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Quality of local political leadership

IS CRUCIAL FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

The Centre for Policy Studies recently completed a study on the role of elected local councillors, particularly ward councillors, in service delivery in South Africa. Currently the public do not see local councillors playing an active role in service delivery. Much of the commentary on service delivery protests appears to focus on the role of municipal technocrats and administrators, as well as contracted service providers. However, we neglect the role of councillors at our peril, given the importance of local political leaders in shaping citizen perceptions of the efficacy of local institutions of government in meeting their needs. Also, local political leaders have an important role to play in mediating state-citizen relationships around issues of quality of local governance. This is especially important in the context of the recent spate of municipal service delivery failures, which have led to public protests across the country.

Understanding the role of local councillors in service delivery will become increasingly important for two crucial reasons. Firstly, it is widely expected that service delivery protests will continue to increase in 2010, and possibly in 2011, when the country is expected to hold the fourth democratic local elections since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. Secondly, and more importantly, the national government places great emphasis on monitoring and performance evaluation. Previously the nature, consistency and quality of oversight, monitoring and evaluation at local government level were extremely poor, as local councillors generally lacked the necessary technical and other vital skills to undertake effective oversight of the work of their municipal administrations.

This research was carried out in four municipalities in Gauteng, the North West, the Northern Cape and the Free State. These four municipalities represent a range of settlement types in South Africa, from predominantly densely populated urban areas to those characterised by sparsely populated rural settlements. This article records some of the key findings.

Key findings

The study investigated a number of important themes in order to understand the current role and functions of local councillors in the processes of service delivery in South Africa. These included relations between councillors and residents, the oversight functions of councillors and the impact of party politics on the quality and effectiveness of local councillors.

key points

The findings suggest that where councillors performed their functions and responsibilities effectively, it was through maintaining frequent contact with residents and ensuring a two-way flow of information between the municipality and residents. This resulted in communities being more satisfied with service delivery, despite a severe lack of resources and perceived municipal failures in service delivery. It was also found that councillors played a mediating role between residents and the administration.

The study found a 'best practice' case in the Northern Cape. In this municipality, councillors effectively conveyed residents' needs to the municipal administration. They were found to have managed the expectations of the local residents effectively, thus possibly obviating the need for community protest action due to unfulfilled expectations. In this case, effective information dissemination and awareness campaigns relating to municipal development programmes and resource limitations played a crucial role in managing community expectations.

The case of the municipalities in the North West and Free State highlighted the consequences of poor councillor-citizen relationships. Factors such as the large size of wards, municipal consolidation and weak councillor capacity aggravated citizen frustration with poor services, leading to widespread service delivery protests.

In all of the four municipalities covered in this study, it was found that oversight over the municipal administration was the key to the effective municipalities delivering services in a sustainable way. Oversight was generally exercised through the committee system, particularly section 80 committees aligned to specific departments or portfolios (eg transport and community safety). With the exception of the Northern Cape municipality, these oversight committees did not appear to be performing their functions effectively owing to a number of factors: lack of administrative support (Gauteng); incompetence and lack of basic literacy among some councillors (North West); and political interference and heavy-handedness by the leadership, including politically motivated arbitrary assignments and reshuffling of committee memberships (North West).

In many cases, the dual role of councillors serving both as members of the municipal executive (in the mayoral committee) and as office bearers in the council chamber (as chairpersons of committees) tended to aggravate the problem of political

- Councillor-citizen relations must be strengthened in a way that ensures regular interaction and information exchange on the work of the council and the nature of service delivery deficiencies.
- Local forums such as ward committees need to be strengthened to serve as platforms for interaction between citizens and their elected leaders.
- Greater attention must be paid to helping local councillors acquire the hard skills they need for oversight.
- The selection of local councillors by political parties should place greater emphasis on levels of education and skills such as basic numeracy and basic literacy.
- Greater acknowledgement of individual specialisation in the allocation of oversight committee membership would improve the quality of oversight.
- The choice of local political leadership at municipal level should be given greater priority by political parties, particularly in terms of ideal qualities, prior leadership roles and experience in high office.

interference in the function of effective oversight. This was particularly the case in the municipality located in the Free State.

The ruling party's policy of 'deployment' was also cited for its pernicious effects on the work of councillors, because it resulted in the most skilled and competent councillors in particular service sectors not always being appointed to the relevant oversight committees. The municipality in Gauteng was the prime example. In the Northern Cape municipality, although oversight committees are located within the mayoral committee system, appointments to portfolio committees were done on the basis of knowledge and capacity to exercise effective oversight. This framework was further strengthened by the robust participation in the portfolio committees of members of the opposition, contributing to a more transparent and effective oversight process.

Policy implications

The findings of this study point to three crucial policy actions that need to be taken by policymakers to ensure that local councillors become effective in the performance of their roles and functions.

Firstly, it is imperative that councillor-citizen relations be strengthened in a way that ensures regular interaction and information exchange on the work of councils and the nature of service delivery deficiencies. It is generally agreed that citizens respond positively to regular information and credible explanations of why government is unable to meet their basic service needs. The credibility of local forums such as ward committees needs to be strengthened so that they can serve as platforms for interaction between citizens and their elected leaders.

Secondly, greater attention needs to be paid to helping local councillors acquire the hard skills they need for oversight. Also, the selection of local councillors by political parties should place greater emphasis on levels of education and skills such as basic numeracy and basic literacy. In addition, greater acknowledgement of individual specialisation in the allocation of oversight committee membership would go a long way towards improving the quality of oversight.

Finally, the choice of local political leadership at municipal level should be given greater priority by political parties, particularly in terms of ideal qualities. Consideration should also be given to prior leadership roles and experience in high office.

The full report can be accessed and downloaded from the Centre for Policy Studies website at www.cps.org.za.

The impact of party politics was evident in all four municipalities in that the governing parties selected council leaders. The political leadership set the tone, defined the agenda of the municipality and determined the framework for the performance of councillors.

In the Northern Cape municipality, the mayor and speaker formed the bedrock of a mature and ethical political leadership structure. Both were seasoned political leaders with the mayor having more than ten years' experience as a councillor. His background as a church minister was a key factor underpinning the trust he enjoyed as a leader among all represented parties and the community. As a result, this mayor's decisions were generally accepted by all parties as being in the interests of the community. Clearly this indicates the crucial importance of the process of leadership selection by political parties at the local level.

It was also found that this mayor valued the principle of inclusivity, and usually ensured that all interest groups and sectors in the municipality were part of decision-making processes, thus avoiding the use of voting as a mechanism for decision-making in the municipality. This created a sense of cross-party consensus on issues that would have created conflict in other municipalities.

By contrast, the North West municipality exhibited the characteristics of weak and divisive political leadership, with negative consequences for service delivery, resulting in calls for the mayor to be fired. Informants in this study perceived ruling party councillors to be ineffective and unable to put the needs of residents before those of the party. Political interference was found to be rife and undermined the ability of councillors to perform their oversight functions effectively. Also, the North West municipality exhibited all the pernicious effects of the policy of deployment, which resulted in poorly prepared and unskilled councillors being placed in key portfolio committees.

The existence and strength of cliques in this municipality ensured fractious governance, which compromised oversight.



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