

KEYNOTE SPEAKER – SESSION 4

Infrastructure Service Delivery Institutions for Less Functional Areas

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ABSTRACT

Many South African municipalities usually suffer service delivery problems which can be ascribed to inadequate management, skills and budgets. The reasons for these in turn invariably include weak economic base, unwise spending of available funds, and difficulty of recruiting and retaining skilled staff. The municipal model which South Africa uses was evolved for industrialising 19th-century Britain, then transplanted to its colonies. Is it not time to review if it is still appropriate to delivering services in the non-metropolitan areas of SA?

Alternative institutional models have been proposed. Examples: (i) The attempt many years ago to set up “regional electricity distributors” to address electricity distribution infrastructure’s deterioration. (ii) The periodically revived proposal for “regional water utilities”. These two concepts had in common that responsibility for specific infrastructure and its service delivery function would be removed from municipalities and given instead to regional bodies.

During the second half of 2019, two departments published somewhat divergent views on institutional reform:

- CoGTA diagnosed ‘the pattern of operating in silos’ as leading to ‘non-optimal delivery of services’. Its proposed solution is an ‘integrated district based approach’.
- The ‘National Water and Sanitation Master Plan’ identified ‘several challenges associated with the current institutional arrangements’. To address this, DWS reiterated its preference for regional water (and sanitation) utilities ‘where necessary’.

The debate needs to be opened: will one of these be the saviour of failing service delivery by many municipalities? Moreover, is a single model for the whole country an appropriate response – or might a variety of responses be most appropriate and, if so, how could this be accommodated? Should the entire concept and scope of what constitutes ‘municipal services’ be reconsidered? If either Minister (Cooperative Governance or Water and Sanitation) gets her way, many municipalities will undergo change to their powers and functions on a scale not seen since the late 1990s.

Discussion at an IMESA conference of alternative service delivery models is long overdue.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the designers of South Africa’s new local government system applied the municipal model long established in the urban areas, with its attendant responsibilities, to the whole country, in the process creating a series of wall-to-wall municipalities. At the same time, an extensive set of support measures – subsequently much modified and enhanced – was put in place.

The independence of local government was emphasised by it, and provincial and national government, being referred to as ‘spheres of governance’, rather than as ‘tiers’.

After more than two decades of experience, there can no longer be any doubt that many municipalities have failed in their primary duty of delivering services. This paper presents evidence of this, and refers to the wide variety of interventions which have been proposed or attempted. But the paper goes further, asking fundamental questions about the current municipal model. It also argues that IMESA, as the body representative of those responsible for delivering municipal services, needs to consider what its views are.

THE PURPOSE OF MUNICIPALITIES

Clause 152 of the Constitution states that:

“The objects of local government are — (a) to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; (b) to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; (c) to promote social and economic development; (d) to promote a safe and healthy environment; and (e) to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.”

(South Africa 1996)

Some South African municipalities do at least a fairly good job of ensuring the provision of services to their communities in a sustainable manner. A sizeable number, however, do not – for the purposes of this paper, these are collectively referred to as the ‘less functional’ municipalities.

THE ORIGINS OF MUNICIPALITIES – SET UP TO DELIVER SERVICES.

Prior to the start of the 19th century, the only settlement of any size in South Africa, Cape Town, was administered by the Dutch East India Company. The Company did not provide more than rudimentary municipal services as we know them today, but when the British arrived a few years after the turn of the century, it was not as if they brought with them a tried and tested service delivery system which could quickly be adopted. Their own existing system, historically based on parish responsibility for basic services, was already unable to cope with rapid changes to the social and demographic face of Britain, in particular the Industrial Revolution then gathering speed.

In Britain, from 1832 onwards, a series of laws to radically restructure local government was crafted. These defined which services should be the responsibility of municipalities, how revenue should be raised, and how these institutions should be governed (generally, by councillors periodically voted into power by all adult persons). Changes continued for the rest of the century, driven by the need to provide more services for a rapidly increasing urbanised population. Change was also driven by, or enabled by, rapid advances in the theory of engineering, science and medicine, and the industrial capacity to manufacture the pipes and

pumps and the engineering works for service delivery, of types and on a scale not seen before. At the same time, rising educational standards and rising democracy levels, requiring a quantum jump in how local service delivery (with unprecedented representation of the users would be implemented), had to be thought about.

Cape Town, then the only South African urban centre of any consequence, became a municipality along the latest British lines in 1840. Its powers, and those of the municipalities subsequently created, were initially very limited, but evolved over more than a century in step with those in Britain, until the stage was reached that municipal government in both countries enjoyed a wide, albeit by no means identical, range of service delivery responsibilities.²

The current local model is, more or less, single or two-tier local government throughout South Africa, with each tier responsible for specific services, and governed by locally-elected council members. Revenue is raised from within the area of jurisdiction, supplemented by operating subsidies from national government. Capital funding is similarly raised from a mixture of local sources and national transfers.

Is it time to ask: how well is this model delivering the required services and, if not, why not?

THE PERFORMANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

It can't be said that many South African municipalities have, by and large, performed well at delivering the services expected of them in terms of the Constitution. A sample – just a sample – of indicators of this include:

- Service delivery protests (e.g. as measured by Municipal IQ).³
- The findings of the 'report cards' prepared by the South African Institution of Civil Engineering (SAICE) on the condition of public sector infrastructure.⁴
- The 'strategic overviews of the water sector' produced each year by the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS).^{5,6}
- The litigation, occasioned by repeated service delivery failure, brought by citizens or business groups against individual municipalities.⁷

The financial state of many municipalities is a cause of the greatest concern. For example, as the Deputy Minister of Finance recently expressed it:

'There are163 municipalities in financial distress and 108 municipalities that have passed an unfunded budget in 2020/21 financial year, Masondo said.' (Staff Writer 2021)

But the most recent, and the most comprehensive, assessment of the state of South Africa's local government, and the consequences for service delivery, was that which appeared just as this paper was being finalised: the Auditor General's annual report on municipalities in terms of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA).

'Audit results under the outgoing administration have demonstrated little sign of improvement and we have observed the deteriorating state of local government. When it took over, the administration inherited 33 clean audits. Unfortunately, it is now regressed to only 27 clean audits.' (AG Media release, page 1)

'Moreover, it is not surprising that citizens experienced poor service delivery from municipalities if less than a quarter of them could provide us with quality performance reports to audit' (Media release page 4).

The Auditor General gloomily observed that recommendations made in the past, e.g. 'effecting consequences for accountability failures', 'investing in preventative controls', and 'using our reports briefings and engagements to identify key areas that need attention', have largely been ignored or have been ineffectual (Media release page 2).

Most deplorable, she pointed out that: 'the most jarring revelations concern the impact of service delivery failures upon the most vulnerable of our citizens – the poor.' (Media release, page 7). Which is a conclusion reached some years – before by SAICE which, in the 2011 report card stated that 'the quality and reliability of basic infrastructure serving the majority of our citizens is poor and, in many places, getting worse' (2011, page 5).

None of this comes as any surprise, as some of the same municipalities have for a decade or more been identified as problematic. Media reports or court judgements name the same issues year after year. Each year, too, promises are made as to how improvements will be affected – very seldom can this improvement be observed.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

A perusal of the literature indicates that the biggest contributors to municipal service delivery failure are (in random order):

1. financial: the municipality overspends;
2. skills shortfall;
3. leadership is wanting.

A fourth possibility is that the current municipal model is simply no longer able to perform the service delivery functions expected of a municipality in South Africa.

1.

'Overspend' by definition is in terms of a funded and balanced budget – which, as the Deputy Minister of Finance has pointed out above, municipalities do not necessarily start the year with. Then income might not be raised where it could be. Or the municipality overspends on providing services or on overheads, or both.

The Auditor General reports year after year describe many areas where the funding available to municipalities can be spent to better effect. The reports on each municipality outline recommended improvement, which would sometimes save tens of millions of rand. Much of this is related to more appropriate purchasing or hiring choices, and also to supply chain management to obtain better value for money, and taking life-cycle costing into account when making capital purchases. But much of it is also related to money wasted in various other ways, particularly wasteful or even corrupt spending.

The reports also identify areas where opportunities to raise revenue – even where a municipality had the right to raise revenue, but did not – have been forgone.

That said, the weak state of much of the economy, weakened still further by the arrival of COVID-19 and the effect of the lockdowns, has undoubtedly hit municipal finances hard, as businesses and householders have found it increasingly difficult to pay what they owe municipalities.

2.

SAICE has consistently identified that insufficient skills – and systems (as for example systems for collection and analysis of performance data, and systems for identifying the long-term least-cost alternatives when initiating capital improvements) have hampered the operation and maintenance of infrastructure, and directly led to the deterioration of its condition. The same point – about low skills – has made by others, including SALGA and the Auditor General. For years, the solution has been sought in 'capacity building', but recently, and justifiably, scepticism has grown as to the efficacy of this capacity building.⁸

Provision for the outsourcing of selected services has long been on the statute book. The injudicious use of this has, however, attracted heavy

criticism: e.g. from the Auditor General, commenting, not for the first time, on the widespread but apparently ineffective use of consultants to prepare the financial statements (Auditor General 2021a;3).

Apart from ‘capacity building’, ways in which skills shortfall can sustainably be addressed are seldom explored to any effect, despite the difficulties which lack of capacity presents to many municipalities. For example, the smaller more remote municipalities would be unlikely to be places where staff with the required, often post-school, qualifications would ordinarily reside – or would even be willing to live for months at a time. Another aspect is the reported unwillingness of many competent staff to join the staff of municipalities because of their perception that municipal employ is too politicised.⁹ Ways must, and surely can, be found where it can be arranged that the low-level skills in the small remote towns are complemented by higher-level skills located elsewhere, rather than a search for these skills being confined to the municipality where the skills are needed. For example, it is worth investigating if the framework procurement contract concept, designed with infrastructure purchases in mind, can be adapted and extended to assist municipalities with other duties.

That obtaining skills from outside can be undermined, unless carefully designed and managed, is shown by the response to the use of consultants, reported above, to assist the municipal staff with preparation of financial statements.

Continuity of service can underpin the improvement of staff performance, as individual staff members over the years gain more and more understanding of the municipality for which they work.¹⁰ ‘Job-hopping’ is, however, all too prevalent.

3.

Poor leadership at underperforming municipalities is widely reported – not least by the Auditor General – as a prime suspect for the ‘less functionality’ of these municipalities. ‘Poor’ is variously defined, including leadership being unethical and corrupt, lacking accountability, and less than competent. While this applies to all levels of leadership in the municipality, for good reason – because it is the top leadership which has the greatest effect on the futures of a municipality – the heaviest criticism can be made of the political leadership and the level of the municipal manager.

One does not necessarily expect the leadership of a municipality to always be collegial, but the rivalries – inter-personal, inter-party and even intra-party – reported by the media almost daily can only be harmful to service delivery, as councillors attempt to influence service delivery decisions for sectarian gain or their own political gain rather than in the interests of all the citizens.

AUDITOR GENERAL 2019/2020 – AND RESPONSES

On the day that this paper was due to be completed and sent to the conference organisers – also the last day of the 2020/2021 municipal financial year – the Auditor General released her report on the local government audit outcomes for the 2019/2020 financial year. This prompted a flood of commentary, including a formal response from SALGA.

The Auditor General report, while an authoritative and most valuable snapshot of the status of municipal finances, reveals nothing unexpected, much of it deplorable, as in previous years. No fault can be found with its proposals for reform and the SALGA list of ‘what must be

done’ – together with many of the proposals in the commentaries, this year and on previous occasions (more or less the same lists that appear each year). But it must be asked: why is there little progress?

For example, SALGA advocates that: ‘Councils must employ competent people and take appropriate steps where officials fail to carry out their responsibilities’. Then again, ‘Mayors and Speakers must hold the administration accountable and act decisively to implement consequence management’.

The ratepaying public hears year after year of the need for municipalities to employ only competent people. But it is rare to hear of a senior official being ousted for incompetence.

MODIFYING THE MUNICIPAL SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

As mooted above, a fourth possibility is that the current municipal model is no longer able to perform the service delivery functions expected of a municipality in South Africa, and needs modification. Alternatively, that some municipal service delivery functions would be better performed by other institutions.

The municipal model for service delivery which South Africa uses was evolved for industrialising 19th-century Britain, then transplanted to its colonies. Is it not time to review if it is still appropriate to delivering services in the non-metropolitan areas here?

The possibility of significant institutional change, to improve municipal service delivery, was touched on above. Would some form of institutional change be an appropriate response? Not across the board, surely, because not all municipalities can be described as ‘less functional’. Which suggests that it is possibly not the model at fault, but the way it so often operates.

Again, the Minister of Finance:

‘We can’t speak of economic recovery and prosperity when municipalities, as agents responsible for helping government achieve these objectives, find themselves in a perpetual crisis.

‘... decisive action is needed to restore the integrity of the municipal sector.’

(Ministry of Finance 2021, pages 11 and 12.)

What is this ‘decisive action’? He does not say.

We now consider, firstly, ad hoc, on a small scale, bypassing the municipal model. And then some proposals

already made for a larger-scale, more nation-wide, move of specific services to alternative institutions.

AD HOC BYPASSING OF THE MUNICIPAL MODEL

Consider the possibility of ad hoc arrangements to accommodate a particular need – arrangements suitable for a particular municipality over a particular period of time. For example, that, to assist with skills deficiencies, a section of responsibility is outsourced for, say, five years.

As noted above, how well this would work would depend on the contract between the municipality and the organisation outsourced to, and how well this is managed on both sides.

There are limited precedents for management contracts in South Africa. Some of them, e.g. to stiffen the water and sanitation department leadership at a municipality (e.g. Johannesburg), have been for a fixed period with gradual handover of responsibilities until the end of the contract. It has been reported these have generally been a success. However they have only been put in place in municipalities, already well capacitated, that needed new strategic direction and innovative methods.

A number of other contracts, such as the framework procurement contract, and the multi-year series of social franchising model contracts for outsourcing infrastructure operation and maintenance, all, to the author's knowledge, in water and sanitation, have been successful. But the total number of these remains low. Why this is so is unknown, but a strong possibility is that the municipalities concerned have been reluctant to let go of responsibilities. Moreover, once appointed, some contractors find their municipalities unable to pay in full and on time, so the contractors themselves walk away.

There have been many programmes for the private sector to second qualified staff, especially technical and financial staff, to municipalities, some of them of several years duration. These also have had varied success, for different reasons, including that the seconded staff report that they are not accepted, and their work is not valued.

Nonetheless it is evident that a number of measures – not a full package, by any means – are currently available to assist municipalities with their service delivery tasks. But these are not as fully utilised as they could be.

Interest in local place-and-time-specific initiatives has risen during the last 12 months, where communities, or entities (e.g. Gift of the Givers), on a variety of bases, have intervened, specifically in the water and sanitation sector. Those with long memories will recall that, three decades ago, there were many functioning community-based water and sanitation schemes successfully operating, particularly in the former homelands. Once the initial capital cost of infrastructure had been covered, often with donor funding, these were generally financially self-sustaining. Post-1994, however, these were 'blocked because the priority was to establish municipalities that would be responsible for service provision' (Muller 2021: 1). Nonetheless, Section 51 of the 1997 Water Services Act remains on the statute books, allowing communities in smaller towns and rural areas to establish local water committees to take responsibility for their own water supply and sanitation services, and it would seem that the courts appear increasingly willing to brush aside objections that dysfunctional municipalities might have. However for such committees to be viable they would have to get access to that portion of equitable share funding intended for these same services (Ibid, pages 2-5).

A SAICE platform during June 2021 aired some of the related debate, and it became evident that ways do exist, difficult they might be, for a variety of community-based initiatives. For a small financially sound local group to take the lead would be a big asset.

Two further options could go some way to addressing the concerns of local businesses which pay their municipalities for water and/or electricity, intending that these funds be paid to Eskom and/or a water board, only for the municipality to retain the money and, as a consequence, for the utility to cut supplies. In June, a court ordered the Maluti a Phogung municipality to hand over for five years its revenue stream for electricity distribution. In May 2021 Sakeliga approached the courts for support of the establishment of so-called 'special masters' – such as independent auditors – to take control of water and electricity payments. Ratepayers and users of the services would then see their service tariff payments forwarded to the providers of the services, and not retained by the municipalities (Sakeliga 2021).

ALREADY TABLED FORMAL ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONAL MODELS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

Alternative institutional models have been proposed in the past.

Two examples:

- The best part of 20 years ago, government attempted to set up 'regional electricity distributors' to address the deterioration of electricity distribution infrastructure which is in the care of municipalities.
- Round about the same time, in response to repeated municipal water and sanitation delivery failures, government proposed the formation of 'regional water utilities'.

These two concepts had in common that responsibility for specific infrastructure and the associated service delivery function would be removed from multi-function municipalities and given instead to regional single-purpose bodies.

The six wall-to-wall regional electricity distributors (REDS) originated in proposals to Cabinet as far back as the 1990s but it was only in 2005 that the first RED, for the Western Cape including Cape Town, was established. Unfortunately, despite the merits of the proposal, government was unable to address the concerns of those municipalities which depended on surpluses from their electricity undertakings – if these were taken away, what substituting revenue stream would they receive? This, together with political opposition from Cape Town, killed the proposal, and the only RED was dissolved (Eberhard 2013).

The regional water utilities proposal has been revived a number of times, notably in the Water Master Plan (see below).

A dozen years ago, the Department of Cooperative Governance (CoGTA) evolved the Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTAS), a hugely ambitious programme to 'improve the organisational and political performance of municipalities and in turn the delivery of services' (CoGTA 2009: 25).

No confirmation could be received as to why, after a number of years, the initiative fizzled out, but it is suspected that it tried to do too much too soon, and the effort could not be sustained.

Incidentally, considering the importance of improving the top leadership of municipalities, this, and other initiatives, have in common that relatively little attention is given to this vital aspect. This is despite acknowledgement of its importance: e.g. in the LGTAS that 'there are serious leadership and governance challenges in municipalities' (Ibid, page 18).

During the second decade, the Municipal Infrastructure Support Agent (MISA), with the financial support of national Treasury, evolved the Regional Management Services Support model. The intention was that a small high-powered multidisciplinary team would be appointed to support each of three district municipalities in a change management process that would see a radical improvement in the leadership, service delivery, financial management, human relations practice, and supply chain management. If this succeeded on a pilot basis over several years, it would be rolled out to further municipalities (Wall 2016).

According to the latest annual report of MISA, the project is continuing, still in the three original municipalities, with no thought (yet) of it being extended to other municipalities.

More recently, during the second half of 2019, two national government departments published somewhat divergent views on local government institutional reform:

- CoGTA diagnosed as a 'challenge' the pattern of government operating in silos, contributing to non-optimal delivery of services. Its proposed solution is a district-based process by which joint and collaborative planning is undertaken at local, district and metropolitan by all three spheres of governance resulting in a single strategically focussed 'One Plan and One Budget' for each of the 44 districts and 8 Metros (CoGTA 2020: 8).

• Three months later, DWS launched its 'National Water and Sanitation Master Plan', which identified 'several challenges associated with the current institutional arrangements'. To address this, DWS reiterated its preference for regional water (and sanitation) utilities 'to deliver some local government services on an agency basis where local or district municipalities lack capacity' (DWS 2019b: 2-5).

If either Minister (Cooperative Governance or Water and Sanitation) gets her way, municipalities, especially those covering the less functional areas, will undergo change to their powers and functions on a scale not seen since the late 1990s.

The regional water utility concept still features in the latest version of the National Water Master Plan on the Department's website, although no information of current activities could readily be seen.

In contrast, the district development model is reported to have been working well in its three pilot municipalities (CoGTA 2020), while it is known that workshops are being held in preparation for the model rollout elsewhere in the country.

At the end of 2020, the National School of Government (NSG) published 'A national implementation framework towards the professionalisation of the public service'. During February 2021 it hosted consultation hearings for specific stakeholder groups. One of these was targeted at 'Professional bodies and institutions in local government', and indeed local government is frequently mentioned in the document. Of particular interest to municipal service delivery practitioners is the intention 'to create a capable, ethical and developmental public service', and that the public service 'be merit-based and insulated from party politics'. How it would be thus insulated is unfortunately not described.

Most recently of all, as noted above, the Minister of Finance stated that:

'... decisive action is needed to restore the integrity of the municipal sector.'

He, too, did not indicate what he had in mind – what type of 'decisive action'!

WHERE CHANGE MIGHT NEED TO BEGIN

There is some evidence that the service delivery problems of some municipalities originate in, or are greatly exacerbated by leaderships' politics and personalities. This would suggest that resolving, or neutralising, these politics and personalities would likely go a long way to improving the service track record of many municipalities.

After all, it is at the level of political leadership that the major decisions are taken: for example budget priorities, and key staff appointments. Once these are in place, the ability of even senior staff below management level to influence bad decisions (for example, a decision that the operation and repair budget will be cut to the bone) is very limited.

When 'resolving or neutralising' these is referred to here, it is so that the leadership will as a result only make decisions in the best interests of the municipality as a whole, and no longer be influenced by personal or political agendas.¹¹

It is here at this top level, also, that the moral tone of the municipality is best set – e.g. a stance against corruption and nepotism.

Perhaps the Deputy Minister of Finance, in his comments on the Lekwa ruling, has put his finger on a key factor in rebuilding infrastructure service delivery where it is broken:

'The case also shows that political and administrative leadership is fundamental to creating a viable municipal sector, he said. "It is also perpetuated by a failure to deal decisively with disruptive management

and leadership issues. If we are serious about fixing a financial and service delivery crisis, we need to first fix the political and administrative leadership crisis!"

There is a lot of merit in this suggestion that change might need to begin here, with the political and administrative leadership.

Reinforcing this, the Auditor General deplored that, 'while the support of mayors and councils is crucial when it comes to resolving material irregularities', 'this is an area where we have not yet observed any significant uptake or commitments' – the only area she thus highlighted (Auditor General 2021a: 5).

So: what can be done to moderate the 'political landscape' in municipalities, in the interest of service delivery?

Would institutional change assist this process?

CONCLUSIONS: WHERE IMESA COMES IN – OR SHOULD COME IN

The above discussion has (briefly) aired issues of vital importance to the sustainability of municipalities – and therefore to the sustainability of the service delivery ambitions of municipalities. Some randomly selected and sorted points to ponder (without taking a stance on any of them), which go to the heart of the reasons for the existence of municipal government:¹²

- Are the service delivery ambitions of many municipalities too ambitious to possibly succeed? That is, ambitious in the range of services (should some municipalities simply give up trying to provide specific services) or quality of services (for example, given the operation and maintenance costs that will be incurred, should some municipalities – specifically rural municipalities – cease attempts to provide reticulated water and sanitation to any households not close to existing urban areas, and rather encourage much less expensive and more sustainable decentralised solutions)?
- Of the expenses that municipalities incur, which category of substantial expenses could be drastically reduced with the least harm to service delivery? (One thinks of the costs of administration – e.g. of the council leadership – as opposed to the costs of water supply, or road repair.)
- Certainly, to still be, after 20 years, persevering in some parts of the country with the colonial municipal model despite the huge efforts that each year have to be invested in trying to assist those municipalities, no longer makes any sense whatsoever.

The debate needs to be opened: will one of models described in this paper – or some other model – be the saviour of failing service delivery by many municipalities – the "less functional areas"? Alternatively, would some communities not be better served by a regional utility – maybe a multipurpose regional utility, rather than one for water and sanitation only, as DWS is proposing? And what about the "district development model", which appears at the time of writing (June 2021) to be government's current favourite?

IMESA, as the body which is representative of those responsible for a primary "object" of local government, namely implementing infrastructure service delivery, needs to consider what its views are. If change in powers and functions at municipal level, and/or change to the institutional model for service delivery, are proposed, IMESA needs to be ready to respond. Better still, IMESA should be formulating its own ideas on the matter, proactively ready to present them when appropriate.

What alternatives will moderate the "political landscape" in municipalities, in the interest of service delivery? And what can be done to assist under-capacitated municipalities in respect of the skills and other resources, especially finance, which they need?

TO SUM UP:

- It must seriously be considered if municipalities which chronically fail at delivering services should not rather be relieved of some responsibilities.
- National government seems to be swinging towards recognition of the need to address this.
- Alternative institutions have been proposed from time to time. The merits of these and other possibilities need to be investigated systematically.

And, certainly:

- One model will not be suitable for all of our municipalities, so enormously varied are they in terms of factors such as population, resources, and urbanisation. A variety of arrangements for service delivery will be needed. But how could this diversity be accommodated?
- The imported model, working so well in parts of this country, can, if governance issues are resolved, also work in others – but demonstrably not throughout the country.
- For much of the country, what constitutes a municipality, and which institution delivers what are currently regarded as ‘municipal services’, needs to be rethought.

Whereas discussion at an IMESA conference of service delivery models is long overdue, it is trusted that this paper will offer a starting point for the discussion.

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Emphasis added by the author.

- ¹ It is acknowledged that these few paragraphs are a gross oversimplification of a complex history. For example, the many changes to franchise arrangements, involving gender, racial and property-

owning qualifications – also the skewing effect of the period of homeland government – are acknowledged, but not described here.

² Its most recent annual summary, that of the year 2020, notes the ‘downward dip’ in that year compared to the several years preceding it, but adds that this dip is ‘not necessarily an endorsement of municipalities’. Rather, it ascribes the dip to COVID-19 lockdown measures which for most of the year placed restrictions on public gatherings. (Municipal IQ 2021: 1)

Nonetheless, 2020 witnessed 102 service delivery protests – an order of magnitude not seen since 2011, whereafter the numbers grew annually, reaching a peak of 237 in 2018 – during which ‘protesters raise issues that are the responsibility or perceived responsibility of local government (such as councillor accountability, the quality and pace of basic service delivery, and, in metro areas, housing)’. (Ibid)

³ That this exercise concluded in 2017, the most recent year available, with awarding South Africa’s public infrastructure an overall average (i.e. across all sectors) grade of only ‘D+’, of a range from ‘A+’ through ‘E-’, indicates a worrying incidence of infrastructure failure, or propensity to fail, with consequences for service delivery. (SAICE 2017: 11)

⁴ Using inter-alia information from the annual Statistics South Africa General Household Survey, DWS in its “2019 Strategic Overview of the Water Sector in South Africa” (DWS 2019a: 35) stated that, in that year:

⁵ “88.0% of households had been provided with a basic level of water supply infrastructure. However, not all of the infrastructure was able to meet the level of assurance (reliability) of supply requirements, defined for a basic water supply as interruptions of less than 48 hours at any one time and a cumulative interruption time of less than 15 days every three months. If this reliability requirement is taken into consideration, then the 88.0% value reduces to 74.36%.”

⁶ For example, Emfuleni LM, in Gauteng; Koster, in Kgetlengrivier LM, North West Province; Lichtenburg, in Ditsobotla LM, also in North West Province; Standerton, in Lekwa LM, Mpumalanga; Mafube LM, in Free State; Maluti-A-Phofung LM, also in Free State; Enoch Mgidima LM, in Eastern Cape; Makhanda LM, also in Eastern Cape; Msunduzi LM, in KwaZulu-Natal.

⁷ The Minister of Finance, no less, has queried the efficacy of government programmes to build capacity in municipalities:

⁸ “National and provincial government have to date spent billions of rands in local government capacity building programmes. The poor performance of many municipalities shows that there was almost a zero return on that investment.” (Ministry of Finance 2021: 11)

⁹ “The most important factor for attracting those with experience back into the system are, however, the need for more autonomy and authority for delivery departments, and uncoupling the business of local government from the politics of local government.” (Lawless 2016: 61):

¹⁰ SALGA gives instances of this. (SALGA 2021: 8)

¹¹ As envisaged by the CEO of the South African National Roads Agency Ltd some years ago. When talking about the difficulty of obtaining funding for maintenance and repair, he stated that:

While underbudgeting for maintenance and repair is not justifiable and makes no sense in the long run, it is nonetheless understandable that it happens ‘in a political landscape dealing with a tight budget and a scarcity of skills’. ‘The critical question’, he went on to say, was how much does engineering (read ‘infrastructure’, or ‘service delivery’) inform needs and priorities in that political landscape. (Quoted in: Frankson, 2018, page 25)

¹² Raising these questions might be heresy to some, within and outside of IMESA – but they must be asked.