

Reflections on local government

CREATING A MORE VIABLE AND RELEVANT VISION FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

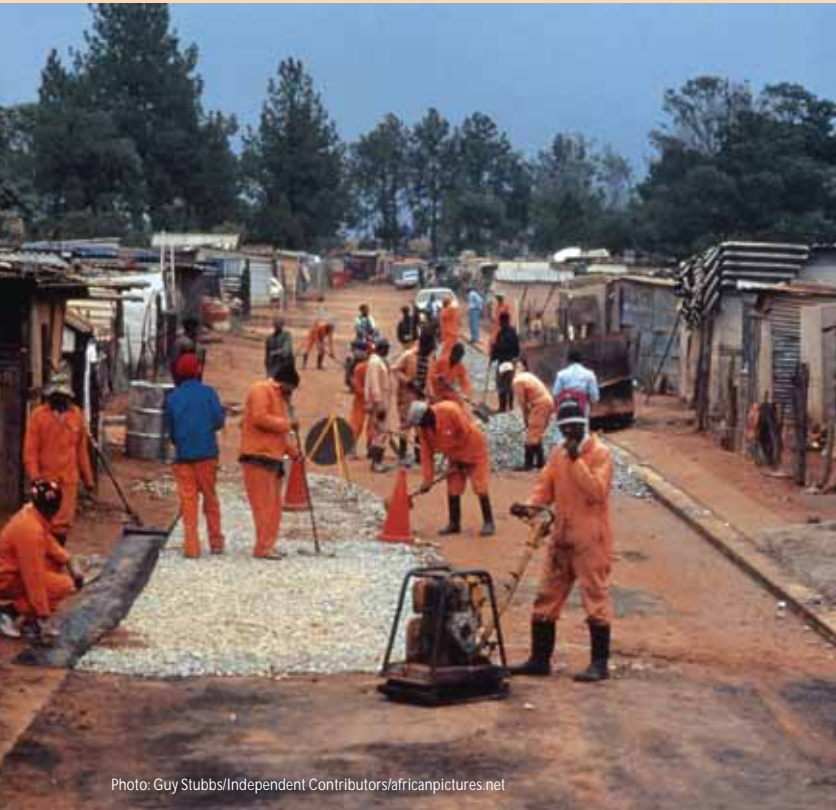


Photo: Guy Stubbs/Independent Contributors/africanpictures.net

Introduction

This article was prepared by David Schmidt for the Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) to stimulate debate and discussion in the GGLN as part of their process of preparing submissions for the DPLG's review of local government. However, the views expressed are his personal views and do not necessarily reflect those of the GGLN or its members. The article focuses on three key areas of reform:

- the need to rethink the current legislative and regulatory requirements regarding participation (and representation);
- the need to simplify and 'unbureaucratise' the specified municipal planning processes; and
- the need for an updated, more dynamic, vision for local government that recognises the need for a much more differentiated approach to different kinds of localities.

Rethinking participation and representation mechanisms

Public participation is rightly given a central role in the local government system envisaged in the White Paper on Local Government. Institutionalising such participation within local government practice was a key objective of the Municipal

Systems Act in particular. However, the conceptualisation of participation within policy and legislation is limited and flawed, and has arguably had the unintended consequence of contributing to a significant decline in the meaningfulness and significance of participation processes since 2000.

In particular, the emphasis on ward committees as primary

mechanisms for municipal public participation has had very negative consequences for the development of stronger and more sustainable forms of participation and participatory governance. Put simply, ward committees do not work. There is much research and anecdotal evidence to support this and little research or anecdotal evidence suggesting that there are, in fact, examples of effective ward committees that have had an impact over a sustained period.

The problem of ward committees is illustrated by comparison with the web of decentralised local participation mechanisms that function relatively effectively – for example, community safety forums, health forums and school governing bodies. These mechanisms work because they have a specific focus, they have meaningful decision-making powers, or at least real influence, and they have a direct and reciprocal relationship with an administrative entity, be it a police station, a clinic or a school, which creates a real relationship of accountability as well as ensuring administrative support.

These factors do not generally apply to ward committees, which lack specific focus or a clearly defined purpose. They also lack decision-making powers and function at the wrong scale to be given a greater role in, for example, land use planning decisions. Municipal administrations are further not structured on the decentralised basis that would enable them to respond effectively at a ward level. This is particularly the case in the larger cities, where the large number of ward committees (often more than 100) means that senior management and executive councillors are not able to attend ward committee meetings or even to absorb and respond to issues raised at ward level. At best, junior officials with little influence attend. Similarly, ward councillors, especially in the large councils, tend to lack administrative or political influence.

However, the bigger problem with ward committees is not that they are dysfunctional or lack a compelling rationale, but that they have crowded out many more appropriate and effective forms of participation. They are typically the beginning and the end of the discussion about participation. The common presumption is that we have ward committees in place – therefore we have substantially fulfilled our participation compliance requirements.

How can we deepen the significance and impact of our participation and representation mechanisms? Here are some suggestions:

- Reaffirm the principle of public participation as a key principle of local government and require municipalities to undertake meaningful public participation exercises

The biggest problem with ward committees is not that they are dysfunctional or lack a compelling rationale, but that they have crowded out many more appropriate and effective forms of participation.

for all major plans and policies, without prescribing the mechanism.

- Dispense with the requirement that ward committees be established, but require ward councillors to hold at least two public meetings in their ward in the course of any calendar year.
- In larger municipalities, establish area-based planning committees as a way of decentralising some of the planning and service delivery decision-making. Such committees should ideally be related to some form of decentralised administration, such as Johannesburg's regions.
- Recognise that different communities have different traditions and different needs when it comes to participation, and encourage municipalities to develop much more differentiated approaches to participation that acknowledge these different needs. Poor communities need much more intense forms of support and engagement as part of generating economic, social and service development. Wealthier, better-resourced communities need a different, less intense, mode of engagement.
- Encourage and promote an extensive range of participation tools including community-based planning, citizen juries, area assemblies, online polls, radio talk programmes and citizen surveys. The more intense and varied the web of participative processes across a municipality, the greater the likely stock of social capital, enhancing the development potential.
- Encourage municipalities to establish a resourced coalition or coalitions of interest groups (including community organisations, NGOs and professional organisations) with which they can engage regarding their strategic plans (IDPs etc) on a municipal scale.

A related issue is the number of councillors. There is a strong case for suggesting a substantial reduction in the number of councillors. Good international practice suggests that the

There would be merit in unpacking the IDP into a number of different planning instruments that are simpler and better-designed to accomplish a narrower purpose.

maximum number of councillors should be around 60, which implies a maximum of 30 wards per municipality. The intention behind large councils is to ensure that councillors are able to remain accessible to voters. The problem with large councils based on relatively small wards is that power and influence tend to become more and more concentrated the larger the council is, with the following effects:

- Executive councillors and a few other politically influential councillors dominate decision-making.
- Other councillors lack influence or substantial roles, and find it difficult to access the administration or get it to do things. Many councillors are reduced to being “voting fodder”.
- This fuels the alienation experienced by so many non-executive councillors and breeds factionalism. Much more effort has to be put into managing caucuses, which is not very productive.
- It also tends to drive very narrow local issues at a scale to which the municipality is not geared to respond.

Even current wards are so large that it is rare for ward councillors in large cities to have a direct and personal relationship with the vast majority of residents in their wards. There is not such a big difference in accessibility between a councillor representing 10 000 people and one representing 50 000 people. Smaller councils balance power more effectively, non-executive councillors have more influence, ward councillors are more effective in getting things done, councillors tend to know all other councillors personally and better talent is attracted.

Reorienting the planning, implementation and monitoring system

The problems outlined above in regard to participation have their parallels within the system of planning and implementation outlined in the Systems Act.

There have been significant benefits from the requirement that municipalities produce integrated development plans (IDPs). It has encouraged municipalities to plan more and to be

more strategic, and has encouraged an integrated view to help balance silo thinking. It has also encouraged intensive participation around the planning process.

However, some fundamental changes are required to establish the necessary focus and mechanisms within the planning process to bring it into line with more modern approaches to strategy and strategic planning. The current approach is based on a somewhat outdated approach that assumes the future is stable and predictable, seeks to be too comprehensive and consequently drives overly bureaucratic approaches. We need more dynamic networked planning tools and processes that are responsive to the fact that strategy is both something we plan and something that emerges out of how we respond to the unexpected dynamics of making decisions in real time.

The major problem of the IDP is that it is supposed to be *the* tool for achieving too many things. The consequence is an ongoing trade-off between different imperatives that ultimately can mean that none of the imperatives are satisfied.

Forcing too many elements into the IDP process can be unproductive and results in IDP documents that are often too complex to be useful. Often, there is also a misperception that alignment can somehow be achieved through the technical process of producing an IDP – that the fact that everyone’s plans have been integrated in a common document somehow produces aligned planning. Alignment rather flows from strong interdepartmental and interorganisational relationships, excellent communication flows and a strong common sense of purpose and direction. Where these are present, alignment will flow, whether or not this is explicit in a document. Where they are not present, there is not alignment, even if it appears from a document that there is.

There would be merit in unpacking the IDP into a number of different planning instruments that are simpler and better-designed to accomplish a narrower purpose. Key elements of such an approach might include the following stipulations:

- Require all municipalities to produce an annual rolling five-year service delivery plan that outlines the municipality’s service strategy and its goals and targets for each service. This service delivery plan should involve extensive consultation of and participation by local communities and should be a key informant of the municipal budget. This is essentially a stripped-down version of the current IDP, focused on the services of the municipality, and is thus the basis on which municipalities are held accountable for performance.

This plan is not supposed to be a tool to align the actions of all spheres of government; neither is it a strategic plan for the long-term economic and spatial development of the municipality. It is simply the service delivery plan. Its purpose is clear. It is not overloaded with too many objectives.

- Require that the municipality produce an annual report evaluating its performance against the service delivery plan. This should include an independent assessment of performance by an appropriate independent institution or auditor to ensure transparency and integrity.
- In the larger urban areas or city regions, municipalities in partnership with other spheres of government, organised business, labour and other relevant economic stakeholders should be required to produce a long-term development strategy for the area, focused on the economy as a tool for aligning common action and strategic infrastructure. It would doubtless be useful to establish a multi-stakeholder city development forum to take ownership of the plan and to mobilise resources and support for implementation. The municipal spatial development framework should be aligned with the plan.
- An annual high-level intergovernmental summit should be held for each municipality where the major proposed interventions and investments of each sphere of government for the municipal area are outlined, with a view to achieving improved strategic alignment and coordination.

Creating a more viable and relevant vision for local government

At this stage of our local democracy, the original White Paper on Local Government appears to be somewhat outdated. While it is full of noble sentiments and had a visionary dimension at the time, it no longer appears to have a strong compelling and directional vision for local government. Local government has evolved considerably since 1997, and the big issues and concerns of today do not resonate with the original White Paper. Some of its assumptions have been shown to be rather optimistic.

For example, it assumes that local government in general has a capacity to be an effective developmental institution able to drive economic and social development as well as delivering municipal services. The reality is that while the big urban municipalities have some significant capacity to take on this

It is the substance of urban transformation that has to lie at the heart of a new compelling vision that will, in due course, be needed to replace the 1998 White Paper and drive the next wave of reforms.

role, the vast majority of municipalities without a strong urban centre at their core have found it extremely difficult to adequately undertake their service delivery roles, let alone engage in higher-order developmental functions. And, in a related fashion, the White Paper assumes that municipal roles, powers and functions, and obligations should be rendered wall-to-wall across the country and that the same frameworks and regulations should apply universally.

There is an emerging recognition that everywhere is not equal and that the watering can approach to development, with all areas getting watered equally, is unsustainable. This thinking is strongly expressed in the National Spatial Development Programme, which begins to open up a new paradigm of focusing limited resources and capacity in areas of greatest potential, providing a basic minimum in areas with limited potential and focusing on investment in people (such as skills) rather than on place (such as new housing in declining areas).

Thus a new vision for local government will assume the provision of a basic service safety net for all and the establishment of democratic municipalities across the country with tools for participation and accountability. However, it will also contain a much stronger and more substantial concept of what we need to do to transform our dynamic urban areas into extraordinary places of sustainability, inclusion and productivity.

It is the substance of urban transformation that has to lie at the heart of a new compelling vision that will, in due course, be needed to replace the 1998 White Paper and drive the next wave of reforms.



David Schmidt
davsch@networld.co.za