

Participatory governance through ward committees

The Department of Provincial and Local Government held a conference on ward committees on 24–25 June. These are the vehicles through which participatory governance takes place and their effective performance is crucial to the success of proper community participation in local government.

The conference aimed to review progress in establishing ward committees, to identify challenges, and to develop a programme of support to consolidate ward committees as critical pillars of the democratic system of local government. The following challenges and focus areas were discussed:

- the roles, powers and functions of ward committees;
- strengthening participation of communities in local governance;
- capacity building and support to ward committees; and
- the regulatory framework of ward committees.

Roles, powers and functions

The Municipal Structures Act does not prescribe any particular powers and functions to ward committees; this is left to the discretion of municipalities. The result is confusion and uncertainty among ward committee members about their roles and functions. Added to this is a lack

of standardisation, as different provinces have different guidelines, and municipalities understand – and provide for – ward committees differently. This all results in inconsistencies between ward committees, which defeats their purpose.

Ward committees should play a bigger role in the IDP process and the link between them should be strengthened. A role identified for ward committees is monitoring the performance of the municipalities. This enables communities' participation in setting performance measures for municipalities. There is a need for proper national guidelines on the roles, powers and functions of ward committees and on meeting procedures.

Strengthening participation of communities in local government

The lack of community interest and participation in ward committees, largely due to the distances that need to be travelled and the numbers of people encompassed by the wards, was a challenge identified at the conference. Further, the public are not aware of the roles and functions of ward committees, while in some instances party politics within a ward affects participation and certain communities feel that they are not fully accommodated.

National guidelines should provide for sector- and area-based representation. It is important that a ward committee reflects the demographics and interests of the community it represents.

Capacity building and support

The lack of capacity among, and training of, ward committee members were identified as major stumbling blocks, accounting for most of the challenges ward committees face. Capacity building initiatives should be formulated so that they take the different backgrounds and competencies of ward committee members into account. Support, such as infrastructure and financial resources, will further enhance the operation of ward committees. The role of the speaker in relation to ward committees should be spelled out in national guidelines, as should the support that the office of the speaker can give to ward councillors.

- National guidelines should be developed to deal with the role, powers and functions of ward committees.
- Guidelines should also address the issue of sector- and area-based representation to enhance representativeness in ward committees.
- The term of office for ward committee members should be extended.

Regulatory framework

A major concern expressed at the conference was the need to standardise the operation of ward committees to ensure uniformity. However, municipalities have the competencies to regulate and establish ward committees themselves. The need for more diverse representation within the ward committees was also identified, which might affect the number of ward committee members allowed. There is also a need to extend the current term of office of ward committee members to enhance capacity building. It was suggested that the term of office should coincide with the term of council. Another proposal was that the term of office should not be less than two years but not more than three.

Another thorny issue was the expenses incurred by ward committee members. A proposal was made that municipalities should reimburse ward committee members for out-of-pocket expenses.

There was consensus that most of the issues raised should be dealt with in national guidelines. Legislative amendments should be minimised and over-regulating should be guarded against. Rather, national guidelines should be developed that municipal councils can adapt to suit their unique needs.

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