POLICY BRIEF

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Translating lessons from international benchmarking and evidence synthesis

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Why trust in Government and other State Institutions

Trust in state institutions has become a focal point of social scientific enquiry internationally. The Covid-19 global pandemic has accelerated efforts to increase trust in order to strengthen state capacity, state-society relations and meaningful citizen engagement. Many governments are seeking to influence citizen trust positively, due to the recognition of the centrality of the state in socio-economic development. Governments have been alerted to dwindling trends on trust in government figures and the increasing lack of confidence in state institutions across many contexts.

While international comparisons facilitate learning and benchmarking, national programmes of action are needed to build, earn and sustain high levels of trust. The South African Government has taken heed of this call to action, especially at the critical juncture as the country emerges from successive waves of the Covid-19 health crisis. The urgency to address citizen trust in state institutions and social cohesion is further demonstrated by the recent outbreak of civil unrest in the country.

An international benchmarking and evidence synthesis study was concluded in June 2020, bringing together various sources of evidence in a collaborative manner to inform strategic interventions. Evidence generated by the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) concur with international trends and conclude that trust in government has been falling over the years.

Competence of government to deliver services at the level, quality and timely expectation of citizens is the foundation of a capable state. Together with intentions of government to be accountable, transparent and to implement public policy with integrity, fairness and commitment towards developmental outcomes, have the combined influence of strengthening trust among citizens and by citizens on institutions. Trust is thus both a process as well as an outcome of government performance.

Trust as a construct for planning

Evidence point to three dimensions of trust, organized in the DPME study **as cultural, social and institutional trust**, with various synonyms to describe them. These dimensions helped to construct a theoretical framework for the study on trust, which strengthens conceptual and analytical underpinnings when contextualizing trust. In order for a political system to function, it needs legitimacy through public support of the structures, processes and systems of state institutions, where the public is supportive of the regime and confident in the institutions.

Two perspectives arise out of these three dimensions. One is that trust is formed as an enduring, psychological trait early in the lifespan of an individual, based on cultural values. The other dimension is the experiential and socialization process of gaining trust that can be influenced through horizontal relations between citizens (interpersonal trust), and vertical relations between citizens and the state (institutional trust). Broadly, the dimensions revolve around 'relational' and 'situational' aspects of trust, where the former is generalized and non-specific at an interpersonal level, while the latter involves confidence in institutions for specific purposes.

Theorization on public trust is growing, with widespread support from social scientists and philosophers on the value of trust by citizens in the political system. Since public space is highly contestable, it is important how we approach judgements of trust; the place of distrust; as well as the relationship of social trust to institutional trust and distrust. The symbolic value of trust is a valuable resource for a stable and flourishing democratic polity and the emergence of civil society, based on mutual respect and commitment in political relationships. Instrumental value of trust links citizens to daily public life, especially where citizens are dependent on public goods and services, and it adds public value through the facilitation of commerce at local levels, healthy politics and social harmony within democratically established rules.

An international scan of evidence on the two core drivers of trust, was synthesised for government according to 'competence' (ability to deliver quality services to citizens) and 'intentions' (principles that inform and guide government action). These drivers and related factors (individual and societal) demonstrate the complexity of the reciprocal nature of trust: its influence on development outcomes and in turn being influenced by performance of the state. The core drivers are synergistic with the governance agenda in international development.

Lessons from international benchmarking on trust

Social ties and sense of community are prerequisites for social and institutional trust

Values link citizens to daily public life, strengthen social cohesion and give a sense of community. Social ties and sense of community promote civic activity, increase voluntary compliance to democratic rules and promote better functioning governments.

Social trust is a resource for participatory democracy and can be built by actions of government

Benefits of trust are evident for all citizens, but especially for those in conditions of adversity, including ill-health, unemployment, low income, discrimination, and an unsafe environment. Action of government in the protection of citizens and the promotion of a developmental agenda has the effect of building social trust by virtue of its interventions. International comparisons demonstrate that institutional trust has a causal impact on social trust.

Transparency, fairness and accountability reduce political tensions and distrust

Openness in communication linked to access to information, effective governance and rules of engagement are the values of a transparent and open government. How citizens experience fair treatment by government leads to acceptance of decisions and better compliance to rules and regulations. Ensuring accountability by government to citizens has the effect of reducing political tensions and distrust.

Competence and values of government in implementing policies and the provision of quality public services influence institutional trust

Evidence point to citizens trusting public services more than they trust government as an institution. This is especially the case when there is a dependency on public goods and services for wellbeing. Quality of public services leads to more satisfied users, which in turn increases trust in government. High quality public institutions influence the achievement of economic growth and the management of inequality.

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> *Seeing **trust in action**, has been found to lead to post-disaster increases in trust, especially where government responses are considered to be sufficiently timely and effective.*
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> *- World Happiness Report, 2020*
> "

Effective analysis of trust depends on a combination of subjective, objective and experimental data

Robust tracking and analysis of trust as both a process and an outcome of government interventions, depend on sustained measures in the generation of data on trust in a reliable and appropriate manner for effective trends over time. Survey coverage is often uneven across countries, within countries and over time.

Key trust outcomes in the South African context

1 **Government compared with other public institutions**

According to the SA Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) survey results of 2017 and 2019, trust in state institutions (Government, Parliament, Legal System, SARS, SAPS, Constitutional Court, Hawks, NPA) remained below 50% with only the SABC increasing from 51% to 58% confidence during that period. Within government, confidence in local government (34%) was lower than trust in provincial (36%) and national (42%) in 2019. A longer-term trend for trust in government from 2003-2018 is provided by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) through the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), which show strong validation that

trust in national government has remained higher than provincial and local government in South Africa (although consistently low trust government overall). This trend differs from the international experience where trust at local levels was found to be higher.

2 Inequality

Tracking Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates against levels of trust in South Africa presents a picture that is steeped in historical, political and socio-economic challenges influencing trust outcomes. In the period 2006-2008 (just prior to the economic meltdown), there were high levels of trust when GDP growth was above 5%. The period from 2011 to 2018 presents a tumultuous picture with trust fluctuating from more than 60% in 2010/11 (GDP above 3%) to below 20% in 2014 (GDP at 2.3%) and trust being lowest in 2018 when GDP fell under 1%. SA's GDP per capita, as a measure of inequality, had periodic accelerations and decelerations lasting over a decade or more, requiring deeper analysis for understanding the fluctuating trust levels.

3 Corruption

Rising levels of corruption perceptions in South Africa have a reverse association (negative correlation) with levels of trust. According to the SA Institute of Race Relations and Corruption Watch, in a 2018 and 2019 survey, national- and local governments have the highest incidence of reported cases of corruption, although the private sector has shown the sharpest increase over the two years.

4 Social cohesion, race relations and active citizenry

Social cohesion in South Africa has been intensely researched by various scholars, with definitions provided, measures introduced (e.g. the 'social cohesion barometer' by HSRC) and evaluations undertaken in the lived experience of South African citizens. The latest measures by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) show that 32% of South Africans in the 2019 round of the SARB report little or no trust in people from other racial groups other than their own. In addition, 52% have noted that inequality has been the most divisive feature of society since 2006. Confidence in government to address social disparities has consequently been on a downward trend. The 2021 Indlulamithi Barometer, which measures key driving forces towards three scenarios in understanding what a socially cohesive South Africa will look like, reported that South Africa has already been trending towards the 'Gwara Gwara' scenario (defined as a demoralized land of disorder and decay) since 2017. Between 2020 and 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this trend has been deepening.

Trust indicators used by GCIS/IPSOS are aligned to international surveys when citizens report on confidence in the future and whether they are happy with the direction the country is taking. Similarly, HSRC's perception and attitudinal data related to trust and social cohesion also show worrying trends in this regard. Overall, there is a clear association between trust and social cohesion as derived by those agencies generating data related to trust in South Africa. While pride in being South African remains high, including confidence in a happy future for all races, race relations is more closely linked to trust. Social trust has been understood as necessary for the emergence of civil society and essential for the development of participatory democracy. When citizens observe how fellow citizens are treated, what opportunities are made available and what rights are enjoyed, social trust is either facilitated/inhibited and becomes instrumental for those who depend on public goods and services. Low levels of participation in community activities (beyond voting in the election), provide further evidence to explore citizen engagement, its influence on social trust, and its impact on active citizenry.

5 Violence

Research on violence in South Africa by the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) found that socioeconomic inequality, frustrated masculinity, and lack of social cohesion intercept to drive violence, specifically gender-based violence. At an individual and social level, the experience of injustice, spatial inequalities, unfair treatment, lack of opportunities and competition for scarce resources, are conditions that lead to violence. Violence is a key feature of protests by citizens at local government level, where such protests have become the dominant form of expression for dis-satisfaction in government service delivery. Explicit links have been made with the lack of trust by communities on the decision-making processes followed by their local municipalities. Citizens could be more accepting of unfavorable outcomes, if they perceived the processes to be fair and their treatment as respectful and dignifying. While international trends point to high levels of trust at the point of service delivery, the South African situation is different where trust is higher for other state institutions and for national government. The HSRC has been tracking violence against foreign nationals which has further eroded interpersonal trust and cohesiveness within communities in South Africa and is an ongoing threat to economic and political stability.

6 Crime

Crime has been reported to influence interpersonal trust negatively with further lack of confidence in services if citizens find that they are not protected by the law and lack confidence in the police. The percentage of households who were satisfied with the police services in their area decreased from 57,3% in 2016/17 to 54,2% in 2017/18. The percentage of households who were satisfied with the way courts deal with perpetrators was already low (44,9%) yet decreased further to 41,1% in 2017/18. Satisfaction with the police declined in every province except the Western Cape and Free State, while satisfaction with the courts declined in every province except the North West. While this data measures levels of satisfaction with service delivery, crime statistics remain high for South African year on year. The Covid-19 pandemic did not lead to reduced crimes under lockdown regulations, with sexual offences and domestic violence causing
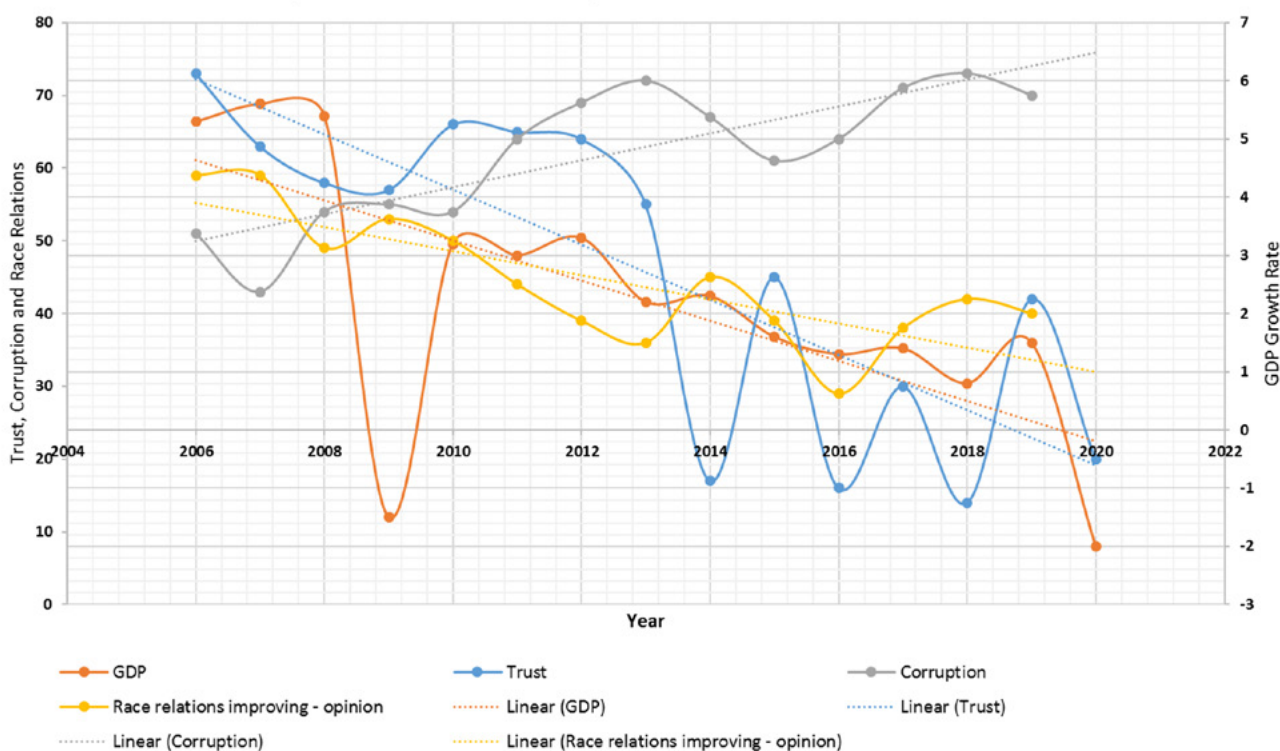

7 Media and the Covid-19 pandemic

The sensitivity of trust to events and responses by government is demonstrated by the findings from Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), which reveal how important it is for government to communicate openly, timeously and in an accountable manner. Higher levels of trust have been reported in sources of information from health experts, government and the World Health Organisation, with less trust in information coming from journalists and business.

Relationship between Trust, GDP, Corruption and Views on Race Relations in South Africa

Legend:
- GDP
- Trust
- Corruption
- Race relations improving - opinion
- Linear (GDP)
- Linear (Trust)
- Linear (Corruption)
- Linear (Race relations improving - opinion)

When comparing trends on trust levels with key factors of corruption perceptions and GDP growth, there are very clear correlations. Rising levels of corruption perceptions are associated with lower GDP growth levels and lower levels of trust (refer to the figure above). While a causal path is difficult to determine without measuring the same trends over time and controlling for other variables, this pattern is aligned with international experiences, albeit under different contextual realities.

Recommendations

Build consensus on strategic and operational understanding of trust in South Africa

Despite increasing attention on the drivers of and factors impacting on trust, it continues to be defined and used in various ways to meet country-specific realities. There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes trust in government and other state institutions, although there is an understanding (and acceptance) that it is correlated with measures of good performance. The starting point is identifying key considerations in the strategic value of trust and building consensus on an operational understanding/ definition of trust in government.

Develop pathways to influence social and institutional trust

The Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF: 2019-2024) provides a high-level narrative for seven priorities of national government. The first priority is the primary enabler with three characteristics of the state: capable; ethical and developmental.

In that priority, trust in government is put as a key impact indicator, which served as a trigger for this research. The study outlines preliminary pathways of change for government to consider, where trust is earned (invested in), built (sustained) and influenced (driven) positively through these three characteristics of the State:

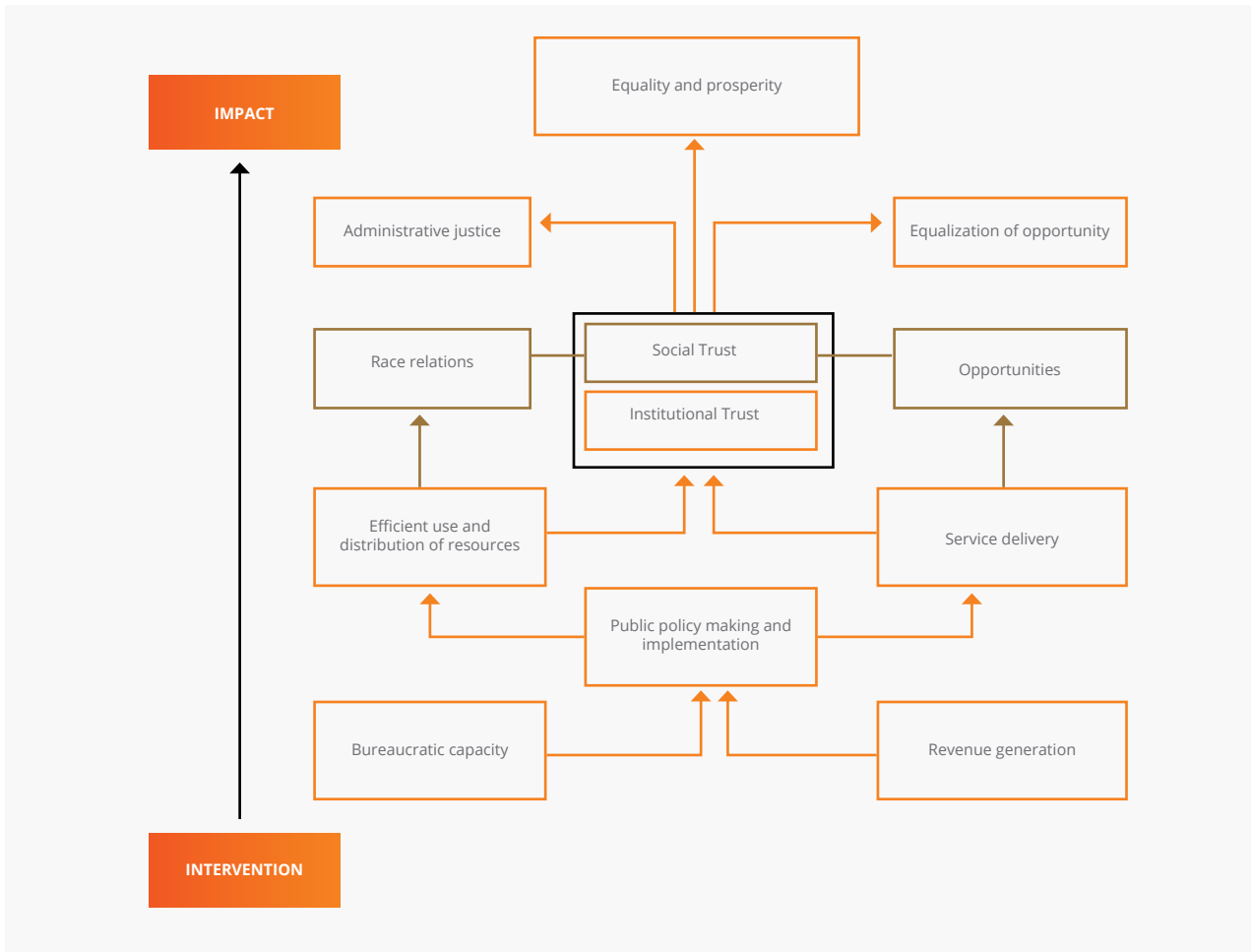| Capable State	Ethical State	Developmental State

Within a strategic and 'results-based' approach, a Theory of Change (ToC) takes into consideration multiple pathways to bring about change. Each of the three characteristics of the state guide the understanding of these pathways, thereby illustrating this complex terrain and the need for wider collaboration. The current MTSF puts focus on trust and 'participatory mechanisms' for strengthening the social compact. Where income disparity is the key driver of inequality in South Africa, trust may not be gained by ensuring good governance alone. High levels of corruption as the key driver of distrust, have a direct effect on institutional trust as well as horizontal social relations between citizens. Bearing in mind considerations and assumptions related to development and societal progress, an evidence-informed approach is used to initiate dialogue on three proposed pathways for change using trust (social and institutional) as the core unit of analysis.

If trust is to be built as a strategic resource, there are multiple entry points and actions on what government should do to ensure that trust is sustained at high levels. These proposed pathways enable debate and discussion with stakeholders and citizens to agree on and implement strategic priority interventions. If trust is both a process (relational) and an outcome (judgement on the performance of government), then it encompasses the 'whole of government' and all seven developmental priorities of the MTSF 2019-2024 to contribute to trust indicators. This requires the Center of Government to effectively measure, track and timeously evaluate trust across all seven priorities to disrupt negative trends and path dependencies, which lead to distrust over time.
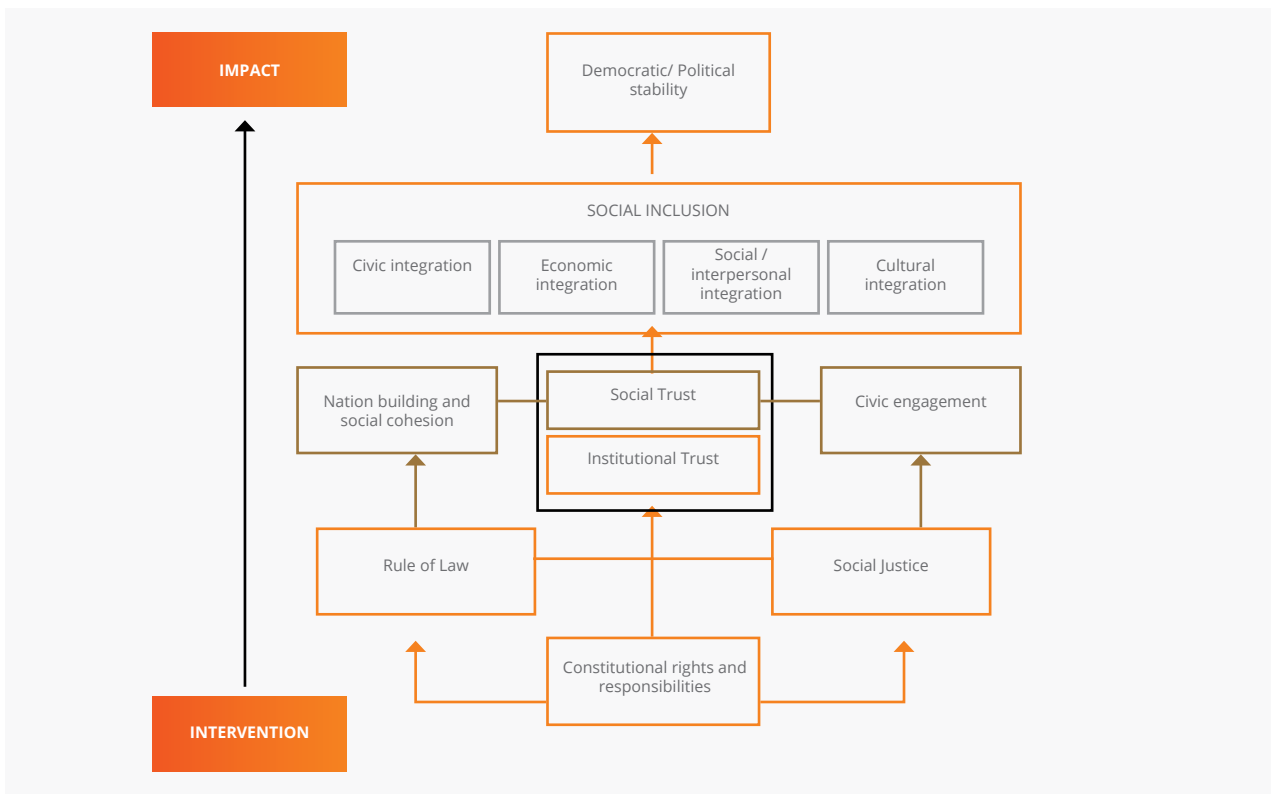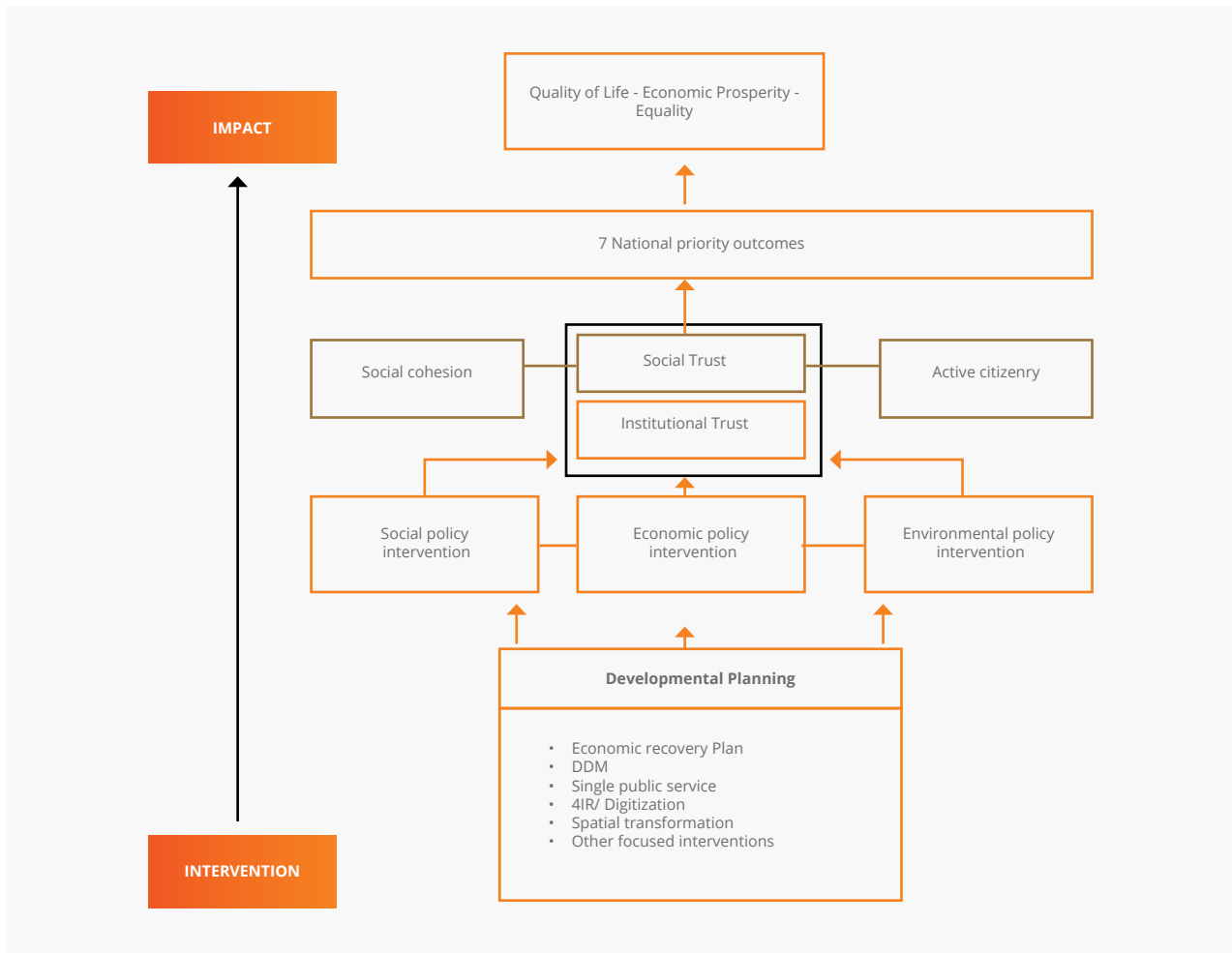
Proposed pathway of change through a capable state

IMPACT

Equality and prosperity

Administrative justice

Equalization of opportunity

Race relations

Social Trust

Institutional Trust

Opportunities

Efficient use and distribution of resources

Service delivery

Public policy making and implementation

Bureaucratic capacity

Revenue generation

INTERVENTION

Proposed pathway of change through an ethical state

IMPACT

Democratic/ Political stability

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Civic integration

Economic integration

Social / interpersonal integration

Cultural integration

Nation building and social cohesion

Social Trust

Institutional Trust

Civic engagement

Rule of Law

Social Justice

Constitutional rights and responsibilities

INTERVENTION

Proposed pathway of change through a developmental state

Strengthen data policy landscape for effective use of trust measures over the medium term

Evidence point to trust being measured in three ways and coincides with the way factors influencing trust have been categorized in the study:

I.   Subjective: Direct measures through perception surveys and composite indices.
II. Objective: Indirect measures through objective data used as proxies and observations of citizens.
III. Experimental: Through impact evaluation designs and behavioural science.

Within South Africa, there are many sources of data on trust, with several agencies dedicated to tracking and monitoring trust indicators with varying frequencies. These range from state agencies (GCIS; Statistics SA; Brand SA), academia (HSRC; universities), research institutes (IJR; SAIRR; CSVR), and a wide range of international agencies. Since each have different methods in their data collection on trust, a comprehensive summary of these different sources and variables on trust have

been documented for further interrogation and alignment to enable robust analysis.

Decision makers need to know what variables exist and how these can be used effectively to inform the narrative as well as analysis along the pathways of change. The challenges of coordination, silos, paywalls and lack of institutional arrangements between different organizations present a disabler in producing consistent data sources, uptake and use of relevant trust data. Trust by citizens will differ between those who depend mostly on government support (poor and vulnerable) from those who do not (affluent). Government engages with organized labour, business, civil society and the private sector to strengthen the social compact, yet trust is measured using subjective surveys at an individual/citizen level. Ideally, each sector providing services is recommended to have an indicator of trust to measure citizen levels of confidence and satisfaction. Finally, there must be consistency in the availability of data for adequate baselines and effective monitoring.

Towards a programmatic response to building trust over the long term

The international benchmarking and evidence synthesis exercise has produced key factors that impact on trust relating to the subjective level (experience; discrimination; violations; inequality; crime and violence; diversity; and war) and societal/objective level (demographics; economic development/wealth; information access; regime type; state capacity). In South Africa, evidence point to a strong relationship between low levels of trust (trend towards distrust), inequality, racial tensions, and high levels of corruption. Insights gained from the international benchmarking exercise show that social and institutional trust have a causal relationship. These informed the proposed pathways to change using the three characteristics of the state – capable, ethical, and developmental. Trust, being both a process (relational) and an outcome (situational) variable, is difficult to measure as a single indicator since it is sensitive to time and circumstances. Investment in consistent and continuous measures over time will yield more accurate information for government to assess its own performance and change course where necessary. Designing a programmatic response for building trust in the South African Government

is highly recommended for long term stability. It is hoped that the scoping exercise, international benchmarking and application of lessons on trust in government will inform debates, deepen discussions and lead to constructive dialogue within government and beyond, in a move towards achieving the desired developmental outcomes and impact over the medium- and long term.

Methods note

This research project adopted primarily a desktop review using secondary data in responding to the brief received. A scoping of the existing literature and evidence on trust in government was carried out to derive the conceptual underpinnings of trust. Several country cases were sourced where trust measures are used to assess government performance. The national context was then analysed for trust in the South African Government, drawing from the lessons and insights of international comparisons. The comprehensive reference list of studies that were analysed is contained in the main research report upon which this policy brief is based.

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There is no conflict of interest. The full report can be accessed from the link below:
https://www.dpme.gov.za/publications/research/Documents/Trust%20in%20Government_Final_15%2007%202021_v2.pdf