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Whither Responsive and Responsible Local Governance?

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The local government is the coalface of public governance and development in South Africa according to the 1996 Constitution. It is the part of government that is closest to even the most marginalised people in society, affecting them by how it provides their basic necessities such as water, electricity and social relief. It is the sphere of government that is expected to be responsive to society's needs almost by design. The key question that arises is: What exactly does a responsive local governance entail? It is imperative to highlight, for reasons of context, that this question is asked specifically because the extent to which municipalities are responsive to the needs of their communities is considered critical for the realisation of the objectives of a developmental mandate. The idea that responsive governance cannot be achieved without municipalities fostering active engagements and interactions as well as mutual cooperation with the communities that they serve. This chapter discusses this and identifies what responsible local government entails and echoes some of the points made in previous chapters as far as these relate to responsiveness.

Keywords: Responsive local government, Developmental local government, Active citizen engagement, Local public management.

Introduction

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 provides for a decentralised system of government that is constituted as national, provincial and local spheres of government. The use of the word 'sphere' as opposed to 'level' is deliberate because according to Maserumule (2017), this signifies the fact that there is no hierarchy of subordination of one sphere by the other. Each sphere of government derives its powers directly from the Constitution. In this decentralised system of government, a bulk of government functions has been allocated to local government (Manyaka & Sebola, 2012). In this sense, Madzivhandila and Asha (2012) argue that this arrangement has placed municipalities at the coalface of service delivery and closer to communities. The positionality of local government is expected to result in responsive governance because it is better placed to effect enormous changes in the socio-economic life of such communities.

The key question is: What exactly does a responsive local governance entail? It is imperative to highlight, for reasons of context, that this question is asked specifically because the extent to which municipalities are responsive to the needs of their communities is considered critical for the realisation of the objectives of a developmental mandate. This is the critical point that has been well argued in the chapters that make up this edition. For completeness, a developmental local government is defined in the White Paper on Local Government (1998) as a local government that is "committed to work with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve their quality of life". Embedded in this definition is the idea that responsive governance cannot be achieved without municipalities fostering active engagements and interactions as well as mutual cooperation with the communities that they serve.

As we attempt to imagine the future of local government, at least from a South African perspective, it is important to highlight the fact that local government is fraught with numerous challenges. Unsurprisingly, this has been the subject of scholarly engagements in the field of Public Administration since the advent of the new system of local government in 2000. This much is evident in that the vast amount of literature on local governance shows glaringly that there is a widespread disillusionment with the performance of municipalities which emanates from poor service delivery which is has become a common feature that characterise most of these municipalities (Tapscott, 2004; Manyaka, 2022).

[In]Adequate Access to Financial Resources

One of the critical challenges of municipalities can be identified as inadequate access to financial resources. It goes without saying that municipalities need to have adequate access to financial resources for them to be able to carry out their development duties effectively. However, without adequate access to financial resources, municipalities will not make noticeable progress in terms of undoing the legacy of apartheid which is still forcefully visible in most communities across the country.

Whereas the funding model envisaged in the White Paper on local government puts emphasis on the centrality of municipal own revenue collection as one of the mechanisms for improving municipalities' finances, it is worth noting that the literature on this subject emphatically states that most municipalities that are predominantly rural are struggling to optimise the collection of municipal own revenue. This, according to Ledger and Rampedi (2020:20) shows clearly "the failure of the local government fiscal framework to deliver what was expected", leaving municipalities with no choice but to survive on nationally raised revenue.

Yet, according to some scholars, the heavy reliance on the nationally raised revenue by municipalities in South Africa is an anomaly that ought to be discouraged since this