25 Years of Local Government: Reviewing Basic Assumptions

A Virtual Conference

In 1995 at the time of White Paper on Local Government and the first democratic municipal elections there was much optimism about the developmental potential of municipalities. Apartheid had largely been crippled by mass movements organizing around basic needs, water and electricity. The local sphere was where new models of development were pioneered, ones that privileged the role of citizens in the design and even execution of projects. Well before the Worker's Party in Brazil experimented with participatory budgets, civic organizations in many places in the country had established community or local development forums and were calling for 'community driven development', a concept that was later taken up by the unions at placed at the centre of the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Yet even in the early stages of the transition there were signs that local government transformation was coming up against major constraints. Municipalities in South Africa where largely self-financing, a legacy of the British model continued into the Apartheid period. They were expected to pay for the costs of service delivery from revenue generated from their local tax-base. This model of autonomy was enshrined in the South African constitution and even radicalized when local government was established as third sphere of government with all sorts of protections against interference from other spheres of government. There was much idealism in this arrangement too. More than elsewhere, democratic momentum was believed to be in local communities, who needed protection from bureaucratic tendencies elsewhere.

Yet right from the beginning, new national departments and the creation of 9 provincial governments drew talented local government activists away from the local sphere. At the same time, the introduction of 'wall-to-wall' municipalities saw the emergence of municipalities in places previously serviced by provinces or by homeland governments, which had little prospects of becoming self-financing. Provincial governments soon ballooned, attracting the lion's share of inter-governmental fiscal grants, leaving the

local government sphere underfunded, with especially serious consequences for financially unviable local authorities.

Political arrangements have further complicated the running of local government administrations. The failure to distinguish between political and administrative roles has created confusion between the respective roles and functions of councilors and local government officials. This has also created tensions between Mayors and Municipal Managers. Severe fragmentation in the ruling party itself has sometimes crippled decision-making in councils, turning councilors even from the same party against each other, and provoking conflicts between Council Speakers and Mayors. In some places municipalities are run by weak and unstable coalitions.

The 25 Years of Local Government will be a virtual conference to reflect on the last 25 years of local government in the democratic era. The purpose will be to surface and to engage the fundamental assumptions that informed the constitution of this sphere to answer two basic questions: 1) Are these assumptions still appropriate for current conditions and 2) what needs to be changed.

Conference themes:

1. Constitutional: Autonomy of Local Government as a distinct sphere of government: what was the legal and constitutional reasoning behind the establishment of local government as the third tier of government. What were the alternatives? Does this still make sense?

2. Spatial: The creation of provincial governments went hand-in-hand with the abolition of Regional Services Council and the introduction of wall-to-wall municipalities. What was the logic behind these reforms? What would it mean to consider a more differentiated approach to local government?

3. Financial: Municipal Finances: the financial autonomy of municipalities is one of the enduring legacies of South Africa's colonial period. Yet only a handful of municipalities are financially viable. What are alternative funding models for local government.

4. Political: how can municipalities be stabilised and what can be done to professionalise administrations and contain political tensions within and between parties from overwhelming the functioning of local authorities.

5. Participation: the notion of developmental local government stressed the importance of community participation in decision-making. This ultimately found expression in

   the ward system. Though the violence associated with community protests suggests that local residents are unable to find their voices in these and other processes.

6. Service Delivery: the key task of local governments is to provide basic services, including water, electricity and sanitation to South African households. Over the last twenty years, municipalities, as a rule, have struggled to with planning, including spatial and financial planning and following-through with the execution of plans. The result has been very uneven service delivery and difficulties in maintaining and developing the infrastructure.