

How to professionalise local government: The time has come to translate good intentions and ideas



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Abstract

“What is needed is not merely technical professionalisation, because a highly skilled government is not an end in itself. What is needed is a change of thinking in the way the sector does its business and a focus on improving its operational efficiency, demonstrated by attitudinal and behavioural change. And corruption must be stamped out.”

Keywords

Corruption, local government, professional

President Cyril Ramaphosa in his 2021 State of the Nation Address (Sona) indicated the intentions of his administration of professionalising local government in South Africa. Over the years, this sphere of governance has experienced chronic challenges of underperformance characterised by poor financial management, political interference, corruption, poor leadership, adverse audit reports and weak oversight, among other aspects.

However, changing the situation in local government will take more than professionalising it. This massive effort should commence firstly by the state proving to the public that it is keen to change the status quo of local government decisively and promptly. It is important to bear in mind that what is needed is not merely technical professionalisation because a highly skilled government is not an end in itself. What is needed is a change of thinking in the way the sector does its business and focus on improving its operational efficiency, demonstrated by attitudinal and behavioural change.

Time has come to translate good intentions and ideas into actions that yield tangible and sustainable outcomes in favor of the citizenry, who continue to experience the weight of operational inefficiency in the sector.

So, then, where should the work towards professionalising local government begin?

First, there has to be the political will to influence meaningful change among public servants towards delivering efficient, effective and sustainable basic services to the public. There is a yearning among the citizenry for better, efficient and high-quality municipal services. Practically, this means that the national government must be willing to confront obstacles that have limited optimal performance of the local government sector. There has to be a willingness to address cadre deployment, as some of those deployed seconded to the sector lack the prerequisite technical competencies needed to promote operational efficiency of local government business.

Second, there is a need to improve the working environment in municipalities in general. The challenges in most municipalities are known and well documented. To attract competent technical people, there has to be an environment that supports and promotes professional practice and institutional capacity. Professional practice can be achieved through improving skills while institutional capacity can be achieved through a cultural and behavioural change in the entire local government sector.

Since professionalising local government requires a mix of professionals from diverse professional backgrounds, it is important that the government co-creates with all relevant stakeholders a supportive environment where professional practices and standards are held as a norm. This shift will require a coherent political and administrative leadership that values and promotes high standards of performance and behaviour among public servants working at the local government level. This is important to professionals as they generally aspire to high ideals such as honour, respect, excellence, scholarship, compassion, accountability and selflessness.

Third, professionalising local government business essentially implies an improvement of local government capability, not only in terms of professional expertise and the right mix of skills but also in terms of citizen-centred service. While most municipalities conduct citizen satisfaction surveys regularly, customer services have remained suboptimal. It is time for municipal political and administrative leaders across the country to take citizens seriously as their most important clientele. This business attitude is important in rebuilding public confidence and trust in municipalities as far as basic service delivery is concerned.

Fourth, corruption must be dealt with decisively. It continues to beleaguer the sector, casting a dark shadow over it. While the government at many levels has made significant efforts to curb the scourge, it continues to proliferate unabated. This endemic problem stifles the capabilities of the sector to deliver basic services efficiently and effectively. Moreover, it erodes the requisite professionalism needed to accompany the delivery of those services to the public as both individual and organisational disciplines diminish. There is a great need to not only strengthen accountability mechanisms within municipalities and across government but also foster ethical principles, practices of individual and collective social responsibility and accountability.

It is a mammoth task to overhaul a system with years of tradition and embedded bureaucracy such as local government. While the intention to professionalise local government is a noble ideal, it is also plausible to begin with establishing conditions under which such a task will flourish and achieve tangible results that can be sustained in the long term.