Featured SET policy:

Building a capable and developmental state (Chapter 13, NDP)

In a series of articles, the NSTF is unpacking the National Development Plan (NDP). The focus is on understanding it from a science, engineering, technology (SET) perspective. The NDP is seen as a blueprint/guiding document for South Africa. The NDP aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030.

- The complete document – 'National Development Plan – vision for 2030'
- The executive summary – 'National Development Plan 2030, Our future – make it work, executive summary'.

NDP chapter: **Overview**

This considers the context and background of the NDP. See 1 – Understanding the context of the National Development Plan (NDP). It also sets the stage for understanding what makes a developmental state. See 2 – The National Development Plan and the developmental state. There is also a summary of the plan and key targets and actions.

NDP chapter 1**: Key drivers of change**

The synopsis is called 3 – Science and technology as drivers of development

NDP chapter 2: **Demographic trends**

The synopsis is called 4 – Demographic trends PLUS the NDP's 5th anniversary

NDP chapter 3: **Economy and employment**

The synopsis is called 5 – National system of innovation and R&D critical for growing the economy

| An economy that will create more jobs |

NDP chapter 4: **Economic infrastructure**

The synopsis is called 6 – Developing a strong network of economic infrastructure – transport, energy, water resources, and ICT

| Transition to a low-carbon economy |

NDP chapter 5: **Transition to a low carbon economy**

The synopsis is called 7 – Transitioning SA to a low carbon economy that responds to climate change

| An inclusive and integrated rural economy |

NDP chapter 6: **Inclusive rural economy**

The synopsis is called Section 8 of the NSTF series – An inclusive rural economy

NDP chapter 7: **Positioning South Africa in the world**

The synopsis is called Section 9 of the NSTF series – Positioning South Africa in the world (Chapter 7, NDP)

| Reversing the spatial effects of apartheid |

N DP chapter 8: **Transforming human settlements**

The synopsis is called Section 10 of the NSTF series – Transforming human settlements (Chapter 8, NDP)

| Improving the quality of education, training and innovation |

NDP chapter 9: **Improving education, innovation and training**

| Quality healthcare for all |

NDP chapter 10: **Promoting health**

| Social protection |

NDP chapter 11: **Social protection**

Chapter 13, National Development Plan – Building a capable and developmental state

Political rhetoric often uses the term: 'capable and developmental state'. What does this mean, particularly for the National Development Plan (NDP)?

'Developmental' refers to the state playing a transformative role when addressing poverty and inequality. "This requires well-run and effectively coordinated state institutions with skilled public servants who are committed to the public good and capable of delivering consistently high-quality services, while prioritising the nation's developmental objectives."

South Africa needs to be "a capable and developmental state: capable in that it has the capacity to formulate and implement policies that serve the national interest; developmental in that those policies focus on overcoming the root causes of poverty and inequality and building the state's capacity to fulfil this role".

The NDP notes that one of the main challenges to building a capable and developmental state is unevenness in capacity. This leads to uneven performance in local, provincial and national government. Weaknesses in capacity and performance are most serious in historically disadvantaged areas. Yet, this is where state intervention is most needed to improve people's quality of life.

Focusing on 'capable', the NDP notes there are fundamental priorities.
- Public service needs skills and professionalism – this includes offering stimulating career paths, ensuring a pipeline of potential talent is being developed, and training.
- Senior level reporting and recruitment shouldn't involve political interference.

To overcome South Africa's social and economic divides, the NDP makes clear that collaboration and coordination are essential. This applies across all spheres of government: local, provincial and national. Individual initiatives, a tendency to jump from one quick fix or trend to the next, and frequent changes have created instability in organisational structures and strained capacity.

The NDP makes the following recommendations to bring about a capable and developmental state:
- **Stabilise the political-administrative interface.** Build a professional public service that serves government but is sufficiently autonomous to be insulated from political interference. This involves a clearer separation between political principals and administrative heads.

- **Strengthen the role of the Public Service Commission (PSC).** Beyond upholding the principles of public administration, it should play a direct role in the recruitment of the most senior posts to ensure professionalism over political favour.

- **Create an administrative head of the public service** with responsibility for managing the career progression of department heads, including convening panels for recruitment, performance assessments, and disciplinary procedures.

- **Use a hybrid approach for top appointments that brings together administrative and political priorities.** The suggestion is that the administrative 'side' creates a shortlist of suitable candidates for senior posts, then the political 'side' selects a candidate.

- **Use a purely administrative approach for lower-level appointments**. Currently, the Public Service Act gives some HR functions with political principals.

- **Make the public service and local government administration careers of choice.** It's about building a skilled and professional public service, emphasising experience and expertise for senior levels, and developing skills and expertise at junior levels. A professional public service is one where people are recruited and promoted for merit and potential, rather than political connections. The NDP recommends: a formal graduate recruitment scheme, clear career paths, adequate experience as a prerequisite for senior posts, and continuing skills development.

- **Develop technical and specialist professional skills.** There is a shortage of professional skills in government, particularly at the local level. Municipalities require engineers to build, maintain, and operate infrastructure. Even when these functions are contracted out, municipalities need to have the technical expertise to manage contractors. Recommendations include: the state developing technical skills (eg apprenticeships, bursaries, graduate training schemes), mentoring, and clear career paths.

- **Strengthen delegation, accountability, and oversight.** Make it easier for citizens to hold public servants and politicians accountable, particularly for service delivery quality. Streamlined processes are needed, that maintain checks and balances and clarify accountability while making it easier to take decisions. Civil society can also play a role in scrutinising government data, while government encourages this by ensuring data is available in suitable formats (Open Data).

- **Improve interdepartmental coordination.** The challenge of improving coordination runs throughout all sections of government. Often, departments have competing objectives or duplicate roles, there are gaps where no department takes responsibility, or areas where departments could be more effective if they worked together. The NDP recommends prioritisation and hierarchy as part of the coordination framework.

- **Take a proactive approach to improving relations between national, provincial and local government.** South Africa's approach is to decentralise responsibility for implementation while maintaining national oversight and using centralised funding mechanisms to achieve redistribution. Recommendations include making roles clear – for municipalities, provinces, and national government.

- **Strengthen local government.** Develop an enabling framework for local government (eg could include operational guidelines for routine tasks) with active support and oversight from national and provincial government. This includes role clarity, and prioritising citizen participation.

- **Clarify the governance of SOEs.** The aim is for efficient, financially sound, and well-governed SOEs that address the country's developmental objectives in areas where no one else (government or private sector) is doing so. Recommendations include: clear mandates, clear and straightforward governance structures, and dealing with capacity constraints.