

United Cities and Local Governments of Africa

Crystallisation of local government in Africa

Africa has a rich history of indigenous and traditional forms of local government. However, lack of coherence between local government and traditional forms of local government are prevalent throughout the continent. The time for unified local government has arrived.

Introduction

Against this backdrop, more than 4 000 delegates from 52 countries convened in the City of Tshwane at the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA) Founding Congress, held at the Tshwabac Events Centre from 15-18 May 2005. Delegates included Heads of State, ministers, executive mayors, mayors, premiers, local government officials, research and academic institutions, the international and local media, the private sector as well as civil society.

UCLGA is a continent-wide unified voice of local government and is a facility for supporting the process of decentralisation, for consolidation of the African municipal movement, and for strengthening the capacities of local governments to deliver services and contribute to local development. UCLGA is a unification of three umbrella organisations, namely, the African Union of Local Authorities (AULA), the *Union des Villes Africaines* (UVA), and the *Uniao dos Cidades y Capitaes Lusofono Africana* (UCCLA).

Purpose

The UCLGA has three fundamental objectives:

- to organise effective political dialogue with

central and local governments, civil society and the international community with a view to adopting decentralisation among Africa's priority development issues;

- to accord African local governments their due place in the dynamics of African integration; and
- to integrate the African municipal movement into the mainstream initiatives of the world municipal movement.

In his keynote address to the Congress, President Olesugan Obasanjo of Nigeria welcomed the UCLGA as a crystallisation of a single voice for sustainable local government and development in Africa. The UCLGA is the mechanism to foster relations between local governments in Africa, address common problems at the local level and share best practices for the benefit of local development on the continent. He also, as president of the AU, pledged full support for UCLGA from the AU and that he would report the outcomes of the Congress to the next AU summit.

The theme of the Congress was 'Toward a unified voice for sustainable local government development in Africa'. The sub-themes were:

- Decentralisation and devolution of authority and responsibility: A call for the establishment

of African local government as a distinct sphere of government;

- African local government and international relations;
- African local government and the challenge of human capital development;
- Local economic development as a mandate of African local government (including sustainable development);
- Culture, identity and development: Notes for African local government; and
- The challenge of funding and finance in African local government.

A major political output of the Founding Congress was the presentation and adoption of the Charter, Congress Declaration and Constitution. The Charter sets development targets for local governments and aims to measure progress in attaining them. It also suggests powers to be devolved to local governments as part of the implementation of local democracy and the establishment of local government as a distinct sphere of government, as well as emphasising co-operative governance among all spheres of government. It draws heavily on the South African model since very few African countries have organised local government structures in place. It was felt that most African countries will look to South Africa for help in setting up organised local government structures. South Africa will therefore, through the UCLGA, assist other African countries to reach levels of democracy in local government structures without imposing itself on those countries. In the words of Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, President of the UCLGA:

South Africa has established a progressive local government system. We need to share our experience and expertise with counterparts elsewhere in the continent. We are part of Africa and we must play a role in developing solutions to Africa's development needs.

UCLGA's priority activities will be:

- advocacy for decentralisation and autonomy for organised African local government;
- capacity building activities focusing on associations of local government and political dialogue;

key points

- **The UCLGA is a continent-wide unified voice of local government.**
- **It is also the mechanism for fostering relations between local governments in Africa, addressing common problems at the local level and sharing best practices.**
- **The Charter will set development targets for local governments and measure progress in attaining them.**

- supporting African local government developmental endeavours and co-operating with other international organisations, both government and non-governmental;
- delivery of the Millennium Development Goals at local level;
- positioning local governments in Africa to support NEPAD; and
- sharing knowledge and experience.

Comment

The establishment of the UCLGA is welcomed and constitutes a major step in the development of African local government. The Founding Congress sends out a strong message to central governments, the AU and other sub-regional organisations that development in Africa is the development of the people and that local government is the vehicle for sustainable development as it is the sphere of government closest to the people. However, conference resolutions and charters do not deliver change. Resourced actions plans must be developed and given practical meaning if the UCLGA is to have the desired impact and not merely serve as another talk shop.

Reuben Baatjies
Local Government Project
Community Law Centre, UWC
