

Media Statement

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Community Protests at the Local Level Highlight General Issues of Governance.

Most studies on protest focus on the service delivery dimension of protest, and local government is often perceived as corrupt, incompetent and unable to deliver on its service delivery mandates. The popular reality is far more complex than this. SALGA has completed a study on Local Government Perceptions of Community Protest.

The study is available on SALGA's website: [http://salga.org.za/Documents/Knowledge%20Hub/Local%20Government%20Briefs/Local-Government-Perceptions-of-Community-Protest-Presentation---HSRC-Dissemination-8-March-2016---Copy---Copy\(1\).pdf](http://salga.org.za/Documents/Knowledge%20Hub/Local%20Government%20Briefs/Local-Government-Perceptions-of-Community-Protest-Presentation---HSRC-Dissemination-8-March-2016---Copy---Copy(1).pdf) . The study found that there is a limited relationship between local government performance and community protests.

Many protests occurring at the local level are fuelled by issues emanating from the side effects of unemployment and relational defects in the intergovernmental structures responsible for delivering services. For example, housing has been widely identified as a cause of protest, a service which is not a local government mandate. The decentralisation of housing has been long on the local government agenda but it remains with the provinces with limited delegation to metropolitan municipalities with capacity.

This renders the accessibility of services and the quality of services as a shared responsibility of all spheres of government. Due to the weak coordination in service delivery, local government is often at the mercy of other spheres of government that do not heed local governments' call for increased consultation.

The perceived treatment of local government as a junior partner reflects in how the study participants lamented that national and provincial government departments implement projects without consulting local government. When the project is handed over to local government, it comes to local government with all the attendant problems of deficient community consultation and poor siting of infrastructure.

While most community protests occur in the metropolitan areas that attract migrants with service delivery expectations, increases in community protests are occurring in underdeveloped areas. Many of these protests are located in areas where there are major natural disasters. In Limpopo, the scarcity of water and the demand for boreholes is a major obstacle to community development. While it has been a major problem for local government, the support from the province has not enabled local government to transcend the drought conditions that have prevailed for quite some time. Protests around demarcation are not service delivery related, but demarcation will have consequences for service delivery for years to come. It is estimated that it takes about three to five years for a newly demarcated municipality to institutionally settle and begin delivering on the basics of service delivery. Protests around demarcations start off as boundary issues but they turn into community protests informed by service delivery protests once the boundaries are re-demarcated.

In Johannesburg and Cape Town, where the majority of community protests occur, demand for land close to opportunities is reaching crisis proportions with communities settling on radioactive mine dumps, on high risk dolomitic land, in abandoned buildings and on vacant land, public and private. In order to uphold by-laws and maintain the security of the environment, municipalities are required to evict illegal occupants. Due to a host of court enforced laws, the eviction of illegal land occupants costs these municipalities millions of Rands in legal fees and relocation costs.

Further, while communities occupy land illegally, illegal electricity and water connections cost these municipalities millions of Rand in lost revenue and damage the reticulation

infrastructure. Land evictions and the disconnection of illegal connections are two of the most frequently cited reasons for violent protest. The City of Johannesburg has taken to converting illegal connections in Zandspruit and other informal settlements into legal and metered connections to recoup some of the costs of the electricity and to mitigate protest action. Residents were reported to have said that they have grown so despondent while waiting for formal RDP houses that they will just take the electricity to ensure that at least their children can study at night.

Community protests themselves are disruptive and destructive affairs and have associated costs that are not covered through SASRIA or through the intergovernmental funding model. The repairs are paid for through operational budgets, which impacts on service delivery. The cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town expend millions of Rands every month cleaning up the mess left by angry communities and covering the uninsured costs of vandalism while local businessmen suffer the effects of opportunistic thieving emerging from many community protest actions. Out of pocket expenditures will certainly reduce local government service delivery effectiveness.

The local governments that participated in the study also made it quite clear that many issues originate from outside their mandates and their areas of competency. Unfunded mandates and structural underfunding have compounded the fact that institutions are still in a settling phase. Most local government structures in the world are many decades old with settled systems and fully developed legal frameworks. The passage of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act in 2015 was designed as part of the legislative expansion of the regulations to which local government must adhere. This speaks to a settling of power, functions and systems in a system that is but 15 years old and subject to continual and expansive reconstruction.

All protests occur in a local government space so it appears as if local government is the cause and origin of these protests. This commonly held assumption disregards the political culture of our country and places the shortcomings of all other government spheres at the

doorstep of local government. Unless there is a concerted effort to collectively address community grievance by all sectors of local government, protests will continue to escalate. This should be accomplished through a process of strengthening local government participation structures so they may be used to consult communities while disrupting the capture of these structures by local interests. Presently, disruptive and violent community protests are methods whereby communities draw attention to their issues with the hope that national government will attend to their problems, to which it has been party to creating by not speaking to local government effectively.

Local Government as a Hub for Addressing Generalised Community Protests

The Local Government Perception on Community Protests study established that community protests have a link to economic conditions. The more people rely on government to survive, the more likely they are to protest on seemingly insignificant matters or over issues that are widely believed to have been resolved. While local government has made tremendous advances in extending services to all South Africans in a relationally short space of time, the need is so great in many communities that even a basic package of services does not have the intended consequence of raising communities' living standards to a commonly held level of aspiration.

The extent to which this is in the power of local government to change is limited. However, in terms of the findings from SALGA's community protest study, local government believes that a substantial cause of community protest is communicative in nature. The problem here is that local government is not the only sphere of government that delivers services in communities; it is joined by both provincial and national government with participation and community engagement processes widely believed to act independently of local government.

Participation structures, existing financial resources and accountability systems were cited as the biggest issues in need of redress in the local government space. A very close forth,

planning resources were cited as a need in local government to address the underlying issues that give rise to community protests.

Underpinning these structural issues were macro issues over which local government has no control. These include cyclical downturns in the global economy, changes in policy direction initiated by national government, and changes in human settlement patterns created by migrating populations adapting to these economic and policy conditions.

In order to address these issues, the Community Protest Perception study drew all the issues together and made the case that in order to address the major issues, the following items must be addressed:

- Municipal communication strategies should actively reduce the asymmetries of information between communities and local authorities, particularly in proposed projects and their sphere of origin.
- Existing structures and personnel, namely community development workers and councillors, should be used to proactively identify issues that give rise to discontent.
- Efficiencies in the system of service provision should be deepened and exploited. The free basic services model should be re-evaluated to determine its effectiveness where it is rolled out.
- Urban planning and densification strategies should be pursued with systems to monitor illegal settlement patterns put in place to minimise the uncontrolled settlement sprawl that creates a demand for services but creates grounds for service delivery protests and expensive legal complications for local government.
- Most importantly, national and provincial government must utilise local government participation structures. This would assist in improving coordination and communication at a local level.

While acting on these issues might be effective in reducing protests emanating from structural causes, there is always an element that cannot be addressed. Protests due to criminality and community desperation caused by privation will always exist while there is extra-legal and needs-driven competition over resources. While government as a whole can

do its part, communities need to do theirs, and become part of a co-creating culture that builds and improves infrastructure instead of destroying valuable infrastructure through acts of pointless and resource depleting violence.

END

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