

Celebrating 25 years of local government

Coalitions and political stability session, 25 November

The need to address public sector institutional culture and relationships

Andrew Borraine: Speaker Notes

Political governance

When political governance goes wrong, e.g. breakdown of coalitions, floor-crossing, factionalism, competition and rivalry within political parties, loss of confidence in leaders, covering up for corruption by one of your own, winner-takes-all attitudes, inability to work across the aisle with your political opponents, throwing out the policies and projects of your predecessor to prove that you are a new broom sweeping clean, it can be highly problematic for the functioning of a municipality, for direction-giving and decision-making, for service delivery, for inspiring community and business confidence, and for sustaining programmes between electoral cycles.

As indicated above, the potential instability of coalition governments is only one of many challenges and is probably not the most important concern. Coalition politics is likely to become the norm, and political parties will need to become more skilled at managing coalition politics. Probably the most pressing problem is when political parties focus on attaining and retaining short-term power.

Institutional culture

I'd like to use this opportunity to look more closely at the internal workings of municipalities, in particular, at the institutional culture and its impact on relationships with communities, on planning and implementation, and on development impact.

Based on experience as a practitioner of past 25 years:

- In government, as public official and City Manager
- Working with all three spheres of government
- Working with CSOs, business and advocacy and research groups
- Intermediaries, partnering processes and partnerships, most recently, COGTA, DBSA and the PPGI in the Waterberg District pilot project
- Observations not confined to any one political party. All tend to behave in the same way when they get into power
- Acknowledge that councillors and municipal officials have to operate in a complex and stressful societal, political and regulatory environment
- Welcome feedback on your own experiences, and whether they dovetail or differ with mine

Top-down, bottom-up developmental model

Two environments impacting on development processes operate side by side, each with very different features, characteristics and cultures:

'Top-down authorising environment'

Political mandates, electoral and budgetary cycles, planning, resource allocation, legislation and regulation, law enforcement, institutional arrangements

The EDP seeks to improve the relationships between these two systems

'Bottom-up mobilising environment'

Entrepreneurs, worker-based movements, activists, NGOs, social movements, philanthropy, front-line government staff, active citizens, applied researchers

We often emphasise the need for 'grassroots development', but the 'bottom-up' environment is not necessarily better than the 'top-down'. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, and both need each other for success.

Generally, relationships between the two environments are poor. Consequences of this are: poor development outcomes, limited ability to learn and to do things differently, little social innovation incorporated into public sector thinking.

Characteristics of the public sector authorising environment

Public sector institutions tend to generate their own internal logic which make them oblivious and unresponsive to dynamics outside the institution. Need to understand *public sector institutional culture, attitudes and behaviours*, and how it can be improved and changed, not through more rules, processes and structures, but through addressing the 'softer' issues of leadership culture, adaptive governance, relationship-building inside and outside the institution.

- Generally unresponsive to citizen-led and business-led initiatives, and ideas and policy suggestions from researchers and academics. Municipal processes, programmes, projects and budgets take up 95% of municipal time and attention, rather than responding to societal ideas, needs and initiatives. Focus is on promising and announcing municipal projects. Not very good at listening, supporting and enabling. Often threatened by initiatives originating outside the municipal corridors of power:
 - Tendency to view civil society organisations as 'unelected gatekeepers' that 'get in the way' of government service delivery
 - Jaundiced view of private sector as not acting in the public interest
 - Often closed to critical thinking and alternative views from academics and scientists
- Token citizen engagement processes. Tick-box exercises, mainly to avoid legal challenges. Can be very disempowering. Usually result in predictable and generic shopping lists of community needs that seldom find expression in complex IDP and budget documents.
- Poor communications with citizens. Communications function usually tightly controlled, used to spin the municipal position in disputes, and to promote political leadership and the institution, rather than provide meaningful information. All about the Municipal Institution, rather than the territory, its people and the range of institutions.

- Engagement with citizens: 9/ 10 meetings of officials are internal. Meetings with external people and organisations are not prioritised. Usually cancelled on the basis of 'meeting with the Mayor or Mayco member' whether real, or made-up. The internal needs and timeframes of the institution trumps public engagement.
- Hierarchical: inwards and upwards accountability to Council structures and committees (endless reports), meeting the needs of politicians and their political parties, and responding to audit processes (the tyranny of the clean audit), rather than a downwards and outwards focus to citizens and communities
- Weaponization of municipal regulatory processes to fight factional battles (legal, internal audit and forensic departments used and abused)
- Departmental siloism and mandatism:
 - difficulty of integrated development in practice
 - project by project implementation, which reduces development impact
 - don't touch me on my mandate (defensiveness) or, why are you convening something in my territory/ mandate, or, don't bring that unfunded mandate to me (it's not my problem).
- Non-collaborative institutional culture, attitudes and behaviours, internally, across municipal boundaries, and intergovernmental cooperation
- Cumbersome and constipated regulatory processes. Procedures as ends in themselves, rather than as means towards the end. In particular, inability to deal with and support informality: community gardens (land, infrastructure, water), community kitchens, spazas, informal traders, waste pickers, unregistered ECD centres
- Rigid planning, monitoring and evaluation systems – inability to adapt and change the plan, based on new intelligence in the environment and changing circumstances, little scope for risk-taking, experimentation, innovation, doing things differently

Results:

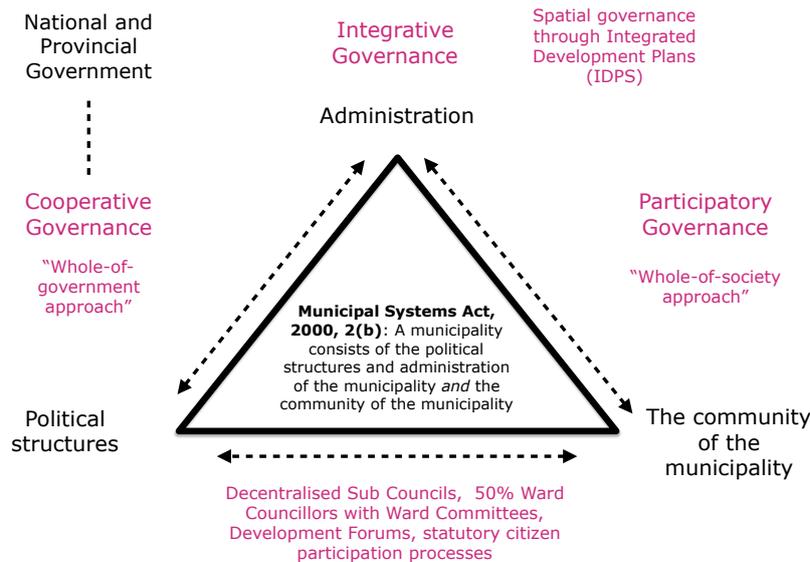
- Poor implementation and development impact
- Disabling environment for development
- Inability to partner with CSOs, business and academia (beyond PPPs)
- Incapable and anti-developmental state that's not fit for purpose

Characteristics of mobilising environments:

- Hyper responsive to local issues
- Multiple organisations, ideas and initiatives, but projects are often isolated, with limited impact and scale
- Emphasis on political and ideological differences between groups makes it difficult for them to agree to work together
- Competitive behaviours between CSOs (struggle for resources)
- Community conflicts, often violent and destructive
- Localised and even parochial views, unconnected to a bigger picture
- Naïve understanding how governments work in practice
- Failure to influence political and policy processes
- Inability to navigate and cooperate with the authorising environment – tendency to default to legal action, mass action or 'exposes' of government

Both environments need each other, but:

- High levels of historical mistrust: broken promises, lack of implementation of previous agreements
- Tend to speak past each other (different languages, cultures)
- Find it difficult to partner with each other and sustain relationships of trust



SA collaborative, participatory and integrative governance system

Work needed in the authorising environment:

- Shift to a collaborative, adaptive and enabling approach, away from disabling 'command and control' hierarchical attitudes and behaviours
- To improve implementation effectiveness, public sector planning processes need to focus on the 'who' and the 'how' as they do on the 'why' and the 'what'
- Better accountability 'downwards' and 'outwards'
- Partnering framework:
 - Transversal collaboration between siloes - departments, professions, mandates, budgets
 - Inter-governmental relationships
 - Cross-boundary collaboration
 - Reconceptualise approach to 'community engagement' and 'community participation'

Work needed in the mobilising environment

- Connect, communicate, collaborate
- New forms of mobilisation, organisation and education, e.g. CANs: hyper-decentralised action, but connecting across historical boundaries (doing, sharing and storytelling)
- Emphasis on the power of building relationships, non-partisan politics and adaptive leadership
- Approach to engaging and partnering with the authorising environment, while reserving the right to resort to legal challenges, mass action, and exposes.

Role of collaborative intermediary organisations in development processes

- Focus on 'in-between spaces'
- Prioritise building relationships of trust
- Able to act independently of sectional and political interests
- Able to identify overlapping interests to build a common agenda to achieve joint action
- Adaptive and responsive
- Create formal and informal channels of communication
- Provide 'backbone' support for partnering processes