

SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN A QUANDARY: HOW TO OVERCOME EVER-INCREASING CHALLENGES TO EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE DELIVERY¹

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Abstract

Despite the introduction of various legislative measures to improve the performance of local government in terms of the mandate to be an autonomous sphere of government, service delivery in South Africa remains questionable and local government in a quandary. Performance in this context is influenced by globalization, technological development and challenges such as the world-wide financial crisis, enforcement of debt collection policies, decaying infrastructure and an unresponsive political and administrative environment. Strategies are recommended to ensure that local government can move beyond this point to excellent service delivery.

Keywords: Local government, local government performance, local government challenges, strategies for improved performance

1. INTRODUCTION

The onset of democratic transformation in South Africa in 1994 had a profound influence on local government, which progressed from being a third tier of government to an equal, autonomous sphere, with implications for comprehensive service delivery. The public's expectations of the process have led inter alia to disillusionment and a lack of confidence and trust in local government as a result of its failure to deliver basic services and create conditions conducive to local economic development - which could ultimately cause reversals in efforts to deepen the democratic process in South Africa.

The ability of local government in South Africa to deliver quality service is often questioned against alleged mal-administration, mismanagement, financial irregularities and corruption. Efforts such as Project Consolidate and a comprehensive local government turnaround strategy (LGTAS) to ensure that municipalities will play their meaningful role as envisaged in the 1996 Constitution have been initiated by the South African government to assist local authorities with performance problems, but the question remains whether these efforts will suffice to ensure that local authorities can deliver satisfactory service to improve the quality of life of citizens.

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The recent local government public service delivery protests in South Africa unfortunately do not put these concerns to rest and therefore reasons for the situation should be analysed and solutions proposed.

In this paper, attention is focused on a review of local government in South Africa, performance of local government, and strategies for improved service delivery by local government. The research method was a literature study of appropriate sources including authoritative publications, books, journals, the Internet and official documents of, for example, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA). Use was also made of focus groups consisting of 35 public service participants at director and senior director level. At the time of writing this article, the group members were enrolled in postgraduate Public Administration and Management studies at the University of the Free State. They shared their views as citizens and users of services as well as from a professional perspective.

2. REVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The magnitude of the changes experienced at the end of the twentieth century was accelerated by the societal transformations that took place during this period as well as the influence of globalization and the advances in information and telecommunication technology (IT&T). Several countries, including South Africa, concurrently moved from undemocratic to participative/democratic states and from planned to free market economies (Farazmand & Pinkowski 2007:4; Kim 2010:801).

To counter this move in terms of governance, emphasis was placed on building and strengthening local government throughout the world. Fundamentally different kinds of governance (that is, the exercise of control over society and the management of its resources for social and economic development) for public management and the delivery of local public services are, however, required with increased governmental responsiveness and accountability through inter alia the existence of an open and unbiased judicial system where the 'trias politica' principle is applied; that is, a general respect for the rule of law and human rights within a country, the building and sustainment of a vigorous civil society, as well as measures that ensure that governmental and political power are dispersed to prevent governments from being too powerful (Linnan 2012: 45). Globally, governments focussed their attention on the establishment of a strong and viable sphere of local government to ensure the dispersion of political power and government authority essential to the maintenance of democratic governance. This becomes more evident if the new challenges related to governing, including fast-paced economic and social changes, the growing complexity of policy issues, the need for a simpler and more transparent political process, the multiplication of controls, too many procedures hampering change, low morale among public servants, low public administration productivity, growing financial constraints, and citizens' lack of confidence in the public service are taken into account (Kroukamp 2007:5).

Linked to the latter is the notion of entitlement of citizens at all levels of society to basic services.

The question, therefore, is whether local government is in a position to meet the service rendering responsibilities that they are undertaking – either voluntarily or upon mandate from the national government. Persistent problems in local government include problematic political/administrative interface; poor leadership; lack of accountability, fraud and corruption; dysfunctional caucuses; weak financial management; unsatisfactory labour relations; and weak public participation structures (Shiceka 2009:16; Kroukamp 2012:4). Attention will subsequently be focussed on performance in local government.

3. PERFORMANCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Performance can be viewed as an individual assessment tool where individuals are assessed against generic criteria using different rating scales; as a development tool to determine and address the development needs of an individual; as individual performance where organizational objectives and plans are translated into individual performance plans; and organizational performance referring to strategic planning and control and consisting of strategy formulation, performance planning, monitoring and corrective action (White 2006:8). Frolick and Ariyachandra (2006:41) argue that strategic planning is a prerequisite for performance management and only once such realistic strategic plans have been developed, one can develop indicators that reflect those plans. Strategic plans should, therefore, be designed to enhance overall performance and concentrate on the development of potential instead of control. Performance, in turn, can therefore be seen as an integrated, systematic approach based on participative, problem-solving processes to improve organisational performance to achieve organisational strategic aims and promote the organisation's mission, vision and values (Holbeche 2005:243).

Anderson, Henriksen and Aarseth (2006:5) contend that an integrated approach to performance management will be needed as it is more effective and powerful. To ensure this, local authorities are obliged to prepare and implement Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), through the Systems Act, 2000 section 26 (RSA 2000) to give effect to a single, inclusive and strategic plan (Kroukamp 2006:24). The performance management system must be commensurate with its resources; best suited to its circumstances, and in line with priorities, objectives, indicators, and targets contained in the IDP (Du Plessis 2012:19).

The system must furthermore:

- set appropriate key performance indicators that measure the following five aspects:
 - its aims and objectives: why the service exists and what it wants to achieve;
 - its inputs and outputs: the resources committed to a service and the efficiency with which they are turned into outputs;
 - its outcomes: how well the service is being operated;
 - its quality: to reflect the experience of the users; and
 - its accessibility: the ease and equality of access to services;
- set measurable performance targets and target dates with regard to each of the priorities and objectives;
- be advised that it may serve as an early warning indicator of under-performance;
- provide for steps to improve performance where performance targets are not met; and
- establish a process of regular reporting to council, the public and appropriate organs of state (RSA2000, Section 38; Mubangizi & Gray 2011:213).

It is thus clear that over a period of 20 years, the government has attempted, through numerous pieces of legislation and regulations, to create a policy environment that is conducive and supportive to one common goal – the improvement of life for all. Such examples include the introduction of a comprehensive local government turnaround strategy (LGTAS) in 2009 and the new economic growth path (NGP) that was launched at national level in 2010 to meet the basic needs of all citizens through reduction in unnecessary government. This means that government institutions had to be re-orientated to optimise access to their services by all citizens, within the context of fiscal constraints and the fulfilment of competing needs (compare Box 1998:24; Wiseman 2006:96). It also means that the government had to ensure a stable fiscal environment (which depends on the performance of the economy) to provide for longer-term departmental strategic planning; business planning had to be introduced to assist Treasury in developing an overview of strategic planning across government institutions; and emphasis had to be placed on the continuous modernisation of programmes and delivery of services with the available funds. The implications were that firm and binding financial targets had to be established and programmes and activities that were delivered had to be subjected to tough scrutiny (May 2013:36).

Unfortunately, the strategies to turn local government around have had little effect and progress has been poor so far.

Tsenodi (2014:1) acknowledges this by stating that the implementation of the LGTAS pointed government to areas requiring further attention, which has led to recommendations regarding the implementation of the LGTAS as approved by the South African Cabinet in December 2013 in support of the preparation of a Municipal Intervention Plan: 2014 to 2019.

The local government system succeeded in its goal to radically overhaul and transform local government in South Africa, but despite all the interventions it appears that the local sphere of government still remains in a quandary. Furthermore, local government is experiencing a variety of problems with regard to financial sustainability where finances should be raised from payments received for basic service rendering and property tax (RSA 2009:60; Tsenodi 2014:1):

- the enforcement of debt-collection policies and an increase in aged debts (outstanding debts of more than 90 days);
- high levels of indigents (people who cannot pay for services (because of poverty) and benefit from free basic services schemes);
- an on-going culture of not paying for services on the part of local communities; and
- losses (in terms of both water and electricity) because of illegal connections and poor maintenance of mainly water reticulation systems.

It can be concluded that the abovementioned problems would lead to increased cash-flow shortages, which would, in turn, have a serious negative impact on the ability of local government to render sustainable service.

Local government is, in accordance with the Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations Act, 1997 (RSA 1997) and the annual Division of Revenue Act entitled to various (unconditional and conditional) grants from national and provincial government.

Du Plessis (2012:16) points out that local government relies substantially on the national sphere for funding to render services in line with the constitutional provision for the sharing of nationally raised revenue. In addition, the situation is complicated in that although provinces have a monitoring role (which should be fulfilled in a manner that will not compromise or impede the ability of a municipality to exercise its powers or perform its functions according to Section 151(4) of the Constitution) over local government in their areas, grants are directly paid to municipalities and are not channelled through the provinces, except in the case of housing subsidy provision. Provinces, therefore, have limited input as to the finances provided to municipalities and yet they have to monitor the progress made by local governments to ensure that expenditure is in line with the intended outcome of the grants (Du Plessis 2012:17).

Although most municipalities suffer from limited funds and poor financial management, it is for the management sphere of municipalities to consider the financial position of the municipalities they serve. Decision-makers should carefully consider the scarcity of the financial resources available and all efforts should be made to avoid any wasteful activities. Service delivery should therefore not be compromised by poor financial decisions and should be regarded as the most important priority of the local authority.

The COGTA Report (RSA 2009:36) furthermore identified a number of problems regarding the successful implementation of the integrated management approach that have had a negative impact on service delivery. These include:

- the scale of the problem of ageing and decaying infrastructure that support bulk services such as water and electricity;
- an unresponsive political and official environment that marginalises communities;
- a lack of accountability on the part of local government to communities in the implementation of the development plan and discrepancies in what communities put forward during public participation processes as priorities and its inclusion in the IDP and the budget of the local authority; and
- a lack of councillor involvement in the development planning process.

Further reasons highlighted by the respondents in the focus groups were:

- capacity problems, not only to deliver and sustain quality service, but in the ability to spend its revenue as well as inadequate or irrelevant training of managers;
- the growing utilization of consultants in local government;
- unacceptably high levels of under-spending in poverty-stricken areas;
- the increasing number of alternative service-providing structures;
- the extent to which policy intentions that are linked to performance are accomplished; thus, a lack of the implementation of policies;
- the quality, nature, availability and accessibility of information provided in service- delivery improvement plans and annual reports. Information in this regard is generally poor, making it difficult to measure performance accurately. This means that baseline empirical data to monitor performance quantitatively and qualitatively are lacking; and
- misconceptions and a lack of knowledge regarding the regulatory framework of government - leading to cumbersome procedures, delays in turnaround time and lengthy decision-making processes caused by municipalities themselves and compromises in the quality of services.

It follows from the above that the service-delivery problems of municipalities revolve around two key issues, namely challenges surrounding the limited resource base and institutional incapacity on the part of municipalities to spend the allocated funds due to bad planning. Specific strategies to improve service delivery thus need to be considered.

4. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVED SERVICE DELIVERY BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Strategies to improve service delivery by local government depend on the nature of the role of local government in service delivery, the capacity of the people in local government and the resources available (Lewin 2014:12). Emphasis should be placed on what can be done to deliver more and better services. This necessitates that cognisance be taken of what the real causes of the service delivery problems might be and to choose strategies that will enable municipalities to make a difference. These strategies will depend on variable factors external to the organisation, such as economic conditions; internal factors such as work environment needs, resources or work systems; and internal people in terms of their competencies, capabilities and motivation (Lewin 2014:12).

Although Tsenodi (2014:1) concedes that a number of positive results have been achieved in terms of the mandate of local government to rationalise functions, structures, legislation and resources, it is recommended that the emphasis should be on the use of non-financial measures such as product quality and customer satisfaction to ensure better long-term performance by local government as such measures will assist managers in refocusing on the long-term aspects of their actions.

The Public Service Commission (2011:42), although focusing on public service in general in both the national and provincial spheres of government, conducted a study with a sample of citizens to establish what they regard as important drivers of their satisfaction with government services. The study, which can also be applied to the local sphere of government as it deals with service delivery per se, revealed the important drivers to be accessibility to public services; being treated with courtesy; timeliness in the provision of services; the availability of information on public services; the knowledge and competency of officials; the condition of facilities; where services are provided; fairness and equity in service delivery; value for money; redress where a promised standard has not been met; and the outcome of contact with a service-delivery unit (actually obtaining the service or product). Respondents in the focus groups indicated that of these, the most important driver is timeliness, followed by information, outcome, knowledge and competence of staff and redress.

To improve services, information should be provided about attempts to improve public services and how poor service and corruption were addressed; sound political leadership; proper management practices; transparency and openness to effective partnerships with private enterprise (Holtzhausen & Naidoo 2011:743).

Institutional service delivery needs to be proactively monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. This must be done in order to ensure that predetermined service- delivery standards are met; to improve planning; to facilitate reporting; to predict possible failures; and to determine the kind of support that may be required to strengthen institutional capacity. Section 69(3)(a) of the Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (RSA 2003) requires each local authority that is classified as either a high, medium or low capacity local authority to compile a Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP) for a particular financial year. The SDBIP is a management, implementation and monitoring tool that can assist the mayor, municipal manager, councillors, senior managers and the community in realising the strategic objectives as outlined in the IDP, focusing on both financial and non-financial outcomes in order to ensure effective and efficient performance (Van Schalkwyk 2006:26). This viewpoint was reiterated by the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA) Report to the Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA 2009:8).

Direct support interventions to improve institutional capacity and service delivery may strengthen the most critical competencies of an institution in order to enhance service delivery. This could, for example, include frontline office improvements, which may have a positive effect on the service-delivery interface of all government institutions in all spheres of government. Indirect interventions refer to systemic issues such as strengthening intergovernmental relations (IGR) structures and processes, communication strategies and the development of national service delivery norms and standards (Sokupa 2010:2). Mechanisms that can be used in the abovementioned interventions include:

- the deployment of experts in the short term to conduct assessments in priority institutions and to make incisive proposals to improve poor service delivery;
- support teams to assist with the implementation of proposals in the medium and long term, as was envisaged with Project Consolidate at local government level;
- secondment of competent staff from other institutions to municipalities in need;
- voluntary and independent peer reviews that are non-threatening and encourage ownership of proposed improvements; and
- mentorships.

It can, therefore, be deduced that resources must be utilised optimally and the incapacity of people and their performance addressed to improve service and therefore the overall performance of municipalities. The use of both financial and non-financial measures for improved service delivery is therefore proposed. For the successful implementation of these strategies, a sound business plan must be in place; responsibilities for the driving, implementation and maintenance of resources for the strategy be allocated; and regular monitoring and evaluation of its successes be undertaken.

Additional aspects that should be considered for inclusion to improve service delivery and performance at local government level relate to (i) the role of auditing in the performance management system where the functionality of the performance management system, the payment of bonuses and the evidence supplied as proof of performance are audited; (ii) the creation of a performance management steering committee in terms of the Systems Act (RSA 2000) to ensure the development, adherence to and accomplishment of the agreed-upon performance management policy framework; (iii) weighting of dimensions on performance agreement to indicate to employees what their key focus areas are; (iv) developing an appeals mechanism for the performance management process should the findings be unsatisfactory; and (v) being innovative in securing funding by involving the private sector in improving local service provision rather than merely waiting to receive additional funding (Du Plessis 2012:20). It is therefore vital that these strategies are implemented to ensure that South African local government can fulfil their mandate in respect of service delivery excellence.

5. CONCLUSION

The role of local government in responding to societal needs and expectations to ensure the existence of a modern democratic government is recognized globally. However, concerted efforts by the South African government to support this notion did not materialise because of a problematic political/administrative interface; lack of accountability; fraud and corruption; and weak financial management as well as public participation structures. It was found that service-delivery problems of local authorities revolve around two key issues, namely, the limited resource base, which poses a fundamental challenge, together with an inability to spend budgeted amounts meaningfully, and institutional incapacity on the part of local authorities. Specific strategies to improve service delivery were proposed, namely the provision of information about attempts to improve public service and available communication channels about poor service and corruption; sound political leadership; proper management practices; and transparency and openness to effective partnerships with the private sector. This necessitates the application of particular prerequisites to implement the strategies to address this situation successfully.

The importance of a sound business plan was highlighted together with the identification of those to implement such plans. Furthermore, regular monitoring and evaluation processes need to be in place to ensure that the process is undertaken successfully.

However, the emphasis should not only be on financial measures to improve service delivery of local government, but also on the use of non-financial measures, such as the quality of service and customer satisfaction to assist managers in refocusing on the long-term aspects of their actions. Once these aspects are dealt with, will it be possible to ensure that local government move out of a quandary, deliver efficient services and address their ever-increasing challenges.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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