



IJSRM

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An Official Publication of Human Journals



Human Journals

Review Article

October 2016 Vol.:4, Issue:4

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Ensuring Local Government Sustainability Through Leadership: The South African Case



IJSRM

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
An Official Publication of Human Journals



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Submission: 10 October 2016

Accepted: 15 October 2016

Published: 25 October 2016



HUMAN JOURNALS

www.ijsrm.humanjournals.com

Keywords: local government, sustainability, leadership, leadership styles, Sustainable Development Goals

ABSTRACT

With ever-increasing service delivery protests and qualified audit reports being received by municipalities do concerns exist over the future sustainability of local government in South Africa. An array of legislative measures was enacted by the national government of South Africa to address the situation, however, with little effect. Leadership is therefore proposed to address the challenges faced by local government in respect of *inter alia* involving citizens in decision-making, ensuring stakeholder coordination, governance efficiency, efficacy, justice and the management of human and financial resources. This is necessary to bring about long-term solutions to ensure that local government will meet the needs of people in future through the provision of operational guidelines, access to training and the availability of specialized skills. How this will be achieved will be discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

The onset of democratic transformation in South Africa in 1994 had a profound influence on local government which progressed from being a third tier of government to an equal, autonomous sphere of government. However, a combination of financial pressures, public service reforms, demographic shifts and increasing citizen expectations are driving a fundamental re-appraisal of what – and how – local government delivers services. The challenges also offer an opportunity to re-think the shape of those organizations that deliver these services. From working with new providers to collaborating with other organizations and finding new ways to interact with customers and citizen, local government must search for new ways to drive improvement in a tighter fiscal environment. These pressures bring a huge range of challenges to local government which, if positively experienced, can culminate in ensuring sustainability of local government for future generations.

The performance of local government in South Africa to deliver quality services is, however, often questioned against alleged financial irregularities, maladministration and corruption and mismanagement. Although the South African government *inter alia* approved a comprehensive local government turnaround strategy (LGTAS) as well as the National Development Plan: Vision for 2030, it is clear judging by the recent local government public service delivery protests that these efforts had little effect to turn local authorities around and to ensure that local authorities can deliver satisfactory services to improve the quality of life of citizens and thus ensure sustainability in local government *per se*. The question therefore exists: how can local government sustainability be ensured for future generations? In this regard, leadership can play a meaningful role. In this paper, attention will be focused on the conceptualization of sustainability and leadership on local government level; a review of local government and their performance; leadership challenges and the role of leadership to ensure sustainable local government.

Regarding the research method, a literature study of appropriate sources containing authoritative publications, books, journals, the internet and official documents such as departmental policies will be conducted to gather information, while the field operations included interviews with practitioners and academics in the field of public administration and management.

SUSTAINABILITY CONCEPTUALISED AND APPLICABILITY TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Sustainability has broad appeal and little specificity, but some combination of development and environment, as well as equity, is found in many attempts to describe it. However, proponents of sustainable development differ in their emphases on what is to be sustained, what is to be developed, how to link environment and development, and for how long a time. Despite the persistent definitional ambiguities associated with sustainable development, much work has been devoted to developing quantitative indicators of sustainable development. The emphasis on sustainability indicators has multiple motivations that include decision-making and management, advocacy, participation and consensus building, and research and analysis (Parris & Kates 2003:562).

For purposes of this paper will sustainability be defined as an ability or capacity of something to be maintained or to sustain itself. It is about taking what we need to live now, without jeopardizing the potential for people in the future to meet their needs. If an activity is said to be sustainable, it should be able to continue forever. Living sustainably is about living within the means of our natural systems (environment) and ensuring that our lifestyle does not harm other people (society and culture). Increasingly our lifestyle is placing more and more pressure on natural systems and are scientists continuing to investigate how human interactions with natural systems can be improved and sustained (Sachs 2012). These same principles apply to government and examples thereof are as follows.

In 2000 the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted marking a historic and effective method of global mobilization to achieve a set of important social priorities worldwide till 2015. These goals expressed widespread public concern about poverty, hunger, disease, unmet schooling, gender inequality, and environmental degradation. By packaging these priorities into an easily understandable set of eight goals, and by establishing measurable and time-bound objectives, the MDGs helped to promote global awareness, political accountability, improved metrics, social feedback, and public pressures. Although developing countries have made substantial progress towards achievement of the MDGs, was the progress highly variable across goals, countries, and regions as some countries achieved all or most of the MDGs,

whereas others achieved very few. The shortfall represents a set of operational failures that implicate many stakeholders, in both poor and rich countries. Promises of official development assistance by rich countries, for example, have not been kept (Sachs 2015:1). To follow on the 15 year MDG period the world on 25 September 2015 adopted a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations. These goals were set to ensure balance between economic efficiency and social equity, economic growth and environmental protection, economic well-being and other human concerns and will therefore have an influence on governance in future (United Nations 2015).

As is generally recognized, governance refers to the processes of governing – the processes of interaction and decision-making among the government, creating, using and managing networks, involving citizen groups for the purpose of creating, reinforcing, and/or reproducing social norms and institutions that facilitate sustainable development, provide effective and efficient services, and ultimately improve the quality of human life. Moving into the 21st century, the trend for globalization, urbanization, and high-tech development greatly complicated the governance processes and exert pressures on earth's resource sustainability and traditional institutional capacity for social governance. New problems, new issues, and new challenges are calling for new solutions (IASIA 2015:2).

To address these challenges the focus should be on capacity building visions, strategies, and methods for sustainable governance and strives to answer questions such as how to build capacity to ensure resource use justice and sustainability across nations, generations, and spaces and how to build human and organizational capacity to ensure social stability, justice, peace, and prosperity. Issues to be addressed are governance strategic priorities, including citizen participation and stakeholder coordination to balance human needs and resource sustainability; how to improve legal, institutional and organizational systems to ensure governance efficiency, efficacy, justice, and sustainability; and the management and cultivation (including educating and training) of human and financial resources to achieve sustainable goals (Buono, Gitsham, Carteron and Haertle 2015:46). The question is whether local government in South Africa is in a position to face these challenges and should their performance be scrutinized.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The constitutional change that paved the way for a democratic dispensation in South Africa directly impacted upon the public sector which was and still is undergoing major structural changes to undo and unlearn the aberrations of the past. Over a period of 21 years, the government attempted through numerous pieces of legislation and regulations to create a policy environment which is conducive and supportive to one common goal – the improvement of life for all. It meant that the government had to revamp its expenditure management system where new initiatives had to be funded by the reallocation of existing resources, a stable fiscal environment had to be provided for longer-term departmental strategic planning, business planning had to be introduced to assist the Treasury in developing an overview of strategic planning across government institutions, and emphasis had to be placed on the continuous modernisation of programmes and by delivery of services with the available funds (Arnaboldi & Lapsley 2003:349).

Through the above-mentioned efforts the new local government system succeeded in its goal to radically overhaul and transform local government in South Africa, but performances in respect of service delivery remain questionable. This has been attributed to the fact that local authorities had to deal with issues such as the non-payment of services, access to adequate resources and national transfers (Allan 2006:34), although the above-mentioned arrangements suggest that financial means can no longer be used as an excuse for non- or poor performance.

A key concern of the South African local governments is that of *capacity* problems, not only to deliver and sustain quality services but in the ability to spend its revenue. Instead of a general increase in spending, both capital and operational expenditure fluctuated greatly. In the late 1990s to 2001 capital expenditure shrunk by 8,5% and 14,6% respectively, while operating expenditure increased with spending on the provision of free basic services such as water and sanitation, but also on the growth in the salary bills of municipalities, causing questions as to why the latter increased at the expense of infrastructure spending (Allan 2006:35). However, the growth in capital expenditure that was experienced during 2002/2003 (12%), 2004/2005 (27,5%) and 2006/2007 (15,6%) hopefully marked a new and consistent trend taking the current (2014/15) 12% into consideration (LG Review 2014:9).

Further indicators of incapacity include the growing utilization of consultants in local government, unacceptable high levels of underspending in poverty stricken areas and the increasing number of alternative service providing structures (De Villiers & Michel 2006:9). Questions are also posed as to the extent to which policy intentions that are linked to performance, are accomplished, thus the implementation of policies. The mere existence of a policy and its impact is no guarantee that it will be translated into action with the results intended. Legislation and regulations referred to are *inter alia* a comprehensive Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTAS) in 2009, the Operation Clean Audit of 2014 to 2019, the New Economic Growth Path (NGP) on national level launched in 2010 as well as the National Development Plan – 2030 (National Planning Commission (NPC) 2013:30) that compliments one another's goals to not only combat the worldwide financial meltdown in 2008, but to meet the basic demands of all the citizens by a reduction in unnecessary government expenditure, the release of resources for productive investment and to strengthen local government's role in financial management for improved service delivery.

Despite all these measures were 95 of 278 municipalities (divided into local, district and metro municipalities) in financial distress (a term specifically used to indicate the number of municipalities approaching 'financial crisis') in July 2013. Although more audits were completed according to the Municipal Finance Management Act in 2012, the number of disclaimers, adverse or qualified audit opinions increased from 110 to 127 in 2013; 43 municipalities were not audited due to their failure to submit annual financial statements on time, with the majority of these unlikely to receive a favourable audit outcome; only 50% of municipalities achieved at least a financially unqualified audit opinion (up from 45% in the previous year); and only 17 clean audits in the country, i.e. fewer than 5% of municipalities achieving the required benchmark (UWC Report 2014:5). The UWC Report furthermore indicated that it is unlikely that the Operation Clean Audit 2019 targets, one of which is that 75% of municipalities should achieve an unqualified audit, will be achieved and that additional interventions and periodic adjustment to actual trends will still be required if the new targets are to be met. Apart from the above-mentioned, is policy and planning often done at top management level without sufficient participation by frontline operational managers resulting in a disjuncture between strategic and operational plans and a gap between policy, planning, budgeting and implementation (Maranya 2006:9).

Seeing that the performance of local government as alluded to above is therefore not satisfactory should mechanisms such as leadership to deliver improved services be investigated to ensure some kind of sustainable local government in the future.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN ENSURING SUSTAINABLE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Combating inefficiency, ineffectiveness and incompetence require a dynamic and multi-faceted strategy or strategies that use scarce resources effectively on a constructive, shared basis. In developing such a strategy/strategies, one should not purely develop it for compliance with legislative frameworks, but should it be developed out of necessity guided by the environments in which one operates to ensure that the outcomes and outputs address the unfavorable conditions. What therefore needs to be achieved is to improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability; improve the application of systems and policies; support a good corporate culture; put public interest first; inform the reinforcement process with a shared commitment; and strive for the deterrence, prevention and detection of these conditions (Kim 2010: 806).

To ensure sustainable local government will according to Lewin (2014:12) furthermore depend on the nature of the role of local government in service delivery, the capacity of the people in local government and the resources available. Emphasis should be placed on what can be done to deliver *more, better and different* services. Capacity constraints, however, exist in local government, including poorly designed or fragmented programs. According to the Financial and Fiscal Commission (2014:17), for capacity building programs to be successful, there is a need to address the underlying challenges. That means government interventions should be aimed at bringing about long-term solutions to ensure that municipalities operate on their own with no intervention from other spheres of government. There is therefore a need for a shift towards enabling municipalities in a more practical and sustainable manner by providing operational guidelines, access to training and availability of specialized skills.

To achieve this, is strong, coherent leadership and pro-active political and administrative leadership necessary. Although leadership is proposed as significant for modernization and improvement it is often alluded to without definition (Fourie 2015:3). According to Hartley

(2002:420), there are at least two levels of analysis in the concept of leadership. In the first, leadership is the behaviors and actions of individuals, whereas the second approach has the organization as unit of analysis, working with other agencies in the locality and having particular responsibility for addressing the needs and aspirations of the inhabitants.

In the public sector, the managerial leadership advises elected officials in formulating policy and determining services, uphold the law, implement policy, and deliver services, and direct or coordinate the administrative structure and manage the resources of the organization. They balance responsiveness to the preferences of the elected officials and demands from citizens with a commitment to promote public interest for the community as a whole and to advance professional standards and successful practices (Svara 2006:1075). Often there are tensions between responding to the aspirations and pressing current needs and addressing important potential problems and long-term needs. The creative tension between political and managerial leadership embodies the continuing challenge of reconciling these perspectives. According to Fitzgerald in Rosenbaum *et al.* (2006:127) should these two leaderships see themselves as operating within a strategic partnership where the respective leadership roles would be understood and accommodated. The point would not be to remove tensions, or any possibility of tensions, as this would be impossible and undesirable. The aim should be the creation of a culture capable of handling and resolving such tensions as normal challenges within the governance process.

Nel, Werner, Haasbroek, Poisat, Sono and Schultz (2008:332) distinguish between the concepts leader and leadership. The authors argue that it is viable to distinguish between the person, the position and the processes in terms of leadership. The idea of leadership as a set of processes concerned with the influencing of people and achieving objectives are reflected in the definitions of leadership by Heifetz (1996:10) (mobilizing people to tackle 'tough' problems); Mulgan (1997:102) (strengthening the capacity of citizens and communities to govern themselves); and Cumming (2001: 2) (creating a strong sense of direction for the organization and the people in it and the values that need to go alongside this direction), enabling governments and other stakeholders to develop a value system of responsibility to the future.

In recent times ethical leadership came to the fore and boils down to know and do what is right (Forje 2014:6). However, it is difficult to define the word 'right' as different cultures, religions and individuals might define the word differently. Ethical leaders are characterized by being people-orientated, aware of how their decisions impact upon others and how to use his/her power to the advantage of others (Bigabwenkya 2014:8). This implies that individuals will be motivated to put the needs or interests of the group ahead of their own. Ethical leaders distinguish themselves by taking decisions that are inconvenient and unpopular; addressing solutions from an interconnected and multidisciplinary nature that in the long-run will be to the advantage of the organization, and extend trust in workers to suggest problem-solving solutions (Burmeister 2014:13). It is thus clear that there is a leadership role for particular individuals in shaping visions of the future and encouraging government as organization to look beyond immediate pressures in order to direct innovative actions to address a stronger external focus and responsiveness towards inhabitants.

In this endeavor, the notion of distributed leadership where one moves beyond the traditional leadership models and highlights the roles taken jointly by politicians, managers and front-line staff, should be embraced. This is a different dimension of leadership than is sometimes assumed from the debates about 'strong' leadership, which often imply more of a command and control approach from the strategic apex of an organization (Van Slyke & Alexander 2007:362). Distributed leadership therefore requires a paradigm shift for government, their management and their practices, with managers, politicians and others accepting their own role in leadership.

In implementing ethical leadership in government, a distinction between different perspectives of leadership should furthermore be taken into consideration. It can either be the perception of the follower of the relationship with the leader, or a character-based perspective (Dirks & Ferrin 2002:614). Although these perspectives were seen as functional equivalents, Clark and Payne (2006:1162) opine that in service delivery entities such as government, a character-based approach has advantages insofar as the ethical leader may have authority to make decisions that have a significant impact on those to whom for instance particular services are rendered or not rendered. Ovadje (2014:107) concur that one cannot do without leadership when one enquires into public sector productivity and efficiency, necessitating according to Jarbandhan (2011:24) and Fourie (2015:5) new skills such as managing change, human resources, multi-lateral

negotiations and risk. This will also apply to leaderships' role in designing and implementing, thus the governance of monitoring and evaluation systems. The levels on which this leadership should be applied are in the societal, intergovernmental and organizational environments. According to Van der Waldt (2004:75) does **societal leadership** require a holistic approach where organizational processes must be identified, managed, reviewed, and improved to ensure a positive impact on society, customer satisfaction, people satisfaction, supplier and partnership performance to develop a sustainable culture. Ethical leadership will provide direction so that the vision of continuous monitoring and evaluation of policies, programs and projects is achieved. Ethical leadership on **intergovernmental level** is important as the creation of a more sustainable system requires interdependency, alignment and coordination across multiple governmental spheres, which, according to Minnaar (2015), does not currently exist in South Africa. To address the aforementioned situation are leadership and performance driven organizational strategies necessary as public sector managers would not be able to fulfill their tasks without proactive and directional leadership to achieve excellence (Govender *et al.* 2011:20). Ethical leadership on **organizational level** is of paramount importance to channel individual efforts within an organization to manage policies effectively and accomplish organizational goals. Without ethical leadership, most members are likely to function in a manner that suits them regardless of the impact on the organization, leading to disorganization (Ile *et al.* 2012:53). To thus prevent this, Kohli (2012:41) stresses that ethical leadership should lead by example and employ the tools of motivation, communication, inspiration and trying out new ventures. Without ethical leadership, will accountability, governance, capacity development and performance management not be increased, thereby jeopardizing the possibility of sustainable local government.

Increasing demands are therefore posed for more creative and effective leadership. The ability to enunciate an engaging and compelling vision for the future of the organization, to focus it on long-term opportunities and goals, and to inspire others, are all among the most important abilities required of the leadership on local government level. The external roles which local governments need to undertake to improve service delivery and in so doing create confidence in the organizations furthermore necessitate particular competencies, i.e. intellectual, visioning, management, relationship and personal (Ali in Rosenbaum & Kauzya 2006:136), that will

contribute to articulating the needs and aspirations of local inhabitants. Leadership on local government level should furthermore be

- creative and propose innovative problem-solving solutions;
- promote equity in service delivery;
- develop approaches to poverty alleviation;
- reconnect with the stakeholders;
- make the institutions more relevant;
- promote transparency in governance;
- promote democratic institutional development *inter alia* through dialogue with citizens; and
- promote public sector ethics to enhance confidence within the institution itself (United Nations 2008:6).

Leadership is therefore a key priority ensuring sustainable local government and should the objective be to recruit, retain and develop the best available talent and skills in local government. In South Africa, the governance structures are clouded with acting municipal managers and persons in CFO positions, namely 17% of all municipalities have acting municipal managers, 60 municipalities have acting chief financial officers, and 22 municipalities have both acting municipal managers and chief financial officers in 2013/2014. The absence of leadership leaves municipalities vulnerable to non-compliance and in a dysfunctional state (Lewin 2014:12).

Once the above-mentioned prerequisites have been met can local government as an institution be regarded as effective through the use of leadership to ensure sustainability for future generations.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it is clear that the South African government succeeded in its goal to transform local government, but despite the introduction of appropriate legislation, additional financial resources and particular programmatic interventions, their performance in respect of service delivery remains questionable. This situation will jeopardize sustainable local government in future and it was proposed that ethical leadership can be utilized in this regard.

Ethical leadership should be aware of their respective roles, duties, responsibilities and obligations and should communication be clear to avoid misunderstanding and will necessitate new skills such as managing change, human resources, multi-lateral negotiations and risk. Ethical leadership should be applied to societal, intergovernmental and institutional environments and will require a holistic approach where organizational processes must be identified, managed, reviewed, and improved to ensure a positive impact on society. It will furthermore require interdependency, alignment and coordination across multiple governmental spheres as well as organizational leadership to ensure that individuals do not follow their own goals instead of that of the organization.

Leadership should not only be the responsibility of a particular individual but on local government level should councilors, managers and front-line staff take responsibility for leadership to ensure that sustainable local government can be ensured.

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