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The politics of service delivery in South Africa: The local government sphere in context



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The post-1994 democratic developmental South African state opted for a strong local government system which has been constitutionalised, in terms of Chapter 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996. The politicisation of the local bureaucracy was inevitable as the ruling party sought to ensure that the executive leadership of municipalities shared the same political ideology and vision to facilitate local development. This raises the question, where does politicisation commence and end, and what is the ideal local political interface for efficient and effective service delivery and, more importantly, to ensure good governance? These questions have to take cognisance of the fact that South Africa is a 'struggle democracy' and development has to take place in historically disadvantaged areas, where services have been poor or non-existent. The historically advantaged areas have to also be maintained and upgraded, as they are key to financial sustainability of the municipalities. The increasing service delivery protests is a matter for concern, if one has to take cognisance of the popular adage highlighted in official literature, 'if local government fails, South Africa fails'. Given that the struggles for a democratic South Africa were fought at the grassroots level, this has to translate to an improved quality of life for local communities. Consequently, sound political management is key to enhanced municipal service delivery and ultimately good local governance. This paper reviews political trends and developments up to 2016, but excludes any discussion on the recent local government elections.

Introduction

Globally, the term service delivery is a popular phrase that is used to denote the distribution of basic communal needs and services, notably housing, water and sanitation, land, electricity and infrastructure, which local communities have taken for granted and become dependent on for their daily existence. However, in the South African context, the delivery and ongoing upkeep of these basic services has proved unreliable at times, greatly inconveniencing and endangering local communities. The resultant response, particularly in the past decade, has been increasing 'service delivery protests' or protests demanding 'better service delivery' (www.blogs.cfr.org/cambell/2014/05/15/south-africa-what-does-service-delivery-really-mean/; Booysen 2012a; Daseah 2012; Reddy 2010).

Political infighting and related clashes between the political and management components in local government in South Africa have also adversely affected municipal service delivery. It is given that the public sector in an African context has always been deemed to be political in nature and South Africa is no exception (Booyesen 2012a; Cameron 2003; 2010; De Visser 2010). On a more practical and realistic level, there have also been challenges experienced relative to the political-administrative interface at the local sphere. South Africa as a democratic state has only been in existence for just over two decades and is a young democracy (Ndudula 2013:3). The local sphere of government is particularly crucial as it signifies grassroots governance and local democracy, which are considered to be closest to the people, and more importantly, it is at the coalface relative to the delivery of basic services.

This paper critiques the politicisation of local government and the resultant implications for municipal service delivery in the broader context of developmental and good local governance. It also critically reviews the 'cadre deployment' policy of the ruling party, which has generated a great deal of debate and discussion in political, academic and social circles, as such policies have provided the impetus for the election and appointment of senior municipal functionaries in local government in the past two decades. The concluding part of the paper focuses on possible solutions and recommendations as a way of moving forward to address the key thematic issues highlighted.

1 South Africa is viewed in some circles as the protest capital of the world (Tony & Lei 2010; Soomy 2006 in Daseah 2012).

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