

Responsive and Responsible Local Government: An Indicative Research Agenda

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The evolution towards the aspired developmental local government in South Africa is part of the ambition to build a capable developmental state that is able to deliver the ideal of a better life for all. It is born out of the belief that development is the goal of governing. It therefore envisages a responsive government in that it must respond to the needs of society including the poor, as well as a responsible government in the sense that it plans, executes, and accounts for tasks given to it every five years of the electoral cycle. To this end, legislations, policies, and decisions focus on improving managerial efficiency, development planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation, accountability, and oversight in local government. There are many initiatives meant to support this, the latest being the district delivery model, whose impacts on this ideal remains a subject for analysis. Having established that we are seeing improvement on all fronts, both in big and small municipalities in South Africa, this paper reflects on ways this happens and factors that need to be better understood through new research and analysis. It uses content analysis and prognostic devices to arrive at solutions that could be considered, but which also need to be tested in policy research.

Keywords: Local government, Service delivery, Governance, Democracy.

Introduction

The district delivery model announced by the government to assist improve service delivery at the local government level was designed to make what already exists by way of policies, programmes, legislations, institutions, and partnerships work more effectively to produce a developmental local government. It is therefore not a new policy or institution, but a catalyst to give effect to what has long existed. It is a strategic approach to improve service delivery through more effective coordination among the whole government at the district level. Therefore, it is supposed to be in effect when there is clear and effective collaboration and integration among various government departments at national and provincial levels, municipalities, and stakeholders in order to address development challenges facing local communities. There are legislations, policies, and decisions long taken to improve managerial efficiency, development planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation, accountability, and oversight in local government. Indications are that we are not witnessing much improvement on all fronts, both in big and small municipalities in South Africa. The question is why, part of the answer is that for us analysts, we are detailed

in siloed analysis that looks at each component quite sharply but easily loses the big picture. The government is also fixing pieces of the puzzle without a sound attention on the whole puzzle at the same time. To contribute to forcing us to the bigger picture, this chapter provides a critical overview of key issues that have occupied researchers and policymakers in the search for a developmental local government marked by responsive and responsible local governance. The aim is not to be detailed on each of the major themes in this overview, but to see every theme in the context of the whole. This might help stimulate research on the whole of local government/governance again.

Legislation and Policies Governing Local Government

Legislation and policies play a vital role in shaping the functioning and effectiveness of local government in South Africa. This paper explores the usefulness of legislation and policies governing local government, examining their impact on promoting accountable, inclusive, and responsive governance. By analysing relevant literature and studies, this essay highlights the benefits and challenges associated with local government legislation and policies in South Africa.

Enhancing Democratic Governance

Local government legislation and policies provide a framework for democratic governance at the local level. The Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) and the Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998) are key pieces of legislation that define the powers, functions, and responsibilities of municipalities. These laws promote transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes (Lavandier & Bekker, 2016). Through mechanisms such as public consultations and community participation, the legislation ensures that local government is responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens.

Promoting Service Delivery

Legislation and policies governing local government also aim to improve service delivery to communities. The Municipal Finance Management Act (Act 56 of 2003) establishes financial management standards and accountability measures for municipalities. This legislation strengthens fiscal responsibility, promotes prudent financial management, and ensures the effective and efficient use of resources (Mutale, 2017). Additionally, policies such as the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) serve as a framework to guide municipalities in aligning their development priorities with the needs of the communities they serve.

Fostering Institutional Capacity

Legislation and policies contribute to building institutional capacity within local government. The Local Government: Municipal Systems Amendment Act (Act 44 of 2003) serves