

# Chapter 1

## The Contours of Smart Local Government: A Prologue

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### Introduction

Digital technologies have emerged as powerful tools with the potential to transform governance and service delivery in various sectors. The National Development Plan (NDP) that guides the pursuit of a developmental state in South Africa stresses the role of local government in development planning and spatial transformation. It calls for integrated development planning that considers social, economic, and environmental factors to guide sustainable development at the local level. The national plan advocates for spatial transformation to address apartheid-era spatial inequalities, promote compact and connected cities, and ensure equitable access to services and opportunities. This type of local government is meant to improve in terms of providing basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, housing, and transportation to all citizens. It must meet the needs of growing urban areas and under-served rural communities.

Local government should be marked by strong institutional capability and responsive governance. It is expected to demonstrate the ability to be responsible and accountable, to manage finances proficiently, and to promote transparency and ethical leadership. In poverty-stricken countries like South Africa, where local government plays a crucial role in addressing socio-economic challenges, digital technologies are being touted as the new avenue for effectively improving developmental local governance and enhancing citizen engagement. A key part of this idea is to build smart cities across South Africa that will enable cities to achieve the ideals detailed in the NDP quicker than expected. This chapter introduces the subject of this book, provides an outline of its chapters and makes a few remarks about the task at hand.

### Local Government and the Transformation of Society

The NDP recognises local government as a critical sphere of government, which plays a pivotal role in service delivery, development planning, and grassroots democracy. According to the NDP (2012), local government is essential for fostering social cohesion, citizen participation, and effective service provision at the community level. It emphasises the importance of local government in promoting inclusive growth, reducing poverty, and addressing spatial inequalities. Municipalities serve as key actors in implementing and localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They have the responsibility to integrate sustainable development principles into their governance structures and development planning processes. According to Bagheri et al. (2018), municipalities in South Africa are required to align their integrated development plans (IDPs) with the SDGs, thereby incorporating sustainable development objectives into local strategies and action.

The transition from apartheid resulted in the role of local government being defined as central and pivotal in the transition towards a prosperous society for all. In fact, as it is conceived within the develop-

mental local government paradigm, local government came to be regarded as the bedrock for building a democratic developmental state that should result in drastic improvement in the quality of lives of people in South Africa. The aims after the transition were to redress historical imbalances, promote local democracy, and empower local communities. However, attempts to achieve these goals have been met with several challenges.

The challenges include corruption, nepotism, and inadequate skills within local government structures, which hinder service delivery. Poor governance practices and insufficient capacity-building initiatives undermine accountability and transparency, and impede the delivery of essential services to citizens. Persistent socio-economic inequalities, inherited from the apartheid era, continue to pose significant challenges to local government and service delivery in South Africa. A study done by Seekings and Natrass (2021) revealed that historically disadvantaged communities, particularly those located in rural and peri-urban areas, have limited access to services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity.

Capacity constraints are rife within municipalities, including a lack of skilled personnel, financial resources, and technical expertise. Insufficient access to quality education and training, as well as the brain drain from rural areas to urban centres, exacerbate this challenge. This is closely linked to weak oversight mechanisms, and therefore weak ability to monitor compliance and address instances of maladministration and corruption.

The relationship between municipalities and traditional leaders is often marked by overlapping authority and roles, which can potentially lead to conflict and tension. Research done by Marishane and Nthambeleni (2019) suggests that the dual roles of traditional leaders, as both traditional custodians and representatives within local government, can create challenges in decision-making processes and in terms of the allocation of resources.

## **Digitally Smart Local Government**

The literature suggests that digital technologies, such as social media platforms, mobile applications, and online portals, provide opportunities for citizens to engage with local governments, voice their concerns, and participate in decision-making processes. According to Akhtar et al. (2019), these technologies enable real-time communication and feedback mechanisms, which allows local governments to gather input from citizens and respond promptly to their needs. Through online surveys, virtual town hall meetings, and participatory platforms, digital technologies can facilitate inclusive and participatory governance, by giving marginalised communities a voice and ensuring their needs are considered in the process of policy formulation and service delivery.

It is assumed that these technologies help to improve service delivery and enhance access to public services in poverty-stricken areas. E-government initiatives, such as digital platforms for submitting service requests, online payment systems, and e-health solutions, can streamline service delivery processes, reduce the administrative burden, and increase the efficiency of local government operations. According to Bwalya et al. (2020), digital technologies can enable remote service delivery and bridge the gap between under-served communities and essential services, such as healthcare, education, and financial services.

Smart local government is expected to generate vast amounts of data that can inform evidence-based decision making and policy formulation. By harnessing data analytics and visualisation tools, local governments can gain insight into social patterns, resource allocation, and service needs, and lead to more targeted and effective interventions. Omoju et al. (2019) highlight the potential of digital technologies in terms of data collection, analysis, and monitoring, which would enable local governments to track progress, identify areas of improvement, and make informed decisions to address poverty-related challenges.