

# Challenges

## FOR THE NEW COUNCILS



Photo: Jason Meinijes/PictureNET

The election of 5 December 2000 was the formal beginning of the new local government dispensation. Local government was established as the primary site for service delivery and development in the country. Five years on, there are concerns about local government's ability to execute its mandate. For the new councils, the next five years will be critical in meeting these challenges and making local government work effectively in fulfilling its mandate of providing services and development.

There is deep concern about municipalities' ability to deliver services and function effectively. In 2004, the national government launched Project Consolidate, aimed at assisting municipalities to effect their basic functions. This project, driven by the President, identified 136 municipalities facing serious difficulties and in immediate need of assistance. More recently, President Mbeki has even suggested that expertise should be imported from abroad to cope with the skills shortage.

The failure of many municipalities was not only noticed by government, but, more importantly, by the people. Not since the violent protest in the black townships in the 1980s have South Africans witnessed protests on the streets of such magnitude.

### Problems

The most common complaints people voice are the following:

- **Failure to deliver services**

Local government is put forward as the engine of development and service delivery, yet some communities are not receiving basic municipal services such as housing, water and sanitation. While there

has been a roll-out of new services in some areas, they are uneven and the basic maintenance of service systems is often neglected. The problems are most evident in the rural areas. The necessary skills levels are not always present. Municipalities cannot comply with the law and financial accounting and, as a result, qualified Auditor-General's reports are regularly issued.

- **Not people-centered**

A frequently voiced complaint is that some municipalities tend to be inwardly-focused – the vehicle for a self-serving elite – rather than being community-centered. People complain about:

- the high salaries of senior officials;
- councillors losing touch with their constituencies;
- political appointments to both high and low positions;
- the high level of the wage bill (the percentage of budget spent on wages is ever-increasing); and
- corruption.

The ultimate form of a self-serving institution is corruption. There are numerous examples. The most dramatic event was the arrest of the mayor and the municipal manager of Mangaung on multi-million rand corruption charges.

## Why the problems?

There are a number of reasons for the problems experienced by municipalities.

- **Too much is expected**

Municipal performance should be assessed against what local government can realistically achieve. By demanding too much, local government is set up for failure. It is simply unrealistic to expect that many municipalities (particularly in rural areas) can effect local economic development while the growth in the national economy is slow and urban based. A review of integrated development plans (IDPs) indicates that the expectation of citizens often fall beyond the scope of local government's competencies.

- **Newness of the system**

The local government dispensation is new. New laws are added every year. Last year it was the Property Rates Act and the Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act. For a system that has undergone major changes in the past five

# KEY POINTS

- With the lack of capacity a key contributing factor in local government's underperformance, capacity building programmes are essential.
- Top management must be equipped to think strategically, with a development focus.
- The new councils will have to ensure that municipalities are community-centered rather than self-centered institutions.

years, the track record on the whole is reasonable. All municipalities underwent a process of amalgamation, which in some instances has not been completed yet. However, with each passing year, this factor obviously becomes less important.

- **Complex system**

Municipalities must function in a highly complex institutional framework which often produces conflict. The relations between district and local municipalities are not always productive. While the Constitution holds out the promise of local self-government, the statutory framework created for municipalities is extremely complex and burdensome. Where the requirements are so onerous and costly, non-observance becomes the inevitable reality.

- **Not developmentally focused**

Part of the problem is that there has not been a complete shift in the thinking of all municipalities towards development. This lack of development orientation manifests itself by the delinkage of the budget and the IDP. Some municipalities start off with their budget and then afterwards try to link it (ineffectively) to the IDP. Strategic planning is consequently weak.

- **A top-down system**

The local government system is premised on representative and participatory democracy, requiring a bottom-up approach to governance. In reality, the converse may be the case. First, the level and effectiveness of participatory democracy is limited. Ward committees are yet to operate

optimally and the participatory process of integrated development planning is often more form than substance. Second, much of local government policy is dictated by national government. Where the national government prescribes all aspects of development, the very purpose of democratic local government is undercut. The danger is that municipalities may become mere appendages of national government. Not only does that often result in unfunded mandates, but development is then no longer shaped by communities.

## The challenges

- **Human empowerment of local government**

With the lack of capacity a key contributing factor in local government's underperformance, capacity building programmes are essential. They include a thorough understanding of the legal and policy requirements of good governance. Further, it is of critical importance to effect a change in macro-thinking and strategic planning. Top management must be equipped to think strategically, with a development focus.

- **Political leadership**

The health of local government is much dependent on the quality of the leadership that the new councils will provide. They will have to ensure that:

- municipalities are community-centered rather than self-centered institutions;
- appointments are not politicised;
- corruption is rooted out wherever it occurs – in council or the administration.

The challenge for the new councils is to make local government work. Local government must play its key role to deliver democracy and development. The new councils certainly have their work cut out in the next five years.