

The Contradictions of Local Government: Challenges for “Development”

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Now that the excitement over local government elections and open toilets has died down and political pundits have delivered their verdicts on the results, we confront a far more difficult set of questions: what’s wrong with local government, and what can be done about it? There is no shortage of answers. In the period since the election we have seen an outpouring of proposed solutions to make local government more efficient, responsive, and “developmental”.

My central argument is that local government has become not just *a* site of contradictions, but *the* key site of contradictions in the post-apartheid era. Local government, in other words, has become the impossible terrain of official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially inflected capitalist society marked by vicious inequalities and increasingly precarious livelihoods for a large majority of the population.

Why does this matter?

Most immediately, it makes us cast a critical eye on what some are calling a “Marshall Plan” for local government, akin to the massive effort to reconstruct Europe after the Second World War. These proposals include:

- Measures to ensure that local government is professionalised and depoliticised. The call is to move forward with the Municipal Systems Amendment Bill to ensure the appointment of competent professionals in top management positions and prevent cadre deployment;
- Merging unviable municipalities and bringing in “special purpose vehicles”;
- Closer monitoring, training and disciplining of councillors, and making them more accountable.

These and other proposals rest first and foremost on the assumption of incompetent, uncaring municipal officials and lazy, corrupt councillors.

There is no doubt that rotten councillors and officials are enormously problematic in some areas – and that bringing in more efficient, accountable replacements would produce some improvements in municipal services.

Yet my work in Ladysmith and Newcastle since 1994 suggests much deeper tensions and structural contradictions than “lack of capacity” and “democratic deficit”. What this work suggests is that intensifying national efforts to surveil and control unruly local governments over the past 10 years are rendering them more fragile. At the same time, measures aimed at disciplining and damping down discontent might actually be feeding into it

To support these arguments, I will focus on changes in local government in Emnambithi/Ladysmith since 1994 and reflect on their wider significance. Ladysmith and surrounding townships and rural areas are not in any sense representative or typical; on the contrary, what makes Emnambithi/Ladysmith interesting is that, on the surface at least, it represents a “model municipality”.

My research in the first phases of local government restructuring (1994-2000) revealed sharp contrasts in local political dynamics between Ladysmith and Newcastle. Reflecting specific local histories, the townships outside Ladysmith were highly organised and mobilised behind the ANC. At the same time municipal officials and councillors were actively responsive to their constituents. The contrast with the generally chaotic local political dynamics in Newcastle was dramatic (Hart 2002).

From an administrative perspective, the Emnambithi/Ladysmith local municipality remains a model of efficiency and fiscal responsibility. Yet over the past 10 years there has been a notable erosion in the responsiveness of councillors to their constituents.

Shifts in national policy and political-economic conditions over the past decade are crucial to understanding these shifts and their larger significance. First is a combination of ever larger carrots and sticks. Transfers from national to local government in the country as a whole jumped from R8,8 billion in the early 2000s to R46 billion in 2010. In the mid-2000s central monitoring of municipal finances became much tighter, and many senior municipal officials have been placed on performance contracts. Also, councillor’s salaries increased significantly

after the 2006 local government elections, and the ANC began exercising much stricter control over councillor selection.

Second, national policy towards local government appears to have become far more “pro-poor”, primarily through the provision of minimal free basic services (FBS) – water, electricity, and sanitation – to poor households, administered by municipalities and funded by unconditional grants from national to local government. Yet especially in relation to water in established townships, this seemingly pro-poor policy is at the same time deeply punitive through its links with debt collection. The logic of FBS is to sort out the “can’t pay” from the “won’t pay”, and make things sufficiently unpleasant for the latter group that they pay up. This is where the contentious question of water meters comes in, that I discuss more fully below.

Third, as Cosatu knows painfully well, the decade of the 2000s has witnessed an ongoing jobs bloodbath, only partially and unevenly alleviated by social grants. Persistent poverty and growing inequality do not just reflect a *deficit* in economic development, argues Andries du Toit. Instead they are the *result* of the path of growth and development of the SA economy that systematically *excludes* millions of poor people from participation in the economy as workers, producers, and traders – while simultaneously *incorporating* them as consumers into the markets of the powerful companies in SA’s core economy.

These processes are crucial to grasping changes in local government over the past decade in Emnambithi/Ladysmith and their larger significance. The 2000 local government elections yielded huge support for the ANC in Ezakheni and Steadville, the townships outside Ladysmith, although the party failed to gain a majority in the council. The reason was that new municipal demarcations had incorporated surrounding rural areas into the local municipality, and the ANC lost out to the IFP in these areas.

In 2001 the new DA/IFP council moved quickly to install water meters in Ezakheni, and clamp down on debt collection by restricting water to 6 kilolitres a month in areas like Steadville where there were already water meters. Under pressure from angry and fearful constituents, ANC ward councillors engaged local officials and the council in major battles.

First, in Steadville and other working class townships with meters, they fought to increase the minimum allocation of water from 6 to 18 kilolitres a month. In 2003, when floorcrossing enabled the ANC to take over the council, they were successful – although in 2004 the district municipality controlled by the IFP took over authority for water.

The second battle, involving the installation of water meters, needs to be understood historically. In the 1960s and 70s, millions of black South Africans were moved into townships like Ezakheni in the former bantustans through forced removals. In exchange they were guaranteed water, electricity, and other urban services at low, flat rates. For residents of townships like these, where memories of apartheid-era dispossession are very much alive, installation of water meters represents another round of dispossession and calls forth angry protests. Responding to these protests, ANC ward councillors fiercely opposed meters – and continued this opposition when the district municipality took over control of water in 2004.

Third, the inability of the municipality to restrict water has meant that there are no downsides to being defined as an “indigent” household, eligible to have debts written off and qualify for free basic services. By 2006 more than half the township households had been classified as indigent, with councillors actively engaged in helping people to sign up.

The 2006 local government elections were a key turning point. In an already tense atmosphere the provincial ANC exercised tight control over the selection of councillors, unleashing further tensions that were intensified by sharp increases in councillors’ salaries. At the same time, municipal officials were subject to much tighter top-down control. The consequence was heavy pressures for “credit control” and efforts to limit the indigence register. In the ensuing battles ward councillors have found themselves increasingly sidelined and incapable of responding to their constituents. They have been transformed into a petty bourgeoisie on the road to class power, as Ari Sitas (2011) has put it, at a time when many of their constituents confront ongoing retrenchments and intensified struggles for livelihood.

Over the past several years there has been an uneasy stand-off: the ANC in Emnambithi/Ladysmith has been able to blame the IFP-led district municipality for poor water services, while the latter could claim to be giving water away for free. Now that the ANC has taken the district in alliance with the NFP, they will meet head-on the contradictions of local government.

What then is the larger significance of changes in Ladysmith over the past decade?

First: municipalities outside the major metros confront massive pressures for redistribution to townships and impoverished rural areas from a far smaller tax base than the metros, as well as far less coercive capacity. While more resources are clearly needed, increased spending by itself is far from sufficient to solve the problems. Nor is it just a matter of competent and committed municipal officials, important though they may be. Top-down disciplining of

councillors is also inadequate. We have seen how even the most diligent and accountable councillors have been sidelined, in part through the logics of how municipal indigence operates in practice.

Second: during the past decade, in municipalities all over the country, official efforts have increasingly sought to render technical that which is inherently political – namely persistent poverty in the face of extreme and obscene inequality. The most extreme instance of techno-fixing poverty is the Siyasizana project launched in 2009 by the City of Johannesburg – a project that I have elsewhere called “bar-coding the poor” (Hart 2009). Yet such efforts are not only doomed to failure. They may in fact be feeding into the popular anger and discontent that they were designed to contain.

In conclusion, let me reflect briefly on “the challenges for development” posed by local government – the topic on which I was asked to speak for the Wolpe Dialogue. It is useful here, I think, to distinguish two meanings of “development”: what one might call big-D Development as intervention to bring about improvement; and little-d development as in the development of capitalism.¹ Much of the discussion about the problems with local government has been cast narrowly in terms of Development, in an ongoing quest for policy solutions. The time has come to open up for broader debate the contradictions of capitalist development embodied in local government – a debate in which the “targets” of local government reform need to be active participants.

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¹ For a fuller discussion of this distinction in relation to South African debates, see Hart (2006).