

Unrealised Spatial Governance: Diagnosing the Failure to Prioritise Spatial Planning in South Africa's Northern Cape Province

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the inability of the Northern Cape Provincial Government to prioritise and implement spatial planning. This is despite the enactment of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA, Act 16 of 2013). While this legislation formally recognises spatial development frameworks (SDFs), in particular provincial SDFs (PSDFs), as instruments for guiding land development and public investment, their influence on decision-making and governance is limited. The paper argues that this disconnect between planning law and practice in the province undermines spatial governance and the ability of statutory instruments to facilitate spatial transformation and sustainable development.

The study, using a governance-focused analytical framework, applies three research dimensions: (1) planning system quality (quality of processes and practices prescribed by planning law and theory); (2) plan quality (quality of processes of the spatial plan as primary instrument); and (3) organisational quality (internal governance arrangements and capacities for planning). The research uses a pragmatist methodology integrating document, survey and content analysis through a meta-governance lens supported by planning theory. The paper emphasises the PSDF as the province's primary statutory planning instrument. It notes that departments in the Northern Cape do not sufficiently recognise the PSDF as a statutory instrument, leading to misalignment of departmental strategies and budgets with this instrument. Evidence of 'meaningful participation' in the development or review of such statutory spatial plans is weak, undermining ownership and legitimacy of these instruments for intersectoral coordination, a function legally assigned by SPLUMA. The inability to prioritise spatial planning stems not from lack of policy, but from a broader governance breakdown. This is characterised by outdated legislation, unclear mandates and lack of political will to embed spatial planning in strategic governance. The paper critically analyses "unrealised spatial governance," where formal instruments exist but are not internalised in

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government decision-making.

The analysis highlights the limited scope of Section 4 of SPLUMA in delineating key components of an effective planning system. A central concern is the component of “Institutional Authority and Competences,” which has not been adequately addressed. The study reveals confusion and overlap between two key planning departments, both asserting authority over planning. This has led to gaps in accountability and ownership of the planning mandate.

The findings have broader implications for spatial governance in sub-national contexts, particularly in South Africa, where spatial justice and development equality remain key constitutional goals. The paper contributes to international debates within the FIG community on governance factors behind planning failure, especially in countries where planning instruments are legally mandated but poorly implemented. Another contribution is the study's engagement with meta-governance theory, specifically the concept of internal meta-governance. This refers to the state's capacity to steer and institutionalise planning functions using relevant planning instruments across government. The paper positions the Northern Cape Government as a meta-governor responsible for sectoral alignment and institutional accountability. However, the study finds that internal meta-governance is weakly manifested. This results in fragmented implementation, blurred mandates and diminished authority of spatial planning as public policy.

By identifying conditions contributing to planning neglect, the paper calls for a shift from compliance-oriented planning toward active institutionalisation of spatial instruments for addressing critical issues such as climate resilience, infrastructure coordination and equitable land development. These insights are especially relevant to Commission 8's focus on spatial governance as a mechanism linking land use, public investment and sustainable development.

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