

Leadership matters

PROFESSIONALISING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Moves are afoot to professionalise the administrative arm of local government. First, the National Treasury has prescribed a competency framework for municipal officials at senior and middle management levels. All senior and middle managers must have acquired the prescribed competencies by 1 January 2013, after which no candidate without the requisite competencies can be appointed. These regulations also make it necessary for current employees to attain these competencies by 31 December 2012.

Second, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs has introduced the Municipal Systems Amendment Bill in Parliament. The Bill prescribes a similar competency framework and also provides that any appointments in conflict with that framework will be void. Furthermore, councillors may be held personally liable for any fruitless and wasteful expenditure occasioned by their illegal appointments in contravention of the competency framework.

All these initiatives are very welcome and commendable. They indicate a political will to tackle the problems besetting local government and turn local government around. They will go a long way towards ensuring that appointments to managerial positions are not made on the basis of political or family ties, but restricted to people with the relevant competencies. They will, furthermore, ensure that the lines of accountability are not turned upside down by managers exercising political power over councillors who belong to their party. The administration will stick to its professional job as the conduit for service delivery.

However, there seems to be a forgotten link in the initiatives to turn local government around. The role of councillors has been seriously neglected in these reforms – at the South African public's peril, I should add. The election of competent councillors is not high on the reform agenda. Yet councillors play a crucial role in ensuring responsible government and service delivery. Councillors are elected to represent communities, which includes mediating between the municipality and local residents. They are collectively responsible for overseeing the performance of the executive and municipal administration. They are involved in formulating the policy and by-laws which ensure that municipalities function as effective, responsive governments in their areas, and they must play a role as leaders in managing conflicting societal interests.

The importance of effective local leadership was acknowledged by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and Commonwealth Heads of Government when they adopted the Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance. The Aberdeen Agenda declares that 'Effective local leadership is central to strong local democracy ... to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community'. South Africa is one of the oldest members of the Commonwealth of Nations and is a signatory to the Aberdeen Agenda.

This article hopes to give pause for thought to policymakers and political parties who elevate the importance of a professional administration above all else. The idea that local politics does not require skill or qualification is outdated. Local government in South Africa has become increasingly complex over the years. The advent of ever fewer, but also ever bigger, municipalities, together with the multiplication of local responsibilities, has led to a mismatch between the formal role of local councils and their actual day to day importance.

Between 1993 and 2000, the population increased from 37 million to 44 million, while the number of municipalities decreased from more than 1 000 to 284. After 2000, the number of municipalities decreased further to 283, while the population increased to 48 million. Consequently, the approximate average population per municipality has gone up from 7 000 to 200 000. We also have to bear in mind the fact that there was no representation for the majority of South Africans before 1994, which puts a huge burden on councillors to address high poverty, inequality and the demand for basic services in poor communities.

This shift in size and responsibility has not only required an increase in the services offered, but also added pressure on elected leadership to deepen representation. Added to this is the flurry of laws regulating local government which contain prescriptive requirements with which municipalities must comply. In this light, it would seem no longer tenable to expect that a political office at local government level could be run by unskilled politicians, even if side by side with a professional administration.

Councillors are the interface between the municipality and residents. As such, they are a critical link in respect of how citizens perceive the efficacy of local government in meeting their basic needs. That role requires councillors to be able to read and understand complicated council documents (for example the budget, the IDP, and credit control policies) and communicate council decisions to communities.

The ruling party has stated publicly that councillors lack the capacity to perform their roles as political representatives. An article on the *Times LIVE* website on 3 November 2009 quoted the Secretary General of the African National Congress, Gwede Mantashe, as saying that 'the incapacity of some municipal councillors to first do their work and secondly, to keep communities informed of what they are doing or are unable to do [are] reasons for the phenomenon of service delivery protests'. Similarly, the report of the parliamentary ad hoc Committee on Coordinated Oversight on Service Delivery identified the quality and frequency of public participation and responsiveness to citizens as the overriding factors behind the protests. Evidently, the capacity of councillors to manage the



expectations of communities effectively by providing a strong and clear articulation of local priorities and concerns, thus obviating the need for protests, leaves a lot to be desired.

Regarding the oversight role of councillors, it is reported that 24 municipalities were under administration across the country in May 2010. The majority of these interventions were occasioned by poor governance, dysfunctional councils and financial problems. The Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Sicelo Shiceka, explained these problems in the following terms. Poor governance by a council includes its inability to perform as required by legislation and non-performance by top management. Financial problems relate to fraud and the misuse of municipal funds and property and the lack of proper financial systems. All these indicate the failure or inability of councillors to exercise their oversight role properly. Strategies need to be devised to correct the problem of non-existent or weak oversight by councillors. Clearly, the endeavours to enhance the capacity of officials in an attempt to turn local government around will prove futile unless measures are taken to capacitate councillors as well.

When it comes to councillors' role in policy formulation, many municipalities rely heavily on assistance from outside consultants. Their councils then accept the consultant's products with enthusiastic gullibility, without applying their minds to the implications for local residents. This gullibility is due to a lack of capacity to engage meaningfully with complicated legal and policy documents. The same consultants are often called upon to disentangle these policies when their implementation is problematic. Consultants are therefore being paid to do the jobs that councillors are elected to do, thus wasting resources that could go to providing services. The

practice of using consultants is not, in itself, a bad thing, as long as they are used wisely and intelligently – and that requires councillors who have capacity to properly manage the responsibility of policy formulation.

Perhaps it is appropriate to ask whether it is time to consider populating municipal councils with competent councillors, or retaining only those councillors who can effectively discharge the policy formulation role and thus save costs. How best can we reverse the phenomenon of councillors who are unresponsive or lack the capacity to manage the expectations of local residents? How do we ensure that councillors' capacity to diligently and confidently play the interface role between municipalities and local residents is enhanced? Can we afford the luxury of electing just anyone, while we know that local government urgently needs quality councillors to speed up service delivery? Is it not time to make local government a career in its own right, not a springboard to careers in other spheres, and thus ensure continuity and avoid the dissipation of institutional memory? This article does not offer answers to these questions, but simply makes recommendations that are worth considering.

Recommendations

Firstly, political parties should consider redeploying, from the current crop of councillors, those councillors who have qualifications and also demonstrate a deep knowledge of local government issues. This might go a long way towards ensuring longevity, stability and efficiency.

Secondly, when deploying new members, political parties should prioritise those with knowledge and experience in financial management, policy formulation or leadership and those who have a sound understanding of local government issues. Local government politicians have an increasingly heavy workload and require intellectual and leadership capacity to handle these demands. Is it not time to review the principle that everyone, including those without proven skills or formal qualifications may stand for election to political office in local government? In Uganda, for example, to be elected as mayor or a speaker, an advanced level of education, equivalent to a South African post-matric qualification, is required. The qualification for all other councillors is matric. Why should South Africans not demand suitably skilled or qualified councillors, given the fact that urgent solutions are required to the difficult problems besetting local government?

A requirement that councillors be functionally literate does not have to violate the right to stand and be elected for political

key points

- National government aims to make local government more efficient, responsive and accountable by professionalising municipal administrations.
- Councillors' role in the crisis facing local government seems to have been overlooked.
- Councillors are failing in their oversight and policy formulation role.
- The capacity of councillors to engage with council documents and account to communities is in serious doubt.
- Political parties should give priority to selecting competent people as councillors in the forthcoming local election.

office if political parties embrace the principle. It is within the power of political parties to ensure that the candidate lists in the coming local government elections consist of competent people, in order to complement the moves to professionalise the administration. A comparison can be made with the principle in the Municipal Structures Act that encourages political parties to ensure gender parity on their lists of candidates. This principle has contributed to local government being successful in ensuring adequate gender representation at council level. Is it not time to consider a similar principle that speaks to the need for candidates with qualifications or proven skills?

The ruling party carries a special responsibility in this regard. The ANC president, in his report to the organisation's Third National General Council held in Durban, made the following commitment: 'Moving forward to the 2011 elections, ... we should ensure that our deployment procedures enable us to produce more highly committed, effective and disciplined cadres to help us improve service delivery in this sphere'. Requiring councillors to be suitably skilled and/or qualified should be an integral part of turning local government around.



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