

Crucial local councillors

How can they better perform?

Everyone in South Africa knows that the quality of local government delivery is uneven and sometimes disastrous. **Thabo Rapoo** and **Robin Richards** investigate the important role of councillors' political leadership in four municipalities and highlight what qualities and factors make for well functioning municipalities.

Current public perceptions do not place local councillors in the role of service delivery. Much public commentary on service delivery protests in South Africa focus predominantly on the role of municipal technocrats and administrators as well as contracted private sector service providers. However, we neglect the role of local councillors in service delivery at our peril because of the importance of local political leadership in shaping citizen perceptions of the efficiency of local government in meeting their basic needs.

Owing to this neglect the Centre for Policy Studies recently completed a study on the role of elected local councillors, particularly ward councillors, in service delivery.

Local political leaders play an important role in acting as a go between in the state-citizen relationships around the quality of local governance and the accountability of service providers to citizens. This is especially important in the context of recent service delivery failures which have led to public protests across the country.

Understanding the role of local councillors in delivery will become increasingly important for two crucial reasons.

Firstly, it is widely expected that service delivery protests will increase in 2010, and possibly in 2011 when the country holds its fourth democratic local elections since the dawn of democracy in 1994.

Secondly, and more importantly, since coming to power in 2009 the new Zuma administration has placed great emphasis on monitoring and performance evaluation. Previously the nature, consistency and quality of monitoring and evaluation at local government level had been poor as local councillors often lacked necessary technical and other vital skills to undertake effective oversight of the work of municipal administrations and contracted private service providers.

FINDINGS

We did our research in the four municipalities of Randfontein (Gauteng), Madibeng (North West), Kharahais (Northern Cape) and Phumelela (Free State). These

municipalities represent a range of settlement types in South Africa. They move from densely-populated urban areas to sparsely populated rural settlements.

All four municipalities are governed by the African National Congress (ANC) with overwhelming majorities. As a result the ANC, as the ruling party, determines the nature of politics and the practice of governance in these municipalities. This makes the role, skills and expertise of ANC councillors, as well as the leadership style of ANC speakers and mayors very important in shaping the quality of governance and effectiveness of service delivery.

While all four municipalities experienced common problems such as lack of resources, institutional weaknesses, high levels of unemployment, poor service delivery and lack of key skills among councillors, the role of the local political leadership played an important part in creating positive attitudes among local community members towards the municipality.

As our research shows, the nature of relations between citizens and

their leaders can be as important as the quality of the services that municipalities deliver to citizens. Yet it seems that political parties, including the ruling party, are guilty of failing to invest effort and time into the careful selection and training of quality local leadership. They are as guilty as government which often does not provide adequate financial resources and skilled personnel for good quality basic service delivery in impoverished communities.

This study examined the role and importance of elected local public representatives, local councillors, in service delivery. We examined a number of important themes in order to understand the role and functions of local councillors in the processes of service delivery. Three of these themes are: relations between councillors and residents, oversight functions of councillors, and the impact of party politics on the effectiveness of local councillors.

CITIZENS AND LOCAL COUNCILLORS

One of the key factors in good quality service delivery is the existence of effective relations between citizens and their elected local leaders.

One of the responsibilities of elected public representatives at local level is to serve as intermediaries between communities and those who make decisions on the allocation of resources and the delivery of basic services. Effective public representatives listen to the grievances of citizens regarding poor or non-existent service delivery and raise questions and seek answers from public service providers, administrators and bureaucrats.

In other words, elected public representatives become the voices and advocates of the voiceless and those who lack necessary levels of

education and financial resources to seek answers and obtain information on why their needs are not being met.

This study suggests that where councillors performed their basic responsibilities, particularly by ensuring frequent interaction with residents and maintaining a two-way flow of information between the municipality and local communities, this contributed towards greater satisfaction among citizens.

It also ensured that citizens better understood the constraints facing their municipalities. Such communities were more satisfied with the little, if any, service delivery they received, despite severe lack of resources and limitations in the quality and quantity of basic services.

The research also found that in only one of the four municipality studies, Kharahais in the Northern Cape, did councillors play a mediating role between residents and the administration.

The Kharahais Municipality was a best practice case with respect to local councillors serving as intermediaries who effectively conveyed residents' needs and demands for better services to the municipal administration and service providers.

The councillors in Kharahais Municipality managed the expectations of the local residents effectively, ensuring that citizens were more realistic in their expectations of what the municipality could deliver. This was crucial in preventing the need for local communities to resort to protest due to unfulfilled expectations.

In this case, effective information dissemination and awareness campaigns relating to municipal development programmes, as well as resource-limitations, played a crucial role in creating a degree of transparency and accountability towards citizens, thus helping to manage their expectations.

In the cases of Madibeng in the North West and Phumelela in the Free State municipalities, the consequences of poor councillor-citizen relationships were demonstrated in terms of high levels of mistrust of local leadership and government officials by local communities. There were perceptions that councillors lacked honesty and accountability and also accusations of corruption and insensitivity to the needs of citizens. This led to frequent service delivery protests and poor relations between citizens and local administrations.



Madibeng municipality



Vikash Yadav

L-R: Sophie Fande Molokoane-Machika, Madibeng's speaker and Caroline Setsiba, Kharahais municipality speaker – municipalities function better when the mayor and speaker have clearly defined roles.



Upington where the Kharahais municipality is a model of good governance.

Factors such as the large size of municipal wards, lack of skills by local councillors, poor planning and poor resource allocation capacity also inflamed the situation and contributed towards greater citizen frustration with poor services, leading to widespread protests.

COUNCILLORS' OVERSIGHT

In the four municipalities, based on in-depth interviews with local councillors, we found that oversight of municipal administration and departments was a key element in determining the effectiveness of municipalities in delivering sustainable services.

Oversight is generally exercised through the committee system, particularly Section 80 Committees, which are aligned to specific departments or portfolios such as transport, municipal utilities and community safety. With the exception of Kharahais, we found the oversight committees were not functioning or performing their functions effectively.

Two factors seemed to account for this. The first factor related to institutional/administrative capacity and competency. The second was political in nature.

Regarding the first factor, the lack

of administrative support to committee members was important in all the municipalities, but its impacts were most pronounced in the Randfontein and Madibeng municipalities where incompetence and lack of basic literacy were rife among councillors.

Resources for committees, including lack of research capacity, poor facilities and poor organisation were important elements that undermined the effectiveness of councillors in their oversight work.

POLITICS AND COUNCILLOR PERFORMANCE

The second set of factors inhibiting oversight committees from functioning effectively were related to heavy-handed political interference and obsessive political controls practiced by party leaders in the conduct and activities of their councillors.

The impact of party politics was evident in all the municipalities, in particular with regard to the governing parties that decide on the selection of council office bearers and the assignment of councillors to specific oversight/portfolio committees. Party politics determined the consensual or adversarial tone of

relations with opposition parties and local communities concerning the quality of local governance.

Political leadership also defined the agenda of the municipality and determined the framework within which councillors of all parties performed their functions as public representatives.

We found evidence of political interference in the Madibeng Municipality, including in arbitrary assignments of councillors to carefully selected committees.

Also the practice of council leadership frequently reshuffling membership of committees in order to marginalise political leaders or render them ineffective in their oversight work was prevalent. This practice was often intended to silence or emasculate political rivals or popular councillors willing to raise uncomfortable questions and seek answers on behalf of their communities.

In some cases, the duplicitous role of councillors who served both as members of the municipal executive on the Mayoral Committee as well as office bearers in the council chamber as Committee Chairs, amplified the problem of political interference, providing opportunities for the settling of internal party political scores within the institutions of governance. This often hampered the effectiveness of oversight work at committee level and was particularly prevalent in the Phumelela Municipality in the Free State.

The ruling ANC's policy of 'cadre deployment' was also cited by informants in three of the four municipalities for its destructive consequences in the work of councillors. Our findings indicated that in many cases the most skilled and competent councillors with experience and in-depth knowledge of particular service sectors were

not always assigned to the relevant oversight committees. The Randfontein Municipality was cited repeatedly in this regard.

In the Kharahais Municipality, although oversight committees are located within the Mayoral Committee system, membership assignments to portfolio committees were done in a manner that took into account prior knowledge, expertise and capacity of individual members to exercise effective oversight. As a result, the members of opposition parties were also included in this effective assignment of members to committees on the basis of competence rather than partisan political considerations.

In Kharahais this practice created consensual rather than adversarial local governance which led to openness, transparency and cross party collaboration. This helped to create conditions conducive to effective oversight.

The positive role of council leadership was demonstrated in Kharahais municipality where the mayor and speaker were the bedrock for consensus driven political leadership. Both were seasoned political leaders and the experienced mayor had served previously as a councillor for over ten years. His background as a church minister had a positive impact. This suggests that previous community leadership roles in other capacities such as a pastor or teacher, could serve as important preparatory experiences for political leadership roles in local government.

The Kharahais' mayor's background appeared to enhance the level of trust in him as a political leader among all the parties in the council as well as within the community. As a result, the decisions made by the mayor were largely accepted by all the parties as being in the interests of the community. This suggests the crucial importance of the process of

leadership selection by political parties at local level.

We also found that the Kharahais mayor went out of his way to promote the principle of inclusivity. He ensured that all interest groups and sectors in the municipality were part of decision-making processes by avoiding voting as a decision-making mechanism. This enhanced cross-party collaboration and forged consensus on issues that often created tensions in other municipalities.

By contrast, the Madibeng Municipality exhibited characteristics of weak and divisive political leadership, with negative consequences for service delivery resulting in calls for the mayor to be fired.

Some of our informants believed that ruling party councillors were ineffective and unable to put the needs of residents before those of their party. Political interference was rife and undermined councillor's ability to perform their oversight functions effectively.

The existence of internal factions within the ruling party in the Madibeng Municipality had created fractious governance which compromised oversight and service delivery. The municipality exhibited all the destructive effects of 'cadre deployment', often resulting in poorly prepared and unskilled councillors assigned to key portfolio committees which hampered effective oversight of service delivery.

LESSONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings pointed to three crucial lessons together with a need for policy action to ensure that local councillors become effective in seeing that citizens receive the services they are entitled to.

Firstly, it is imperative that councillor-citizen relations are enhanced through the strengthening

of public participation structures and processes. Regular interaction, dissemination of information and credible explanations by councillors for why the needs of communities have not been met are crucial.

The Kharahais Municipality took the lead in demonstrating how local communities respond positively to, and develop trust in, this type of leadership, even if service delivery is inadequate. A culture of service to citizens needs to be forged through policy and practice among service providers, administrators and bureaucrats and also among elected local councillors, particularly ward councillors.

Secondly, municipalities need to pay greater policy attention towards supporting local councillors through the provision of vital skills necessary for committee oversight, but also through financial resources, office facilities and administrative support staff.

In addition, the selection and assignment of councillors to portfolio committees needs less emphasis on political considerations and affiliations, and more emphasis on skill, competence, ability and knowledge. This is crucial for enhancing the quality of monitoring and oversight of service delivery. Emphasis on education, especially basic numeracy and literacy should be central to policies on assignment of oversight committee membership.

Finally, the choice of local political leadership at municipal level should be given greater priority by political parties. This is particularly true of the ANC who needs to pay attention to necessary qualities, skills and especially prior experience of leadership at community level. ^{LB}

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