



Local Government's Existential Challenge: 25 Years of the White Paper on Local Government (1998–2023)

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The White Paper on Local Government (WPLG) was published 25 years ago on the 9th of March 1998 (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1998). The ideal South African Local Government can be imagined as the vision of local government, enshrined in the South African Constitution, 1996 and in the founding document for transforming South African local government, the WPLG (RSA 1998). The WPLG, laid the groundwork for enabling legislation that subsequently followed, most notably the *Municipal Demarcation Act, Act 27 of 1998*, the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, Act 117 of 1998*, the *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, Act 32 of 2000* and the *Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (MFMA)*.

Since 1998, the South African government has introduced many initiatives aimed at fixing the prevailing issues of dysfunction within local governance. Project Consolidate launched in 2004 was aimed at deepening the impact of existing local government policies and programmes. The Presidential Local Government Summit of 18th September 2014 gave birth to the Back-to-Basics Strategy, which sought to improve the functioning of municipalities, to better serve communities by getting the basics right. More recently, the District Development Model (DDM) (Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [COGTA] 2019), launched in 2019 is among other objectives, aimed at addressing silo planning and implementation across spheres of government. It also seeks to maximise impact and align plans and resources at the disposal of government through the development of 'One District, One Plan and One Budget'.

Central to this local government transformation vision is the desire to ensure that previously disadvantaged communities are brought to the forefront of development, as envisaged in the WPLG's (1998) developmental local government public value and social equity vision. Section 152 of the Constitution of the RSA (1996) identifies five performance areas, which guide municipal strategy-making, execution and evaluation, namely:

[D]emocratic and accountable government for local communities; provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner; promotion of social and economic development; promotion of a safe and healthy environment; and encouraging the involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government. (n.p.)

These constitutional provisions are meant to guarantee beneficiaries and all South African citizens and residents access to dignity, equality before the law, freedom and security and access to basic services (housing, healthcare, education, food, water and social security). These provisions can be described as the generic objective of local government across many societies. However, what sets South African local government apart is its point of departure on the developmental nature of local government.

It is difficult to problematise local government in South Africa. However, one seminal place to begin is municipal performance. While South Africa has post-1994 made some notable strides in local government transformation, however, almost 30 years later, the developmental local government ideal appears to be at a crossroads. The 2009 State of Local Government in South Africa Report presented findings of a countrywide assessment of the state of local government, culminating in the Local Government Turn-Around Strategy (LGTAS) Programme in November 2009. In 2014, the Department of COGTA, diagnostic report resulted in the back-to-basics strategy document, which identified municipal performance shortcomings and sought to improve service delivery and optimum municipal functionality. A new model of governance, the DDM, was introduced and adopted by Cabinet on 21 August 2019, to improve cooperative governance and enhance service delivery.

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The LGTAS (RSA 2009a) as well as the State of local government report (RSA 2009b) pointed to key areas of concern, which are also confirmed in independent academic research. These are as follows: capacity and human resources, responsiveness and accountability, economic growth of municipalities, sound financial management and the legacy of apartheid spatial development. Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs initiated back-to-basics by conducting a desktop assessment of municipalities in all nine provinces and developed a set of indicators to be reported on monthly, as per the pillars of the back-to-basics approach, to measure whether municipalities perform in terms of the five 'basics'. The DDM as a practical intergovernmental relations (IGR) mechanism is envisioned to get all three spheres of government to work together, with communities and stakeholders, to plan, budget and implement in unison.

These concerns and initiatives imply that the ideal developmental municipality in South Africa must be administratively competent and provide the basic household infrastructure needed to develop social and economic growth; effectively integrate and co-ordinate the complex relationship nodes needed for local government functionality; purvey social equity sensibilities to empower communities and be innovative through organisational learning and visionary leadership. This emphasises the importance of municipal performance in the realisation of the vision of the WPLG's (1998) ideal municipality. Twenty-five years after the unveiling of this ideal vision for local government in South Africa, perhaps more than ever before, the severity of electricity, water and other services provisioning problems in South Africa could pose an existential threat to the survival of local government as currently structured in South Africa. This year (2023), the *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* (JOLGRI) has taken up the challenge of addressing this existential question: Is Local Government as presently structured in South Africa beyond redemption? Articles published this year not only illuminate the existentialist question but also begin to present solutions that go beyond perennial reports and recommendations, such as capacitating local government or draining the swamp of corruption and dysfunctionality.

This year, articles such as those contextualising the factors that influence human resources development in municipalities, those examining social innovation through South African Local Economic Development Policy approaches or those examining measures that may assist non-performing municipalities in improving their performance, contribute to the discourse of municipal survival. These articles demonstrate that to survive, municipalities cannot escape from self-initiated measures of survival. There must be self-originated innovation and an openness to creative enrichment in local government. Thus, from a social innovation perspective, it is essential to promote new approaches to developmental local government through co-ownership and co-production. Even more important is the

need to change the culture of service ennui and embrace agile solutions in local government.

Other articles evaluated the implementation of municipal credit management policies, explored the effectiveness of section 139 intervention in municipal accountability architecture and examined municipal amalgamations and feasibility of economies of scale in local government. These articles contribute to the existential question of local government in South Africa, by examining the current structure of local government. The articles in this volume, debunk previously held notions of municipal reform. These articles take a strong path of departure from mainstream assumptions put out over the years, such as how amalgamations or structured administrative interventions lead to better efficiency and effectiveness, which begs the question of why these structural provisions are not reviewed and what will be the alternative?

The politics of local government may be argued to be one of the most detrimental threats to its existence. One article explored the dynamics of traditional leader's relationship with municipal councilors and service delivery. Another discussed how to enhance municipal counselor's oversight in local district and metropolitan municipalities; while yet another article examined political violence and killings. These articles show that professionalisation is non-negotiable as a requirement for municipal survival. The 'P' (professionalisation) word strongly features in these articles in different ways and reveals that the excessiveness of the power dynamics in local government lies in a clear stipulation of roles and in the capacitating of political role players, such as councillors towards carrying out their duties in a professional manner. The political-administrative interface, conundrum, indeed, remain protracted and does not seem to make the relationship between councillors and administrators any easier.

Finally, the research range and contribution of this year's JOLGRI volume is much wider than previous editions. Many articles presented data across different municipalities, as opposed to single case studies, giving this volume a strength in terms of a better understanding of the unique character of municipalities across the board. The article examining ICT entrepreneurship training and job creation in a local government in Lagos State Nigeria also added to this comparative lens, through which to examine local government in South Africa and beyond.

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