





The future of local government

ACCORDING TO
THE ANC

The ANC's National General Council (NGC) is a forum at which the organisation's progress and challenges are reviewed between national conferences. It is the highest body of the ANC, after the national congress, and convenes every five years. The third NGC, which sought to review the ANC's performance against policies adopted by the Polokwane conference, was held in Durban in September. Its important outcome for the local governance sector is that there will soon be a summit on local government.

The NGC adopted three important positions that have a bearing on local government.

The NGC agreed to urgently implement the Polokwane resolution on the Review of Provincial and Local Government. In particular, it was acknowledged that the resolution's implementation was part of the process towards the development of a White Paper on provincial government and a review of the Local Government White Paper. This process was started under President Mbeki's government in 2007 but was never completed.

It was further noted that the Municipal Systems Amendment Bill and all key legislation affecting local

government would have to be presented to the summit. As part of the process of reviewing the existing legal framework for local government, it was recommended that a discussion document be prepared and circulated to ANC structures in preparation for the next summit. The NGC recommended that the ANC structures and alliance partners must make appropriate and quality inputs.

The two-tier system of local government

There was initially a divergence of views on the issue of a two-tier system of local government. It was then agreed that further discussion would have to take place on the matter at the upcoming summit. In principle, it was agreed that a criteria needed to be developed for such a system, and noted that such criteria ought to be informed by an integrated approach, redistribution, access to services and an approach to shared services. These criteria should inform the configuration of the structure of local government. Furthermore, this process needed to be linked to the future of provinces. It appears that the position by the NGC on the two-tier system of local government was prompted by the need to promote cooperative governance and social equity in the delivery of, and access to, social services.

The future of provinces

Regarding the future of the provinces, the NGC agreed to put the final decision on hold pending a thorough investigation. According to the NGC, there was a need for an in-depth study

based on the balance of evidence before any final decision was taken. Tentatively, the NGC revealed that some members were in support of a gradual phasing out of provinces. However, it was noted that an inquiry into the future of the two-tier system of local government would be linked to a future reconfiguration of the provinces.

Review of local government funding models

The NGC also expressed the urgency of the need to review the current funding model of local government, taking cognisance of the equitable share formula, which should be based on the poverty index and not on outdated population figures. The NGC also recommended that integrated development plans should have a component including the financial implications of the Millennium Development Goals, with greater emphasis placed on the provincial and national governments.

The delegates to the NGC were clearly not comfortable with the existing intergovernmental fiscal relations framework, on the grounds that, in its present form, it accounted for some of the service delivery failures. The NGC thus recommended that intergovernmental fiscal relations be reviewed in their entirety. This review would entail conducting an impact assessment of the abolition of the regional services council levy and the consequences of that for the ability of district municipalities to deliver on their mandate. The NGC noted that, as part of the intergovernmental fiscal relations review process, the municipal infrastructure grant should be re-examined.

Simultaneous elections

Somewhat controversially, the NGC also recommended the holding of simultaneous elections for all three spheres of government. The NGC cautioned that in the event that a decision were to be taken to conduct elections simultaneously, such a decision should not be based only on financial considerations, but also on political considerations. It is argued that notwithstanding the NGC's caution about the possible misuse and misreading of its recommendation on holding all elections simultaneously, no plausible argument was advanced for this position.

The fact that holding elections for all three spheres of government on the same day could strain the capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission might have been overlooked. Although the NGC made the point that a broader perspective needed to underpin the approach, the proposal should have been informed by an understanding of the bureaucratic difficulties and financial and capacity constraints at play. It is important to note that the NGC agreed that the ANC would undertake research into the likely impact of

key points

- The NGC is an ANC forum whose role is to review the party's performance against policy adopted at ANC conferences.
- The NGC dealt with the need to urgently implement the Polokwane resolution on the Review of Provincial and Local Government.
- A need to develop criteria for a two-tier system of local government was agreed on in principle.
- A need was identified for an in-depth study before any decision on the future of provinces could be made.
- The NGC also made recommendations on the holding of elections simultaneously for all three spheres of government.

simultaneous elections before making any concrete proposals on the matter. As noted in the editorial, the idea of the single electoral cycle will critically damage our nascent local democracy in that it will be overshadowed by national politics. Campaigns and votes for local government will be dominated by the national debate.

Comment

The debate on reforming local and provincial government in South Africa continues, and its resolution remains uncertain. This debate has not escaped the attention of the NGC as one of the key forums for the ANC. Improving service delivery to local communities might account for much of this debate. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that a genuine desire to reform the two institutions is not overshadowed by political machinations.

The full resolutions of the NGC emanating from its latest summit are available at <http://www.anc.org.za/docs/reps/2010/3rdngcx.pdf>.



Douglas Singiza
Doctoral intern