had been the deputy chair and then chair of the NPC. However, his first SONAs in 2018 and 2019 made no mention of the NDP. After the 2019 election, the second SONA delivered that year contained the most detailed discussion any SONA has given to the NDP. The focus was on the lack of progress made towards achieving the NDP and the 'need to prioritise', 'take extraordinary measures' and 'restore the NDP to its place at the centre of our national effort', suggesting a recognition that the status of the NDP had declined. Despite the focus on prioritisation, the 'priorities' were broad. The SONA identified 'seven priorities', with one priority covering 'education, skills and health'. The speech then went on to set 'five goals' for these 'seven priorities'. The goals were only slightly more focused than the priorities, with one of the goals being that 'our schools will have better educational outcomes and every 10-year-old will be

able to read for meaning'. This illustrates how statements about the importance of the NDP can be reworked to prioritise different signals at different points in time and thus ensure a consistency of framing between the NDP and subsequent policy narratives.

Subsequent SONAs touched on the NDP more briefly. The 2020 SONA set out 'the strategic objective of our National Development Plan, which is to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030' and linked this back to the vision provided by President Nelson Mandela in 1994. In the 2021 SONA the NDP was mentioned only in the context of SOEs to say that 'the mandates of all SOEs are being re-evaluated to ensure that they are responsive to the country's needs and the implementation of the National Development Plan'. The NDP was not mentioned at all in the 2022 SONA.

We can see different approaches to alignment across these SONAs. The early focus on confirming the hegemony of the NDP shifted to a focus on implementation and then, as newer policies emerged, the NDP became less prominent but retained a role in justifying newer policies. We see a similar trend in budget speeches made by the Minister of Finance.

7.2 Links to the budget speech and Estimates of National Expenditure

There are a number of documents that could be analysed to understand the links between the NDP and the annual budget. The closest equivalent to the SONA on the budgetary side is the annual budget speech made by the Minister of Finance. This is a different type of speech as it is tied to the release of the various budget documents, and it needs to be underpinned by policy detail in a way the SONA does not. Nonetheless, a significant part of the budget speech is still about framing priorities. This is accompanied by the more detailed Estimates of National Expenditure, which also include a narrative summary of the measures introduced, while each minister makes his or her own statement on the departmental budget to parliament.[7]

Budget speech

The budget speeches[8] contain a greater depth of engagement with the NDP, particularly in the first years after its adoption. The 2012 budget speech, like the SONA, focused on identifying the points of similarity between the NGP and the NDP. The 2013 budget speech also emphasised the points of similarity but by then the hierarchy had become clear, with the NGP being said to 'support' the NDP. Naidoo and Maré (2015: 421–422) highlight this as 'a gradual shift in emphasis

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7   Each year, as part of the budget process, the Minister of Basic Education makes a speech on the Basic Education budget vote. These speeches have consistently contained brief references to the NDP both as part of the framing mandate for the department and with regard to particular priorities.

8   The budget speeches are available at https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/ default.aspx

from the NGP to the NDP'. This change in emphasis does not necessarily indicate a change in the content of economic policy, but it suggests a change in the signal sent by the budget speech about the relative importance of different framings of economic policy.

This signal continued in 2013 when the budget speech stated that 'the 2013 Budget takes the National Development Plan as its point of departure' and that 'the strategic plans of government and the medium-term expenditure plans will be aligned to realise our objectives'. Thus, the speech was reiterating the approach to implementing the NDP. It also referred to the NDP in relation to specific issues such as growth, infrastructure and the cost of living. The 2014 budget speech highlighted the vision provided by the NDP and that the process of alignment had begun: 'as the first phase of implementing that vision we have a five-year plan and a medium-term budget framework'. The speech picked up on the NDP's emphasis on the need to 'mobilise' society around the plan. It also referred to the NDP in relation to specific priorities including education, growth and agriculture.

The 2015 budget speech again pointed towards the work being done to implement the NDP and highlighted the importance of the budget in that process. In saying that 'a sound budget framework is one of the enabling conditions for implementation of the National Development Plan', it used the NDP to reinforce its arguments for controlling public expenditure.

The 2016 budget speech provided an overview of key points from the NDP and explained that the budget was 'guided by the NDP'. However, the 2017 budget speech raised a warning for the first time and highlighted that growth 'falls well short of our NDP goals'. It also highlighted the importance of 'the clarity of vision and the details of sectoral priorities and programmes set out in the National Development Plan'.

The most recent budget speeches have tended to focus on other plans – the Economic Growth Strategy in 2020 and the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan in 2021. Whereas the NGP lost supremacy to the NDP, it seems that the NDP may now have lost its position to newer economic policies, although these can plausibly be seen as taking forward broad priorities contained in the NDP.

The engagement with the NDP in budget speeches has thus been similar to engagement in the SONA. The more technical nature of these speeches has made the shifts in emphasis more pronounced as budget speeches have moved from emphasising the overarching role of the NDP to reiterating the process for its implementation and then shifting the emphasis to other economic policies while still asserting the overarching role of the NDP.

Table 3 Number of references to the National Development Plan in major political speeches

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
SONA	1	4	2 + 2	1	3	2	0	0 + 9	1	1	0
Budget speech	4	13	12	8	4	3	0	1	0	0	0

Estimates of national expenditure

A similar level and style of engagement can be seen in the more detailed Estimates of National Expenditure, which provide the details of budgetary allocations for particular sectors. The Foreword and Introduction, which are reproduced ahead of the details for each department, provided the framing of how the budget aligned to the NDP. The Foreword to the 2013 Estimates of National Expenditure sought to use the NDP to support the Treasury's focus on making better use of existing resources, which was also a major message of the NDP. The Foreword stated that 'in the period ahead, improvements in outcomes have to come from qualitative improvements in the use of available budgets and other inputs' before saying that 'the National Development Plan 2030 sets out the planning framework for improving delivery in the public sector' (National Treasury, 2013). The 2013 Estimates of National Expenditure for Basic Education went on to emphasise how the NDP aligned with existing education plans ('the department's action plan and vision for schooling in 2025 and the national development plan's proposals for basic education are complementary') and to highlight that 'both focus on the need to improve the quality of education on an ongoing basis' (National Treasury, 2013: 315).

Both the 2013 and 2014 Estimates of National Expenditure for Basic Education included a subheading on activities that contributed to the NDP, and listed a significant range of activities. Some of these were directly related to the Treasury's preferred focus on improving quality, such as increasing the exam pass rate and changing the way school performance is evaluated. This section also referred to other activities with clear financial implications such as making more scholarships available for trainee teachers and addressing backlogs in school infrastructure where existing expenditure plans aligned with the priorities of the NDP. From 2015 onwards, the Estimates of National Expenditure for Basic Education no longer included a dedicated section on activities related to the NDP but made mention each year of specific activities that linked to the NDP as part of the general narrative about the sector.

7.3 Different forms of alignment in departmental strategic plans: comparing health and school education

Departmental strategic plans are where we might expect to find the strongest alignment with the NDP. These documents have a lower public profile and their preparation is a predominantly bureaucratic exercise. As discussed above, the responsibility for oversight of these plans was transferred from the Treasury to the DPME following the adoption of the NDP with a view to facilitating alignment of strategic plans with the NDP.

There are different ways departments could seek to align their strategic plans with the NDP. They may focus on aligning with signals contained in the plan itself or with signals sent about the priorities of the plan in the MTSF, budget or SONA. Departments may attempt to demonstrate alignment by explaining how their activities contribute to objectives in the NDP, by focusing on particular actions from the NDP, or by building on approaches in the NDP, such as the emphasis on improving the quality of existing activities. In this section, I explore the variation in how departments approach the task of aligning their strategic plans with the NDP by focusing on two departments – the DoH and the DBE (responsible for school education).

Context for the health and education sectors

The DoH and DBE provide some points of similarity and difference for comparative study. The NDP identified education as one of the three most important priorities (alongside employment and state capability) due to its importance in overcoming the racial inequalities inherited from apartheid and reducing high levels of youth unemployment. It is an area on which government spends significant resources and has done so for an extended period but with questionable results. Education is a concurrent function, with education policy set at the national level and implemented at provincial level. Health is also a large area of government expenditure and a concurrent function implemented at provincial level. However, while a whole chapter of the NDP is dedicated to health, it is not one of the plan's apex priorities. This enables us to consider the implications of the plan placing more emphasis on one sector than another. Prioritisation is said to be important in planning, and plans are often said to fail because they fail to prioritise, but we have little understanding of how and why prioritisation matters. If prioritisation makes a difference, we might expect to see the education sector paying greater attention to the NDP than the health sector does.

There was broad agreement on the priorities and approach set out in the plan for these sectors. For both education and health, the NDP stressed that it built on existing government activities and that changes were marginal or about emphasis rather than fundamental change. The focus in the Overview chapter of the NDP was on 'Improving the quality of education' and 'Quality health care for all'. This reflects the emphasis in much of the NDP on changing the way things are done rather than what is done. This point was emphasised in the relevant chapters of the NDP:

> The National Development Plan is aligned with the Department of Basic Education's Action Plan and Vision for Schooling in 2025 in both its diagnosis and proposed solutions. These plans are complementary, not competing. The National Development Plan makes new proposals in some areas and in others it merely outline general points of departure to frame and guide reforms in education. (NPC, 2012: 302)

> The proposals presented here are in line with many of the strategies that are under consideration in the Ministry of Health. In the view of the National Planning Commission, South Africa is on the right path after a period of some difficulty. (NPC, 2012: 230)

This focus on policy continuity was partly a response to the extensive reforms that had taken place in transforming the apartheid state into a democratic state, and recognising the downsides of constant change and the need for a greater degree of policy stability to work through complex problems incrementally. This was encapsulated in the NDP's chapter on health by the statement, following an ambitious list of goals, that 'there are no quick fixes for achieving the goals set out above' (NPC, 2012: 335). This focus makes these sectors interesting examples to look at given the focus in the NDP on seeking to improve the quality of existing activities rather than make major policy changes.

Variation in how departmental strategic plans approach alignment

The NDP features frequently in the strategic plans of both departments. In contrast to the gradual decrease in references to the NDP in the speeches discussed above, the NDP has been cited most in the more recent departmental strategic plans for basic education and health. The reasons for this are unclear, but they may reflect the strength of alignment between the NDP and departmental priorities in these sectors, although it could also reflect the increasing scope to engage with the NDP as departments became more familiar with the contents of the document, or simply be due to who worked on the different strategic plans. The NDP is also discussed more in the strategic plans for education than for health, in keeping with the greater emphasis the NDP put on education.

Table 4 Number of references to the National Development Plan in departmental strategic plans

Departmental strategic plans (each plan covers five years)	2014/15–2018/19	2015/16–2019/20	2020/21–2024/25
DBE	19	34	50
DoH		15	18

The NDP features most prominently in defining the mandate within which the departments operate. Departments are not just subject to a 'cacophony of plans' but also to overlapping mandates. For example, the current strategic plan for the DoH explains that:

> The Department of Health derives its mandate from the National Health Act (2003) [and] contributes directly to the realisation of priority 2 (education, skills and health) of government's 2019–2024 medium-term strategic framework, and the vision articulated in chapter 10 of the National Development Plan (DoH, 2020: 4).

The NDP had more of an overarching mandate in the earlier strategic plan (2015/16–2019/20) where the opening statement by the Director General explains that 'the Department created this Strategic Plan to ensure that the nation's resources are working toward the same goals as articulated in the National Development Plan' (DoH, 2015: 5) and there is a section dedicated to the health priorities set out in the NDP.

The DBE also highlights the overarching mandate provided by the NDP. The Foreword by the Minister to the 2014/15–2018/19 strategic plan states that 'all our plans in the education sector have started addressing a segment of what is contained in the National Development Plan' (DBE, 2014: 2). The text of the department's plan explains that 'the focus of the education sector is blending its sector plan to the NDP in order to drive the mandate in a comprehensive way' (DBE, 2014: 10).

As the NDP seeks to build on what is already happening in government, it includes existing activities and initiatives that government is already working on. This is made explicit in the DBE strategic plan (2014/15–2018/19): 'The issues raised in the NDP have always been sector priorities in that they came directly from Action Plan 2019 "Towards the Realisation of schooling 2030"' (DBE, 2014: 16). This provides lots of areas where departmental plans can refer to the NDP without changing what they are doing. The level of detail varies. The DoH's strategic plan also contains a table showing the 'Alignment between NDP Goals, Priorities and NDoH Strategic Goals' (DoH, 2015: 22). The strategic plans also sometimes make reference to how specific priorities fit with the NDP. For example, we are told that tackling cervical cancer and investing in health infrastructure contribute to implementing the NDP.

Given the many areas of overlap, a departmental plan can identify areas of alignment without having to engage with the more challenging narratives, such as those focused on improving performance. Most examples of alignment fit this pattern. However, there is variation in how strategic plans engage with the NDP, particularly when it comes to discussing specific activities. This can be seen in the following three examples from strategic plans for the DBE.

Sometimes the focus is on specific activities. For example, the DBE's strategic plan for 2014/15–2018/19 presents a collaborative initiative to improve education outcomes as taking forward the NDP:

> We have begun implementing the National Development Plan and in response, have established a National Education Collaboration Trust which is a joint partnership of Business, Government and civil society to work on a whole district developmental approach to the schooling system (DBE, 2014: 14).

Here we see the NDP being used to justify the approach towards a specific activity and the way the activity fits with the broader methodology contained in the NDP, which focused on the need for collaboration between the state, private sector and civil society.

Implementation is not always this straightforward. In the DBE's Strategic Plan for 2015/16–2019/20, we see adaptation in how it acknowledges the NDP proposals for all South Africans to learn an African language:

> The NDP requires all South Africans to learn at least one indigenous language as part of nation building and social cohesion. In 2014 we began piloting the incremental introduction of African languages (IIAL) in eight provinces and 228 schools as an immediate response to this noble call in the NDP (DBE, 2015: 5).

Here the department picks up on an idea from the NDP and, given the challenges of implementing the proposal, suggests piloting the initiative. The challenges are not specified but may include the availability of teachers and how to balance this initiative with the core focus on improving literacy and numeracy.

In another case, the strategic plan specifically addresses the challenges to implementation in relation to the issue of multigrade classes:

> The NDP advocates the eradication of schools with multi-grade classes, which currently constitute 26% of the schools in South Africa. The Department will, where possible, advise and support provinces in merging small and non-viable schools. Where merging of schools becomes a challenge because of distances, teachers will be developed professionally to handle multi-graded classes and transport will be provided to aid learner access to schools (DBE, 2015: 5).

Here, the strategic plan makes it clear that it deviates from the NDP's policy proposal but seeks to provide an alternative way of addressing the underlying issue. This appears the most considered of the three examples because it addresses the difficulties with implementation.

These examples represent different approaches to alignment depending on what is suggested in the NDP and how it fits with the department's priorities. The wording used also reflects different interpretations of what alignment with the NDP entails. The first is phrased as a 'response' to the NDP, the second to what the NDP 'requires' and the third to what the NDP 'advocates'. These are all examples of alignment with the NDP but they approach that task based on different framings of

the role of the NDP and the nature of its authority. All three examples are presented as responses to issues signalled in the NDP rather than as simple implementation of activities predetermined in the NDP. This approach allows space for the DBE to develop and present its own approach, including justifying how it diverges from or adapts proposals contained in the NDP.

7.4 The political framing of the plan

Moving from government documents to the manifestos of political parties, despite this gradual decline in the prominence given to the NDP in major speeches and ideological contestation over the content of the NDP within the ruling ANC, the plan features briefly in recent ANC manifestos. The full version of the ANC's 2019 election manifesto made no mention of the NDP, but the summary version of the manifesto highlighted that 'the NDP will continue to guide government's policy agenda and will be implemented at a brisker pace'. It also linked the NDP to the ANC's history by explaining how the NDP builds on the Freedom Charter, which was adopted by the ANC in 1955:

> The Freedom Charter is the living soul of our country's progressive constitution and is the foundation of Vision 2030 of the National Development Plan (NDP) [and] everything we are doing is in pursuance of the vision of the NDP to address the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality. (ANC, 2019)

The ANC's 2021 local election manifesto contained a commitment that planning at the local government level would be focused on 'the long-term NDP 2030 goals' (ANC, 2021). Thus, alignment features as a political and not just technical priority and the political framing we see is consistent with the framing we see in government speeches.

The opposition DA, by contrast, made no mention of the NDP in either its 2019 election manifesto, where it focused on 'A New Plan to Realise Economic Justice for All South Africans', or in its 2021 local election manifesto (DA, 2019; DA, 2021). However, strategic plans for the DA-run Western Cape province have continued to refer to the NDP as a guiding document. Both the provincial strategic plan for 2019–24 and the strategic plan for the provincial DoH state they are guided by the NDP, while the strategic plan for the provincial DoH reproduces the table used by the national DoH to set out how the health-related goals and priorities in the NDP are taken forward through the MTSF. This suggests that, as the NDP has become associated with the work of government, the opposition party has focused on presenting its own alternatives while recognising the guiding role of the NDP for departmental plans. This illustrates how the plan might be echoed selectively, depending on context.

8 Conclusion

The logic of planning is often articulated as bringing the different parts of government together or developing clear prioritisation. Alignment clearly matters. A national plan has little purpose if it is not reflected in the priorities and activities of government. However, it is difficult to define how and why alignment matters. The plans and activities of government are not improved simply because they align with a national plan, but they may be improved by the way in which they seek to align with the plan. For a country like South Africa with high levels of contestation and debate over policy priorities, the narrative of alignment often focuses on the need for all parts of government to work in the same direction or even on the need for all parts of society to work in the same direction, but looking at how alignment is conducted in practice highlights the value of taking a less linear view of alignment.

If we want to understand the impacts of the resurgence of national planning, as well as its sustainability, we should focus not so much on how much of a plan is implemented as on the different ways the plan is used. Looking at the plan in terms of the signals it sends and how other government documents respond to these signals, rather than as a list of monitorable activities, provides a way of exploring this broader view of alignment that recognises the contested and complex nature of policy-making involving numerous processes and actors.

In this paper, I have explored different approaches to alignment used within the South African government. I contrasted the formal narrative on how alignment should happen with the complexity of approaching alignment across multiple government documents. South Africa's NDP has been widely cited in government documents in the years after its release. It also features in speeches and manifestos, so it is not just something found buried in government documents. Sometimes it features as the hegemonic document and sometimes it features as one among many documents. The NDP often features as part of a list of guiding mandates, but it also features in the discussion of priorities, objectives and activities. It can be used to frame other priorities and, in doing so, may provide a sense of coherence or focus by illustrating how a department's activities contribute to wider national objectives.

Alignment can take many different forms depending on how departments respond to the signals in the NDP. These signals cover a wide range of actions, priorities and objectives. Different signals come to the fore at different times and in different policy contexts. This enables departments to be selective about how they incorporate the NDP into their own activities. In doing so, other government documents both respond to signals from the plan and themselves send signals about how to interpret the role and significance of the plan at different points in time. This means that a national development plan evolves over time through the way it is echoed and reframed in other policy documents.

In South Africa, the breadth of issues covered in the plan and the multiple 'signalling effects' it provides make it easy to demonstrate some alignment by mining the NDP for areas of overlap, whether in terms of analysis, objectives or activities. Much of the alignment focuses on demonstrating that different policies are aligned because they share similar broad objectives. There is less engagement with the challenge of improving the quality of government activity, which is central to many areas of the NDP, but the NDP can be seen as part of a wider shift towards focusing on policy consistency over major policy change, which is intended to enable increased focus on the quality of implementation. The examples I have cited from the DBE demonstrate an unusual depth of engagement with how to take forward specific proposals from the NDP. Such examples are much less common than broader references to alignment of mandates. Yet, the broad framing can also matter. In particular, the presentation of the plan as an uncosted plan has enabled it to coexist with the approach taken by National Treasury and ensured that budget documents paid as much attention to the plan as planning documents did.

This paper provides some exploratory work on different ways of thinking about alignment and what it means for the resurgence of national development planning. It provides evidence that South Africa's NDP has attracted sustained interest within government, but that this has varied over time and between different areas of government activity. The paper has started to think about why this is the case. However, there is a need for further research. Future studies could go *deeper* to trace the signalling of the NDP through government planning and policies including at the subnational level; and also go *broader* to compare how the signalling effects of national development plans vary between countries. This could include comparing institutional arrangements where planning is done within the finance ministry with those where planning is located outside it, comparing countries with stronger or weaker finance ministries, or comparing countries that have recently (re)introduced national development planning with those where national development planning is more firmly established.

More broadly, this paper suggests there is value in looking at how plans are used in practice and that to do this we need to move away from viewing planning as a hierarchical compliance exercise or an exercise that is necessarily focused on introducing major policy changes. Looking at the signalling effects of national plans and the variation in how different departments respond to these effects provides scope to reflect on how governments actually approach alignment with national development plans. It also provides scope to inform our thinking about the relationship between planning and budgeting, and how the resurgence of national development planning may impact on the position of finance ministries.

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