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Negotiating through complexity and uncertainty to transform South Africa using ICT

*How do we continue to transform government services using ICT and enable citizens to actively participate in the information society in the midst of complexity and uncertainty?*

Thabo Molefe, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the National Electronic and Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA) pondered on the dynamics of managing a government agency in conditions of uncertainty. Just five years prior, a government flagship project had successfully managed to convince the South African government of the need to e-Skill South Africa as a means of stimulating the creative and innovative use of ICT in government, among citizens, communities, and organisations so they can favourably participate in the information society. The agenda flagship project had managed to put in place a number of collaborative partnerships with South African Universities, the business sector, leading technology firms, civil society and other government bodies to participate in the e-Skills initiative.

The success of the flagship initiative meant that to grow, it needed to become a legitimate government agency. The initiative was as such amalgamated in principle with two other government institutions; NEMISA and the Institute of Satellite and Software Applications (ISSA) to become the iKamva National e-Skills Institute (iNESI). However, the red-tape of amalgamating government agencies had now been dragging for a little more than a year and is yet to be confirmed by national parliament. The red-tape involved fierce competition from a number of government departments over where the new agency should reside strategically. Some suggestions went as far as proposing that such an agency should not even exist as it could comfortably be placed within other government telecommunications agencies or even within Universities. Each of the voices was backed by strong political positions.

NEMISA, was initially a government agency that focused on emancipating girls from rural communities by skilling them in multimedia and broadcasting skills in order for them to be employed. The number of students had since been dropping over the years, and the agency needed something new, a fresh and innovative spring. The amalgamation into iNESI provided that much needed injection. But the injection came with new challenges and opportunities; navigating political terrain, taking on a completely new focus and vision, and becoming a central coordination agency for Universities which pride themselves in being the custodians of knowledge.

In the above complexity and uncertainty, Thabo had some critical questions and decisions to consider:

1. How do we recreate ourselves into a coordinating role?
2. What is the most strategic option for us as an agency?
3. How do we negotiate and influence strong political heavy weights into the best strategy?
4. What is that best strategy anyway?