



Photo: PictureNET Africa/Halden Krog

Police disperse the crowd at Protea South Informal Settlement after protests became violent.

# Service delivery protests

## FAILURE TO DELIVER OR FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE?

### Service delivery protests in the spotlight

At first glance, the photo accompanying this article seems more reminiscent of the protests which marked the struggle against the apartheid government than that of a recent service delivery protest.

These protests are not isolated incidents, but are of a growing number that have affected various parts of South Africa during the past eighteen months or so. Of grave concern is the increasing number of violent incidents which have marked these protests, resulting in destruction of property, injury and even death. In areas where the demonstrations have been protracted, the economic loss to the region has been substantial.

These protests come in the wake of the draft national framework on public participation and the landmark Constitutional Court judgments of *Matatiele* and *Doctors for Life*, which emphasise the importance of community participation

and the duty on organs of state to involve the community in participatory processes related to all governance processes (discussed in *LGB 8(4)*, September 2006).

In response to a growing number of complaints from the affected communities and increasing public concern, the office of the Public Protector announced that it would initiate its own investigations into the root causes of these protests. In a statement on 16 August 2007, the office indicated that it was in the process of identifying specific municipalities around which the investigation would be centred. The Public Protector has already embarked on consultation with key stakeholders, including the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, the Minister for Provincial and Local Government, and the chairperson of SALGA, to establish the terms of reference for the investigation.

## Root causes of the protests

The most commonly cited reason for the protests is a lack of service delivery on the part of municipalities. Reports in the media have highlighted communities' concern about the slow or non-existent delivery of housing and basic services in their areas.

A contributing factor in many cases may be that communities feel excluded from decision-making processes which affect them. Clearly, the channels of communication between municipalities and affected communities must be distorted if residents feel they need to resort to protest action in order to be heard. Problems with ward councillors and ward committees may contribute to the perception that a municipality is not responsive to its community's needs. The failure on the part of municipalities to adopt effective complaints-handling mechanisms and customer-care strategies only amplifies the problem (discussed in *LGB8(3)*, July 2006). Community members are more likely to respond to a municipality which is accountable to them and which takes the time to explain why their needs and service delivery expectations are not being satisfied.

There have also been claims of political motives being at the forefront of some of these protests. According to recent reports in the media, certain protesters have been seen at different locations. While politics may certainly play a role, the fact that the protests have not been contained to a particular area or even a particular province is indicative of a broader problem facing local government.

The frequency of the protests and the violent incidents that mark them clearly demonstrate the extent to which channels of communication between government and communities have broken down.

That said, local government often has to bear the brunt of community dissatisfaction because it is the sphere of government most accessible to the people. Some of these protests are misplaced at local government's door and would be better addressed to national and provincial government. For example, as mentioned above, many of the protests concern housing delivery, which is a provincial function. While local government has a designated role in housing delivery, it cannot bear sole responsibility for delivery failures.

## Comment

Given the varying conditions between municipalities in South Africa, it is important to realise that there is no single factor motivating all these protests. The different imperatives which drive them must therefore be examined case by case. However, the frequency of the protests and the violent incidents that mark them clearly demonstrate the extent to which channels of communication between government and communities have broken down.

Municipalities therefore need to undertake a dispassionate, introspective assessment of the root causes of these protests. Where they are clearly linked to service delivery failure, municipalities must identify the impediments to efficient and effective service delivery. Only then can remedial measures be taken. The investigation by the Public Protector will assist municipalities in this.

In addition, with investigations still at an early stage, the partnership between the stakeholders involved can influence the outcome of the investigation. These stakeholders have the authority and political will to drive the investigative process forward and to ensure that a strategy for improved municipal performance in problem areas is implemented.

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