



## WHERE DO WE GO TO FROM HERE?

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Cities are experiencing their greatest turbulence in the democratic era, with shifting dynamics in the formation of councils and ongoing urbanisation challenges, including population pressure, poverty, and the effects of energy and water scarcity. The following recommendations are offered to cities, as a basis for a new political outlook for local government, to enable cities to survive and thrive in the next phase of democratic local government.

### Adopt a local cooperative model of governance

Over the past five years, the governance reality of coalitions (which are temporary in nature) has demonstrated instability, a lack of decision-making and a visible decline in service delivery across South African municipalities. There appears to be no universal acceptance or common understanding and articulation of the challenges facing cities among political parties. Inevitably, the consequences of coalitions will be that municipal performance continues to take a back seat. To address this, local government should adopt a cooperative model of governance, which draws on the cooperative business models practised in communities. Unlike coalitions, cooperation focuses on strengthening relationships among leadership and expects everyone to work together to achieve a common purpose. People working cooperatively empower and hold each other accountable for the power granted, while practising, protecting, promoting and perpetuating healthy democratic practices.

A cooperative governance instrument would both improve local government's performance (in terms of administration, service delivery and responsiveness to community needs) and encourage citizen participation in urban decision-making. To be effective, such collaborations would require negotiations that appreciate the political complexities, and leadership groups that share a common interest in addressing the thorny challenges facing cities. The first step would be to develop a convincing plan and a clearly articulated narrative that defines the problem and is broadly accepted. Simply put, the problem is not local government in and of itself, but complex systemic challenges, which require a cooperative governance structure to resolve them.

### Implement a differentiated approach to solving problems

Any long-lasting solution must recognise that municipalities are not identical but face similar problems of varying magnitudes. 'One-size-fits-all' and generic solutions will not address the deep-rooted and systemic problems facing cities. What is needed is a differentiated approach to solving local government challenges. Unfortunately, the current system still largely relies on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, despite urgent calls for differentiation. The policy framework simply does not go far enough to allow for differentiation among the large metros, secondary (or intermediate) cities and rural municipalities. Even within these categories, the significant differences in economies, capacity, and social and spatial environments need to be recognised and accommodated.

A differentiated approach must be adopted to support municipalities that are unable to sustain themselves. A differentiated approach needs to consider the following:

- Cities are the drivers of the economy and must be at the heart of South Africa's growth strategy. Practically, this means that cities must be allocated and assigned a range of specific powers and functions that enable them to drive growth.
- All functions related to the built environment (including human settlements, public transport and related functions) should be devolved to metros and non-metro municipalities that demonstrate capacity. Combining resources across municipalities would give effect to the notion of regional governance. For example, the City of Cape Town, the Cape Winelands District Municipality and the Overberg District Municipality could pool resources to leverage economies of scale in dealing with issues such as housing.
- A two-tier system (city-states) should be considered in certain areas of the country, where state and municipal functions could be combined under a single authority. The most obvious example of this is in Gauteng.

## Amplify the 'voice' of local government

Although the Constitution defines local government as an equal and autonomous sphere in the government system, in practice local government's authority is vastly diminished. To strengthen the 'voice' of local government, municipalities must be involved in both planning and allocating budgets in all issues that affect the local environment. Municipalities must be given adequate representation in all national and provincial strategy sessions and party conferences, as well as specific planning and budgeting sessions. For example, municipalities must be involved in developing and budgeting for the post-COVID-19 economic recovery plan.

Through strong advocacy, local government has a substantial role to play in reshaping the future of our cities and, most importantly, responding to challenges as they emerge. To amplify the voice of local government will also require decluttering the local government operational space and streamlining policy and legislation meant to support local government. Furthermore, cities need to recognise that citizens are their greatest resource by adopting a more holistic approach to problem-solving, which puts people at the centre, fosters discussion, and enables policymakers, individual cities and their citizens to choose the best way forward.

## Rethink the architecture and design of the local government system

South Africa is a land of many paradoxes that include shining lights and bleak darkness. As cities face (and will continue to face) emergencies, strong and resilient administrations need to be developed and insulated. This means separating the legislative and executive functions in municipalities, which will require rethinking the architectural design of the local government system as set out in legislation and policy.

It is proposed that the mayoral system be enhanced to allow for the establishment of a cabinet that functions in a similar way to the executive authority of national government. This would allow for the establishment of several committees that would include representation from opposition parties. Furthermore, while the cadre system is inevitable in political appointments, it cannot play a role in administrative appointments, and so it is crucial to flag the difference between political and executive appointments.