

District Intergovernmental Forums

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PAST

By August 2006, all district municipalities must have established district intergovernmental forums (DIFs). The Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act (IRFA) of 2005 prescribed these forums to provide a framework for co-operation and co-ordination between districts and their locals. Co-operation, as detailed in Chapter 3 of the Constitution, is the guiding principle of intergovernmental relations. But a legislative forum alone is not enough. As the past five years of district-local relations have made clear, district forums are only successful when all members embrace a co-operative ethos and understand the main sources of intra-municipal conflict.

District forums before 2005

Due to the difficulties with co-operation that many districts experience, numerous non-statutory forums were established before 2005 to facilitate better communication and co-ordination. Reflecting on the practice of these forums is instructive for the successful implementation of the DIFs required by August 2006. What follows is a summary of the best practices from five years of intergovernmental relations.

Meetings

Successful intergovernmental relations require regular contact. Many districts established forums that met a few times, often with ambitious agendas. The meetings became increasingly infrequent until the forum ceased to meet at all in some districts. Ideally, DIFs should meet at least a few times a year with a full agenda (although the IRFA only

requires one meeting annually). This preserves the relationship between district and local mayors, which is important to prevent conflicts from emerging by maintaining a frequent exchange of views.

Service providers

The meetings should also try to include service providers (and must do so at least once a year) to discuss delivery options for the district. While private corporations are the usual invitees, DIFs should consider inviting other providers, such as community-based organisations. This ensures districts are informed about the range of options from self-provision to outsourcing. However, the

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chairperson should ask service providers to leave after their presentations so that the members can debate providers' worth freely and objectively.

Agenda

The practical functioning of DIFs is critical for their effectiveness. Agendas are key in setting a manageable list of topics to focus a meeting. This is also a means for local municipalities to raise their concerns, as noted earlier. In the meeting itself, all discussions, presentations and resolutions should be recorded accurately in detailed minutes. Any decisions taken and recorded in a meeting should be reviewed in future meetings to monitor progress. A dedicated DIF secretary should be appointed to record, keep safe and distribute the agenda and minutes.

Provincial support

Since many district forums will suffer from a shortage of administrative capacity, a province can play an assisting role by linking DIFs to the provincial department responsible for local government. Provincial representatives at forum meetings can help co-ordinate the plans of district and local municipalities with the provincial policies on financial and budgetary issues. Provinces should also promote co-operation between districts and locals by facilitating district-local conflict management through DIFs to improve effective service delivery.

Technical support

District intergovernmental forums are essentially political; member mayors meet to debate and co-ordinate political

key points

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questions. Municipal managers, however, are responsible for implementing this policy. Districts are advised to take advantage of the technical forums provided for in the IRFA. These forums provide a valuable mechanism for municipal managers to meet and discuss implementing the co-ordinated plans developed in the district forum, which is comprised of mayors. Successful technical forums also report regularly to the DIF to update the mayors on the actual outcomes of their plans, measure progress and address implementation problems.

Comment

District-local relations have had a chequered past in many municipalities. The problems range from poor understanding of a district forum's purpose to outright political intransigence. When creating the new IRFA-compliant forums, districts and locals should carefully consider the past conflicts in the five years of intergovernmental relations. In this way, a district can avoid some of the pitfalls facing any district-local forum. Yet the DIFs are, in the final analysis, political forums. To maximize the effectiveness of the new DIFs, district and local mayors must match formal compliance to the IRFA with a political commitment to co-operation.

CAGE project

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