

# Local government revamp needed for district development model to work



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## Abstract

*South Africa's local government has struggled to meet the aspirations of the citizens, especially over the last decade. President Ramaphosa has proposed an integrated development model to help revitalise the developmental local government agenda. The model has the potential to improve service delivery, but its success will only be determined by the extent to which it improves the lives of ordinary citizens.*

## Keywords

Local government, South Africa, development, governance

South Africa's local government sector has struggled to meet the aspirations of the citizenry in the past decade. The decade was characterised by seemingly unending civil protest, especially service-delivery related, to the point where SA was at one point referred to as the protest centre of the world.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is showing no signs of abating. In fact, there is a high probability that the trend will increase if government and citizens cannot or will not work together to address the various multinatured effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is an urgent need for a transformative form of politics that will generate a new, citizen-centred approach to co-operative governance. The state must aim is to collaborate with ordinary citizens in developing the areas where they live, and uphold governance and ethical leadership practices as a new norm.

During his state of the nation address earlier in the year President Cyril Ramaphosa proposed an integrated development model that will be based at the district level of governance, commonly referred to as the 'district development model'.

The model is designed to:

- eliminate the 'silo' operation tendency that has characterised government at all levels of governance;
- facilitate 'integrated' development at the district level as it takes in all 44 districts and eight metros across the country as 'development centres', with one integrated plan for each development node;
- facilitate co-ordinated service delivery across municipalities;
- spur investment in local economic development;
- accelerate land release and land development; and
- manage urbanisation, growth and development.

While the above ideals are important pillars of revitalising the developmental local government agenda as captured by the district developmental model, they need to be centred fully on public participation and social engagement. This is critically important because sustainable developmental by local government must be fully supported by an involved citizenry (including social partners), otherwise the model will not take off as intended. Therefore, to increase its chances of success, the following impediments must be eliminated:

- the political power struggles that have characterised local government in SA in the last decade, including internal conflicts in the governing party;
- poor public and stakeholder engagement. The model is a top-down approach aimed at securing buy-in from key stakeholders. There has not been enough grassroots engagement to sell the new model so that it gains the necessary credence from local communities to make it work;
- bureaucracy that impedes effective policy alignment with existing development strategies and plans. This phenomenon is often characterised by poor intergovernmental co-ordination of policy implementation; and
- the chronic 'silo' approach to development planning and management.

In the interests of rebuilding the local economy from the devastating effects of Covid-19, the district development model will require a reconfiguration of local governance. This must prioritise good governance and ethical leadership. Moreover, it must reprioritize budgets, aligning them with the new realities the country faces as a result of the pandemic, otherwise the model will be a non-starter without adequate funding to support its implementation.

Moreover, since the model will be implemented in phases, evaluative thinking must be employed at each phase of implementation to measure progress as accurately as possible while addressing teething challenges that might be encountered during the process. This evaluative thinking process must be informed by evidence, driven by an attitude of inquisitiveness, posing thoughtful questions to gain insights that inform the next phases of implementation.

Connected to this point, there is a need to ensure that public officials with strong evaluative skills are tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the model, people who can employ evaluative judgment to make informed decisions about the quality of work done throughout the phases and provide useful feedback to the political leadership for consideration on an ongoing basis. One would then expect that lessons learnt to be used to make improvements to the next phases.

The model has the potential to fast track service delivery at the local level. However, the impediments identified must be eliminated to give the model the best chance of success. Ultimately, its success will be determined by the extent it changes the lives of ordinary citizens for the better, while creating mutually beneficial partnerships with all social partners to promote collaborative political accountability, trust and transparency.

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