

Multilingualism in local government

The Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) recently announced draft Guidelines for Implementing Multilingualism in Local Government.

Multilingualism refers to “the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives”. The implementation of multilingualism at the municipal level aims to promote more effective participation and civic engagement by removing the language barriers to communication between local government and its community, improving communication within local government, and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity through the greater use of African languages.

The draft Guidelines attempt to provide for more systematic arrangements in meeting the linguistic needs of those who lack proficiency in English, or who are illiterate or disabled.

Legal requirements of multilingualism for local government?

The Constitution, together with the Municipal Systems Act, require local governments to “take into account the language preferences and usage in their municipality; and the special needs of people who cannot read or write” for all internal and external communication.

Councils are responsible for determining the official language(s) for the municipality based on local “language preferences and usage” and all public notifications must be communicated in these languages. In addition, councils must provide for the language needs of those who are not proficient in the official languages and render assistance to people who cannot read or write. This would include services such as interpretation at ward committee or other public meetings, translation and other support for inviting and submitting comments, assistance in completing required forms, as

AMBITIOUS RHETORIC OR A REALISABLE GOAL?

well as aspects of communication regarding service delivery and internal administration. How a municipality provides for additional language needs and assistance is left to the municipality’s discretion.

What is proposed by the draft Guidelines?

The draft Guidelines comprise a set of recommendations for implementing multilingualism at the local level. They are not compulsory. The recommendations focus on three main steps for implementation:

- developing a language policy detailing the municipal position and procedures regarding communication, capacity building, administration and financing for language-related issues;
- establishing a municipal language unit to develop and administer the policy; and
- engaging ward committees and community development workers in implementing multilingualism.

Developing a language policy

Municipalities are encouraged to assess their community’s language needs and formulate a language policy that addresses them. The policy is expected to cover internal and external forms of spoken and written communication, including language of record, labour relations, workplace training, translation and interpretation, monitoring and evaluation and mechanisms for engaging the public on language-related issues.

Establishing a municipal language unit

The Guidelines recommend establishing municipal language units to develop and implement the language policy. These units would be responsible for all language-related needs, including conducting language needs assessments; coordinating language needs related to communication, interpretation, and translation; helping to mainstream language policies into municipal strategies and processes; conducting training and capacity building; raising

awareness of multilingualism within both local government and the community and monitoring the implementation of municipal language policy. These units should also manage municipal participation in district, provincial and national language forums responsible for coordinating progress on the development and implementation of multilingualism and for discussing the promotion of African languages.

The Guidelines also mention the establishment of an office to deal with language-related enquiries and complaints, but do not specify how this structure relates to the proposed language units.

Engagement of ward committees and community development workers

As the crucial link between the community and the municipality, the Guidelines see a key role for ward committees and community development workers. They are expected to engage communities in developing a municipal language policy as well as ensure that multilingualism is mainstreamed in participatory planning and service delivery on an ongoing basis.

Ward committees, in cooperation with community development workers, are specifically expected to: draw up a language charter for the use of multiple languages in different sectors (e.g. housing, transportation, education); support multilingual IDP analysis, in which community inputs and documentation are provided in local languages and then translated into English and identify additional gaps and language-related barriers to service delivery.

What are the cost implications?

Budgeting for multilingualism will occur through the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework. The cost implications of implementing multilingualism are clearly substantial. Funds will be required for staff, materials and equipment for the new municipal language units; technical assistance in developing language policies; training for municipal staff and elected officials; campaigns to raise public awareness; translation of public documents; participation in local and regional forums; and fielding enquiries and language-related complaints.

Sample costs for the establishment of national language units were approximately R18.2 million over a three-year period from 2003 to 2005. While costs for the establishment of municipal units are expected to be much lower, if implemented on the scale envisioned, expenditures are still likely to be considerable.



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Comment

The draft Guidelines fail to provide clear direction on implementing multilingualism in local government. This results from four main weaknesses. First, it fails to identify the language-related barriers to effective participation and service delivery at the municipal level. Without a concrete evaluation of the language-related needs of different types of municipalities, it is difficult to gauge the extent of the problems and develop relevant solutions. Although a detailed needs assessment would still be required for each municipality before developing its own language policy, better identification of the different challenges that municipalities face is necessary to evaluate the ability of the Guidelines to provide effective guidance in implementing multilingualism.

Second, no accommodation is made for differences in strategy between urban and rural municipalities or municipalities of different sizes. For instance, implementing the recommended approach is likely to be inappropriate for those rural municipalities which have fewer languages spoken within their boundaries than in the larger metropolitan municipalities.

Third, the entire exercise begs the question of whether this complex structure is really necessary for addressing multilingualism at the municipal level.

Finally, the Guidelines envision the creation of a further layer of bureaucracy at some fiscal burden to municipalities and without any indication that such an unwieldy structure is required for meeting local needs. DPLG still has considerable work to do before the Guidelines will provide a useful tool for realising multilingualism in the local sphere. Municipalities would be wise to exhibit creativity and discretion when deciding how to realise this mandate.

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