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1. Background

A Standard Operating procedure (SOP) is a set of written instructions that document a routine or recurring activity followed by an organisation. The development and use of SOPs are a fundamental part of a successful quality system as it makes available information to employees to perform a job effectively and efficiently. A SOP facilitates consistency in the quality and integrity of an end product or end result.

Clear and effective SOPs are essential in the development and deployment of any solution. The Service Delivery Organization Transformation (SDOT) framework was developed to provide direction and guidance on the development, implementation, monitoring, report and feedback on the SDOT interventions in the public service. Fundamentals in this regard include among others; the macro-organisation of the public service, service delivery mechanisms, norms and standards to access quality services for all, enhanced citizen engagement and participation and the promotion of innovative learning and knowledge management.

One of the key principles underpinning SDOT framework is promoting the agenda of a developmental state by institutionalizing quality service through effective and efficient SDOT mechanism. Central to this is the development of the service delivery planning and implementation value chain that include framework and toolkit stipulating the minimum required norms and standards for business process mapping, review and management, standard operating procedures, setting of service standards. The development of a framework and methodology for developing effective SOPs were finalised in March 2011 as a result of a need for consistency and a set standard.

2. Why the toolkit

The toolkit is intended to assist Departments in developing and implementing and maintaining SOPs. Every Department needs to prepare a comprehensive set of SOPs to provide structure to important administrative functions. Each Department will need to tailor information to their unique needs and preferences. The toolkit on SOP will serve as an important guide to assist Departments to improve communication. SOPs help integrate departmental operations, linking the work of managers and planners with the activities of other workers. SOPs act as effective communication tools that contribute to worker understanding and job satisfaction. Standard operating procedures include steps that outline when and how information should flow between departments. The SOP development process, while demanding, can provide significant performance improvements. When properly and fully carried out, the development process brings workers, managers, and advisers together in a collaborative way. As a result, everyone focuses their abilities on doing the best job possible with the department’s resources. The knowledge of SOPs will make departments understand processes in order to improve efficacy in achieving government’s outcomes.
3. **Benefits of SOPS**

The development and use of SOPs minimizes variation and promotes quality through the consistent implementation of a process or procedure within a department. The benefits of SOPs are outlined as follows:

- **Standardisation of activities** – SOPs identify planned and agreed upon roles and actions. This information helps standardize activities and promote co-ordination and communication among personnel. SOPs thus help to assure the quality and consistency of a service;
- **Explanation of performance expectations** – SOPs describe and document what is expected of personnel in the performance of their official duties. As such they provide a benchmark for personnel, an objective mechanism for evaluating operational performance, and a tool for promoting a positive organisational culture. It ensures that good practice is achieved at all times;
- **Training and reference document** – Written SOPs can provide a framework for training programmes and briefings. These activities in turn improve the understanding of work requirements and helps identify potential problems. A comprehensive SOP manual also serves as a reference document for personnel and SOPs provide a contribution to the audit process.

4. **Definition of SOPS**

A SOP is a specific procedure or set of procedures established to be followed in carrying out a given operation or in a given situation to enhance quality through following a standardized work procedure. SOPs are part of a continuous improvement strategy which should be continuously reviewed and revised as services become more efficient.

5. **Approaches to SOPs**

SOPs should be written in a concise step by step easy to read format. The information provided should be unambiguous and not overly complicated. The active voice and present verb should be used. Using the active voice is preferred as it results in fewer words, it is more engaging to readers, and it comes across as direct and concise. The document should not be wordy, redundant or overly lengthy. Keep it simple and short. Information should be conveyed clearly and explicitly to remove any doubts as to what is required.

The organisation should have a procedure in place for determining what procedures or processes need to be documented.

Several categories and types of SOPs can be distinguished. A number of important SOP types are:

- **Fundamental SOPs** – These give instructions how to make SOPs of the other categories.
- **Methodic SOPs** – These describe a complete testing system or method of investigation
- **SOPs for safety procedures**
SOPs for operating instruments and other equipment
SOPs for analytical methods
SOPs for the preparations of reagents
SOPs for receiving and registration of samples
SOPs for Quality Assurance
SOPs for Archiving and how to deal with Complains

The initiative and further procedure for the preparation, implementation and management of documents is a procedure in itself which should be described. These SOPs should at least mention:

- Who can and who should make which type of SOP
- To whom the proposal for a SOP should be submitted and who adjudges the draft
- The procedure of approval
- Who decided on the date of implementation and who should be informed.
- How revisions can be made or how a SOP can be withdrawn.

6. Step by Step Guidance

There are four main steps in developing a SOP:

Step 1: Determine Objective of SOP

The author of a SOP should be very clear on its objectives while writing it. They can be broadly described as follows:

- Define the expected results of implementation, regulatory or organisational;
- Understand why a SOP is needed and who will use it and how will it be used;
- Determine the SOP needs and assign local responsibility for management and review;
- Distinguish between SOPs, guidelines, policy statements and work instructions and learn how each may work for area of responsibility in a concerted, integrated way;
- Implement appropriate SOP training programmes; and
- Implement review and control system.

Step 2: Appoint a SOP Writer/Group

The development of a SOP should be overseen by the manager responsible for the management of the daily operations. This manager will be ultimately accountable for the SOP. The name of the manager under whose authority the SOP was prepared should be clearly specified. It is good practice to involve all staff
involved in the dispensing process in preparation of the SOP. This will help to engage staff and ensure that procedures specified are followed.

The SOP should be written by individuals knowledgeable with the activity and the organisation’s internal structure. These individuals are essential subject-matter experts who actually perform the work or use the process. A team approach can be followed, especially for multi-tasked processes where the experiences of a number of individuals are critical, which also promotes buy-in from potential users of the SOP.

The SOP must convey a clear instruction. Not only must the user understand the instruction, he/she must also be able to carry it out. The logical step is to let the user, as far as possible, write a draft of the SOP, in co-operation with his/her manager. The user author practice prevents the working procedure appearing to the reader unfamiliar or awkward. It is much likely that the user-author practice will result in an improved sense of responsibility for the obligation to use and comply with the SOP.

**Step 3: Produce a SOP**

Producing a complete set of SOPs for a Department can be a time consuming process. SOPs are produced for core practices and when it is necessary to communicate and/or standardize administrative or technical tasks. SOPS should as a minimum requirement cover:

- A descriptive title and indication of the SOP’s position in the total collection of documentation;
- Scope including functions performed, types of products to be used;
- Chart of the procedure followed;
- Date when the SOP became operative;
- Periodicity of the review;
- The signature and name of the person authorising the SOP;
- Distribution list and filing requirements SOP; and
- Training on SOPs.

**Name the SOP**

A title should contain sufficient information about the content of the SOP and be placed prominently on the front page, to allow the user to identify and find it easily. The SOP should be names using descriptive action words. The name should clearly identify the activity or procedure

**Determine the scope of SOP**

The scope of the SOP should clearly outline the areas of work to be covered by the procedure. The scope includes functions performed, equipment necessary and the type of products to be used. Clearly State the range of activities the SOP applies to, as well as any limitations or exceptions.
Chart the procedure

Charting is the procedure of laying out all the steps and analyzing the process with the goal of making it more efficient and easier to follow. It involves taking each step in the process and placing it into a process chart. All people involved in performing relevant tasks should participate in the charting process, following free, exhaustive and open discussions.

Date when the SOP became operative

SOPs should be clearly marked with the date of preparation and operation and/or date of review/amendment. They should be kept up to date and relevant at all times.

Periodicity of the review

SOPs need to remain current to be useful. Therefore whenever procedures are changed, SOPs should be updated and re-approved. If desired, modify only pertinent section of a SOP and indicate the change date/revision number for that section.

SOPs should be regularly reviewed to allow for changes in practice or circumstances such as legislative changes or changes in staff. SOPs should be systematically reviewed on a periodic basis e.g. 1-2 years to ensure that policies and procedures remain current and appropriate, or to determine whether the SOPs are even needed. The review date should be added to each SOP that has been reviewed. If a SOP describes a process that is no longer followed, it should be withdrawn.

The review process should not be overly cumbersome to encourage timely review. The frequency of review should be indicated by management in the Department’s SOP guide document.

When changes are made in facilities, equipment, operations or personnel, the SOP may need to be updated to take into account these changes. It is incumbent on the Department to routinely evaluate the effectiveness of its SOPs and proceed to appropriate changes accordingly. Setting up a regular timetable for reviewing SOPs is strongly advised.

Further, SOPs should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that they encourage efficient work practice, that comply with the ever increasing requirements, improvements and government’s regulatory framework changes. If no changes are necessary this decision should also be recorded and reflected in the number of the SOP version.
The signature and name of the person authorising the SOP

No SOP is a SOP unless it is properly authorized. With authorisation concurrence for implementation of an appropriate method for a given procedure, standardize performance of a particular activity and communicating the SOP to all involved is revealed.

The signature of the person responsible for writing the SOP shows that the SOP is complete and correct. Should an auditor or anyone else have a query about the content of the SOP, this would be the person to contact. The signature of the relevant authority in the Department responsible for authorising the SOP shows that the SOP is operative.

**Step 4: Distribute and File SOP**

The distribution list directs the SOPs to persons, which will use it. It should be distributed to all related persons of its function. A strict check should be kept for numbers of SOPs issued and distributed at each working area.

The Department should maintain a master list of all SOPs. This file or database should indicate the SOP number, version number, date of issuance, title, author, status, organisational division, branch, section and any historical information regarding past versions.

The historical or expired SOPs, whose new version have been issued, should be properly filed. This is kept in a designated file under the responsibility of the manager. All copies of expired SOPs must be destroyed immediately after the new version comes into effect. This is to reduce the confusion for the employees working on the floor by existence of two different methods floating simultaneously.
STEP DETERMINE OBJECTIVE OF SOP
- Objectives should be clearly defined

STEP TWO: APPOINT A SOP WRITER/GROUP
- Development should be overseen by a manager
- Should be written by individuals knowledgeable with the activity and the organisation’s internal structure
- A team approach can be followed

STEP THREE: PRODUCE THE SOP
- Name the SOP
- Determine scope of SOP
- Chart the procedure
- Review Periodicity
- Authorisation of SOP

STEP FOUR: DISTRIBUTE AND FILE SOP
- To be distributed to relevant stakeholders
- Create and maintain a master list of SOPs
- Proper filing and archival of SOPs
8. Training on SOPs

SOPs are training tools. At the first level this is associated with understanding the way of implementing certain tasks, while at a second level is a reference for knowledge updating, as it may be needed.

Training on SOPs if often neglected. It is frequently the case that employees do not receive adequate training on SOPs implementation. The purpose of the SOP thus remains unfulfilled.

The relevant manager should see that there is continuous training of personnel on SOPs. The training should be properly documented. Generally, the effective date for SOP training must be 2-3 days after it is authorized. This is to give sufficient time for staff to read and understand the SOP before it is actually implemented in the system.

Formal and continuous training sessions should be delivered by the relevant manager. Thus awareness amongst staff will increase and, also, it will contribute to the continuous review for improving the SOP.

9. Non-Conformance

If deviation from implementation of a SOP occurs, this can be either the result of unacceptable implementation by the responsible employees or it might be the SOP itself that is at fault. Perhaps the use found a much superior way of doing the job, from the one described in the SOP. If the cause lies with the SOP, this is the signal that the SOP is to be updated since continuous deviation in implementation is not acceptable.

There may be exceptional cases where it is necessary or appropriate to work outside a SOP, e.g. in the event of a computer breakdown. In these situations the professional judgment of the manager in charge must remain paramount.

It is good practice to record incidences of non-conformance with SOPs. In some cases it may be possible to anticipate situations where changed circumstances will apply. These should be reflected within the SOPs.

10. Conclusion

The introduction of SOPs for government has many benefits. The preparation of SOPS requires managers to document what they already do. This makes it easier to analyse current ways of working and decide whether better use can be made of support staff. SOPs provide an opportunity to demonstrate professionalism, accountability and responsibility and can go a long way in tackling service delivery and governance issues within Government.
## Standard Operational Procedure Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY SOP ELEMENT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intent:</td>
<td>An anticipated outcome (planned and desired action).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope:</td>
<td>The work that needs to be accomplished to deliver the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives:</td>
<td>Statements of specific outcomes to be achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition:</td>
<td>A passage that explains the meaning of a term, a word, phrases or other set of symbols.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms:</td>
<td>Formed from the initial components in a phrase or name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles:</td>
<td>Fundamental norms or values that represent what is desirable and positive for an individual, group, and Organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility:</td>
<td>Duty that is delegated formally to be performed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability:</td>
<td>Obligation of an individual or Organisation to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority:</td>
<td>An institutionalised and legal power inherent in a particular job, function, or position that is meant to enable its holder to successfully carry out his or her responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicators:</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicators are quantifiable measurements, agreed to beforehand, that reflect the critical success factors of the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annexure:</td>
<td>Something added at the end, esp. an appendix or supplementary document.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SOP Formats and Templates

There is no standard operating procedure format. In fact, one standard operating procedure format is often as good as another. However, the way in which SOPs are managed is critical for both quality and compliance success. Today, especially, SOPs can be difficult to manage. Demands for speedier processes make it hard to keep up with SOP changes, implications and SOP-related training.

Each SOP template should feature:

- The name of the organization
- The title of the SOP
- The purpose of the SOP
- The authorization
- Version number
- References
- Clear instructions
- A link to the process referenced
- The date of implementation or the effective date
- Page number
- Rationale
- An identifying number
**EXAMPLE 1**

**STANDARD OPERATIONAL PROCEDURE (SOP):**

**Name of service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOP Group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline</td>
<td>Procedure</td>
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</table>

**Relevant Legislation, policies, Documents/Manuals/Handbooks Systems**

**SOP Reference and Version No:**

**Certification of Due process:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Delegated Authority</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**Approval Date**

**Commencement Date**

**Review Date**

**REVISION HISTORY:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Revision Ref No.</th>
<th>Approved/ Rescinded</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Resolution Number or Minutes Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.0 Intent:

2.0 Scope:

3.0 Objective(s):

4.0 Definitions and Acronyms:

5.0 Principles:

6.0 Responsibility:

7.0 Accountability and Authority:

8.0 Who was consulted regarding this SOP:

9.0 Who should know this SOP:

10.0 SOP Implementation Plan:

11.0 Resources required:

12.0 Answers to FAQ:

13.0 Performance Indicator(s):

14.0 Annexure(s):
This document provides guidance for writing a standard operating procedure (SOP). These guidelines detail the type of information to be included within each particular SOP section, along with writing dos and don’ts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of SOP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOP Number:</td>
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</table>

**Purpose**
Explain the objective the SOP is intended to achieve.

**Scope**
State the range of activities the SOP applies to, as well as any limitations or exceptions.

**Responsibility**
State the personnel, departments, groups, contractors, and/or subcontractors responsible for complying with the SOP.
State the person or group responsible for assuring the appropriate personnel are trained on the SOP.

**Procedure**
Explain the procedure in simple steps. Describe what to do, not how to do it.
State who does each step and how it is recorded to be certain that whoever is performing the procedure can prove that they have done it. Think about what is needed before the procedure is started so that the person performing the function can do it correctly the first time.

**Review and Revision**
State how often the SOP is reviewed and/or under what circumstances it is to be revised.

**Contingencies**
State what happens if the SOP cannot be followed. Identify who needs to be notified.

**References**
List related SOPs, any supporting documentation necessary to understand and correctly follow the procedure, and any applicable regulations and regulatory guidelines.

**Definitions**
Define words and acronyms that people reading the SOP would not generally know and that would require clarification. If a definition is needed, and one exists in the regulations, use the regulation definition.

**Attachments**
Attach any documents used in support of the SOP, e.g., flowcharts, work instructions.

**History of Change**
State in sufficient detail, what changes were made, what parts of the SOP were affected and when the changes become effective.