

# Local government contradictions

Proposals to reform local government see the problems in terms of corruption, incompetent municipal officials, and lazy councillors. **Gillian Hart** argues that the problems with local government go far deeper as a result of capitalist development that produces massive wealth while expelling millions of people from the economy.

**N**ow that the excitement over local government elections and open toilets has died down and political analysts have delivered their verdicts on the results, we confront a far more difficult set of questions: what's wrong with local government, and what can be done about it?

There is no shortage of answers. In the period since the election we have seen an outpouring of proposed solutions to make local government more efficient, responsive, and developmental.

My central argument is that local government has become not just *a* site of contradictions, but *the* key site of contradictions in the post-apartheid era. Local government, in other words, has become the impossible terrain of official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially divided capitalist society marked by vicious inequalities and increasingly precarious livelihoods for a large majority of the population.

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Most immediately, it makes us cast a critical eye on what some are calling a 'Marshall Plan'

for local government, like the massive effort to reconstruct Europe after the Second World War. These proposals include:

- Measures to ensure that local government is professionalised and depoliticised. The call is to move forward with the Municipal Systems Amendment Bill to ensure the appointment of competent professionals in top management positions and prevent cadre deployment.
- Merging unviable municipalities and bringing in 'special purpose vehicles'.
- Closer monitoring, training and disciplining of councillors, and making them more accountable.

These and other proposals rest first and foremost on the assumption of incompetent, uncaring municipal officials and lazy, corrupt councillors.

There is no doubt that rotten councillors and officials are a problem in some areas and that bringing in more efficient, accountable replacements would produce some improvements in municipal services.

## DEEPER TENSIONS

Yet my work in Ladysmith and Newcastle since 1994 suggests

much deeper tensions and structural contradictions than 'lack of capacity' and 'democratic deficit'. What this work suggests is that intensifying national efforts to manage and control unruly local governments over the past ten years are making them more fragile. At the same time, measures aimed at disciplining and damping down discontent might actually be feeding into it.

To support these arguments, I will focus on changes in local government in Emnambithi/Ladysmith since 1994 and reflect on their wider significance. Ladysmith and surrounding townships and rural areas are not in any sense representative or typical. On the contrary, what makes Emnambithi/Ladysmith interesting is that, on the surface at least, it represents a 'model municipality'.

My research in the first phase of local government restructuring (1994-2000) revealed sharp contrasts in local political dynamics between Ladysmith and Newcastle. Reflecting specific local histories, the townships outside Ladysmith were highly organised and mobilised behind the African National Congress (ANC).

At the same time municipal officials and councillors were actively responsive to their constituents. The contrast with the generally chaotic local political dynamics in Newcastle was dramatic, as I show in my book *Disabling Globalization*.

From an administrative perspective, the Emnambithi/Ladysmith local municipality remains a model of efficiency and fiscal responsibility. Yet over the past ten years there has been notable erosion in how councillors respond not only to the needs, but also the upholding of social and economic rights of their constituents.

### CAN'T-PAYS LOSE OUT

Shifts in national policy and political-economic conditions over the past decade are crucial to understanding these shifts and their larger significance. First is a combination of ever larger carrots and sticks. Transfers from national to local government in the country as a whole jumped from R8.8-billion in the early 2000s to R46-billion in 2010.

In the mid-2000s central monitoring of municipal finances became much tighter, and many senior municipal officials have been placed on performance contracts. Also, councillors' salaries increased significantly after the 2006 local government elections, and the ANC began exercising much stricter control over councillor selection.

Second, national policy towards local government appears to have become far more 'pro-poor', primarily through the provision of minimal free basic services (FBS) – water, electricity, and sanitation – to poor households, administered by municipalities and funded by unconditional grants from national to local government. Yet especially in relation to water in established townships, this seemingly pro-poor policy is at the



*There is more to local government than elections.*

same time deeply harsh through its links with debt collection.

The logic of FBS is to sort out the 'can't pays' from the 'won't pays', and make things sufficiently unpleasant for the 'won't pays' so that they pay up. This is where the troubled question of water meters comes in.

Third, as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) knows painfully well, the decade of the 2000s has witnessed an ongoing jobs bloodbath, only partially and unevenly eased by social grants.

Persistent poverty and growing inequality do not just reflect a *lack of* economic development, argues Andries du Toit from the Programme on Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape. Instead they are the *result* of the path of growth and development of the South African economy that systematically *excludes* millions of poor people from participation in the economy as workers, producers, and traders. The excluded are simultaneously *incorporated* as consumers into the markets of the powerful companies in South Africa's core economy.

These processes are crucial to grasping changes in local

government over the past decade in Emnambithi/Ladysmith and their larger significance. The 2000 local government elections yielded huge support for the ANC in Ezakheni and Steadville, the townships outside Ladysmith.

But the party failed to gain a majority in the council. The reason was that new municipal boundaries had included surrounding rural areas into the local municipality. The ANC lost out to the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in these areas.

In 2001 the new Democratic Alliance/IFP council moved quickly to install water meters in Ezakheni, and clamp down on debt collection by restricting water to six kilolitres a month in areas like Steadville where there were already water meters. Under pressure from angry and fearful constituents local officials engaged the council in major battles.

### WATER METER DISPUTES

First ANC ward councillors in Steadville and other working-class townships with meters, fought to increase the minimum allocation of water from six to 18 kilolitres a month. In 2003, when floor crossing enabled the ANC to take over the council, they were

successful although in 2004 the district municipality controlled by the IFP took over authority for water.

The second battle, involving the installation of water meters, needs to be understood historically. In the 1960s and 70s, millions of black South Africans were moved into townships like Ezakheni in the former Bantustans through forced removals. In exchange they were guaranteed water, electricity, and other urban services at low, flat rates.

For residents of townships like these, where memories of apartheid-era dispossession are very much alive, installation of water meters represents another round of dispossession and calls forth angry protests. Responding to these protests, ANC ward councillors fiercely opposed meters and continued this opposition when the district municipality took over control of water in 2004.

Third, the inability of the municipality to restrict water has meant that there are no disadvantages to being defined as an 'indigent' household, eligible to have debts written off and qualify for free basic services. By 2006 more than half the township households had been classified as indigent, with councillors actively engaged in helping people to sign up.

The 2006 local government elections were a key turning point. In an already tense atmosphere the provincial ANC exercised tight control over the selection of councillors, unleashing further tensions that were intensified by sharp increases in councillors' salaries.

At the same time, municipal officials were subject to much tighter top-down control. The consequence was heavy pressures for 'credit control' and efforts to

limit the indigence register.

In the ensuing battles ward councillors have found themselves increasingly sidelined and incapable of responding to their constituents. They have been transformed into a petty bourgeoisie on the road to class power, as Ari Sitas has put it in *The Mandela Decade* at a time when many of their constituents confront ongoing retrenchments and intensified struggles for livelihood.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTRADICTIONS

Over the past several years there has been an uneasy stand-off. The ANC in Emnambithi/Ladysmith has been able to blame the IFP-led district municipality for poor water services, while the IFP could claim to be giving water away for free. Now that the ANC has taken the district in alliance with the National Freedom Party (NFP), they will meet head-on the contradictions of local government.

What then is the larger significance of changes in Ladysmith over the past decade?

To begin with, it is important to note that the municipalities outside the major metros confront massive pressures for redistribution to townships and impoverished rural areas from a far smaller tax base than the metros, as well as far less strong-arm capacity. While more resources are clearly needed, increased spending by itself is far from sufficient to solve the problems. Nor is it just a matter of competent and committed municipal officials, important though that may be.

Top-down disciplining of councillors is also inadequate. We have seen how even the most diligent and accountable councillors have been sidelined,

in part through the logics of how municipal indigence operates in practice.

In addition to this, during the past decade, in municipalities all over the country, official efforts have increasingly made technical that which is political – namely persistent poverty in the face of extreme and obscene inequality.

The most extreme instance of techno-fixing poverty is the Siyasizana project launched in 2009 by the City of Johannesburg – a project that in *Amandla* I called 'bar-coding the poor'. Yet such efforts are doomed to failure and may in fact be feeding into the popular anger and discontent that they were designed to contain in the first place.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me reflect briefly on 'the challenges for development' posed by local government. It is useful here to distinguish between the two meanings of 'development'. These are 'big-D Development' as intervention to bring about improvement and 'little-d development' as in the development of capitalism.

Much of the discussion about the problems with local government has been cast narrowly in terms of Development, in an ongoing quest for policy solutions. The time has come to open up for broader debate the contradictions of capitalist development embodied in local government – a debate in which the 'targets' of local government reform need to be active participants. <sup>LB</sup>

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