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'A luta continua', will it ever end? The reality of local government in South Africa

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'My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people I love them. They must continue the fight', Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu.

'A luta continua' (the struggle continues), once a phrase that brought hope, inspired confidence and fuelled a fighting spirit among many oppressed people across the continent and globe. A chant echoed by great revolutionary leaders such as Samora Machel and Eduardo Mondelane of Mozambique, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, Agostino Neto of Angola, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, and Steve Biko, Chris Hani and Nelson Mandela of South Africa, in the liberation against the oppressor. While many countries on the continent had attained liberation through political freedom, the utopia was and is a livelihood free from any form of indignity and poverty.

Scholars see the attainment of liberation and freedom as synonymous with the decolonisation of Africa. Many even equate decolonisation with the philosophical and intellectual grounding that occurs when Africans relive and reimagine their existence from an indigenous African perspective (Enaifoghe 2019; Oelofsen 2015). The decolonisation project is not only an African phenomenon but also a global imperative undertaken by indigenous peoples on different continents such as Asia, South America, Africa and Oceania (Irom 2018; Speich Chassé 2013). The realisation of decolonisation in Africa and beyond could be what leaders of the South African struggle meant while saying 'A luta continua'. In a post-liberation and democratic Africa, the struggles faced by ordinary people on the ground are caused more by dysfunctional governments, corrupt leaders and several other systematic challenges. Wasserman, Chuma and Bosch (2018) articulated some of the direct challenges that affect communities and citizens in South Africa to be housing, unemployment, water and electricity, sanitation, corruption and municipal maladministration. Some of these form part of the basic human needs as clearly stated in chapter two of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 while chapter seven mandates the onus for basic services is on local government.

Local government in the South African Republic has been at the heart of the struggles of communities as illustrated in the Auditor General's (AG) 2020–2021 Local Government Audit Outcomes where the AG indicates that there has been no improvement in the audit outcomes for the majority of the municipalities. The report further indicates that infrastructure management remains a huge problem where 70% of the municipalities have poor wastewater management treatment causing substantial harm to communities, while 80% do not have infrastructure maintenance plans causing further strain on the existing infrastructure. A total of 64%, which translates to 166 of the municipalities, contributed to a R20.45 bn loss in unauthorised and fruitless expenditure in the reporting period. All the while the ordinary citizen hopes that the struggle will end.

Contributions to this issue are versatile and touch on several essential areas in local government in South Africa. A balance of service delivery articles sets the tone where the importance of an inclusive system and strategy by the government and stakeholders should be the departure point. One article echoes the imperatives of stakeholder engagement in local government in achieving service delivery in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The study found that dysfunctional stakeholder relations are attributed to poor resource management, governance and other social ills that affect service delivery. Authors proposed strategies for improving stakeholder engagement and participation at this level. Another article demonstrated an important assessment of local government's response to the effects of COVID-19 on the attainment of SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) in South African municipalities. It also provides a global perspective on local government provisioning in the time of crisis by analysing local and state government responses to COVID-19, a serious threat to the attainment of 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (in particular SDG 6). The authors

highlighted local governments' inadequate infrastructure and failure to provide this basic need in informal settlements, which caused a risk of an outbreak. A bottom-up approach, as opposed to a trickle-down approach, was proposed to ensure that policies and strategies are informed by the experiences of those who lived them. Another submission advocated for the management of district-local relations through district intergovernmental forum. The authors found that these forums were flawed and did not execute the functions they were meant for. They recommended the refinement of the legislative roles of the district intergovernmental forum to distinguish between relevant district governance matters that need to be dealt with at the district council. This not only avoids unnecessary deliberations, duplication of agenda issues and waste of time but also regulates stakeholders' participation in the district intergovernmental forum. This proposes a gap for studies around the District Development Model (DDM) as a tool to combat social ills at the local government level.

Several articles in this issue give a much-needed discourse on financial matters in the municipality. For instance, one discusses financial mismanagement, another budget management and another municipal infrastructure funds. The latter paints a glaring and undesired picture of a municipality that lacks the capacity to plan and implement its policies and budgets. This causes strain on existing infrastructure and for budgets to shrink as unspent funds are to return to the national treasury coffers. The study proposed a more proactive approach and the use of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) strategies. In line with all the mentioned articles, there is also a contribution that argues for the strengthening of oversight mechanisms at the local government level. Another study found that ineffective internal control tracking, the AG's limitations to regularly make progress checks on recommendations made, nepotism in municipal appointments, futile audit committees and management's inability to enforce consequences are some of the barriers that lead to the failure of oversight at this level. Their recommendations are a radical transformation through enhanced accountability and leadership and strengthened monitoring and evaluation strategies. The studies in this issue give an in-depth assessment of topical issues at the local government level and provide a premise for further studies that might fill the gaps.

The *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* seeks to become a major player in the network of intellectual scholarship and research on local government and government in general. It also seeks to further contribute to research in the following (but not limited to) niche areas:

- Renewal of planning and resource allocation for local government (e.g. The District Development Model)
- Improving the scholarship of research in regional and local governance.
- Monitoring strategies for improving performance and productivity in local municipalities.
- Mobilisation in collaborations and partnerships for public service delivery.
- Agility, innovation and networking in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- Accountability, ethics and integrity institutions and organisational change.

Finally, a local government of the future is one where human dignity is at the top of the list for government and basic services, and needs are received by the people without having to take to the streets and engage the government physically. 'A luta continua' cannot be forever in the context of the liberal movement; there is a need to continue reforming local government. In the 28 years of democracy, there is a need for a re-emergence of the concept by steering further local government reforms in a direction that includes the democratisation of the structures of local governance infused with ethics and integrity to enhance the performance of local government.

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