

Are our councillors listening?

Not that long ago, a democracy promotion organisation arranged a course to help local councillors improve their capacity to represent voters. The skills it taught were how to hear what local voters were saying and how to speak on their behalf. After a while, the councillors complained that the course did not meet their needs. They wanted, they said, to be taught “how to deliver services”.

The councillors' request is a useful example of what is wrong with our current attitudes to local government. They reacted as they did because they had repeatedly been told by national political leadership and the media that their job, and that of the councils on which they served, was service delivery. In reality, it is not the job of councillors to deliver services. Nor is this local government's chief task. Councillors' – and councils' – job is to represent people, which is not at all the same as 'delivery'.

First, while local government obviously does offer services to citizens, it is not the job of councillors to deliver them. Their task, rather, is to speak for those who voted for them. That means making sure that what local government does is what voters want. Rather than 'delivering' anything, it means

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watching over those who do provide services to make sure that what is done and how it is done square with voters' wishes.

Second, 'delivery' is not what local government should be doing. Nor is it what people who have taken to the streets in protest want from their councillors. 'Delivery' happens when those who have something transfer it to those who need it. To insist that the main task of local government is 'delivery' is to insist that councils have goodies which citizens need and that its job is to make sure that they get them. This sees local government as active, voters as passive – councils give, voters receive. And it suggests that the best council is one that has lots of technically smart and qualified people because it is they who can 'deliver' best.

Role of councillors

But, in a democracy, citizens are not meant to be clients of the government – they are meant to own it. It is not meant to hand

things out to them, it is meant to serve them. And so citizens are meant actively to hold local government to account, not to wait for it to 'deliver' to them. Local government is meant to be a servant; those who have needs are meant to be its employer. The core task of local government is, therefore, service, not delivery – doing what voters want, not handing goods out to them. This means that their priority is to listen to voters and try to meet their needs, not 'deliver' what they are assumed to need. And the best councillors are therefore not those who have the most degrees or technical skills, but those who know how to listen to citizens and speak on their behalf.

To illustrate this, we can look at some current developments in local government. Last year, a wholesale clear-out of councillors was meant to end grassroots citizens' disenchantment with councils. But protests against mayors and councillors continue, despite the fact that the African National Congress (ANC), whose councillors make up the majority, replaced 60% of its local representatives. And, while some say these protests are motivated by people trying to gain political advantage, we should know from our own history that people do not protest unless they are unhappy.

Government and opposition leaders seem to think that the solution to the protests lies in a common business solution – firing people who do not perform. But this 'remedy' is precisely what did not work last time. The stress on axing 'non-

performers' is a cause of the problem, not a cure, because it rests on the faulty belief that it is possible for anyone to know better than local people who should represent them.

This approach helped cause the problem it was meant to solve. In our first local elections, popular grassroots activists who had developed strong reputations for being able to speak for people and address their problems were passed over as candidates. Because our voters are extremely loyal to their parties, the fact that credible local activists did not gain the party nomination ensured that they were not elected. The effect, inevitably, was to weaken the link between local government and citizens. And it is this weak link – the reality that citizens do not think elected councillors care about them or their problems – which explains the continuing protest: protestors repeatedly complain that their mayor or councillors neither listen to them nor respond to their needs. The protestors clearly feel that they did not choose those who were nominated to represent them. Leaving the choice of candidates to local people could not make voters trust their councillors less and may prompt them to place more faith in them.

But more is needed if councillors are to win voters' trust. Equally important is the need to send out different messages about local government and its purpose. Currently, municipalities are seen largely as implementing agents for national plans. In theory, councils choose their own priorities; IDPs and other processes have been created to allow them to do this. But they are expected to do it within national policies and programmes that limit local government's choices. Disrespect for local difference and choice is often subtle: for example, the expectation that smaller, less resourced, municipalities should perform the same tasks as their big-city equivalents forces some councils into ways of doing things that remove them from their voters' needs. And often, these limits on local government's right to choose are justified as routes to better 'delivery'.

Nor are local councillors encouraged to represent voters – as we saw in the incident mentioned earlier, they are seen as agents of 'delivery'. But councillors are the voice of the people. They are not elected municipal officials – or assistants of other spheres of government. Grassroots voters know what their councillors are meant to do and have become angry at their failure to do it, hence the common complaint that councillors and councils do not listen to them. While that may include a desire for services, people who want to be listened to expect very different things of councils to people who want government to deliver to them.

But, while local voters know what is needed, opinion-



A woman passes the burning house of a councillor after angry Khutsong residents set it on fire.

formers and decision-makers continue to ignore them by insisting that local representatives be judged not primarily on whether they speak for people, but on whether they implement the plans of others. Only when we begin to insist not that councillors 'deliver', but that they do what local voters want them to do, are all our local governments likely to become valued servants of the people rather than targets of protest.

Comment

For councils and councillors, the message is clear. Technical and management skills can help, but they are only means to an end. Councillors and councils who want the support of their voters will concentrate not on delivering more smartly, but on listening harder to voters, working more with them, and serving them rather than trying to hand out goods to them.

Dr Steven Friedman
Research Associate, IDASA
Visiting Professor of Politics,
Rhodes University