

Improving citizen participation mechanisms and processes is therefore essential for advancing service delivery initiatives and perceptions of municipal performance.



Infrastructure and service delivery – lessons from SA and China

The HSRC conducted a collaborative study with the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) to explore aspects of best practice in service delivery in terms of water, sanitation and electricity. The study found that important obstacles to service delivery fall within the governance, policies, programmes and stakeholder relationships of local government practices, i.e the *intangible* aspects of service delivery. *Elmé Vivier and Marie Wentzel report.*

The Municipal Systems Act No 32 of 2000 establishes that it is the responsibility of local government to provide the basic household services necessary to ensure an acceptable and reasonable quality of life, thereby contributing to the social and economic development of the South African people. But pervasive challenges persist in the face of increased backlogs and subsequent service delivery protests. Some of the main obstacles to infrastructure development and enhanced service delivery fall within the systems of governance, policies, programmes and stakeholder relationships that characterise local government practices.

It is within this context that the HSRC conducted a collaborative study with the

Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) to explore essential aspects of the intangible infrastructure, from government policies and partnerships to attitudes on citizen participation.

We selected three case study areas in South Africa and China respectively as municipalities of best practice across the service sectors of water, sanitation and electricity. The key lessons from the successes, as well as continuing challenges within each area, confirmed the significance of intangible forms of infrastructure.

The criteria for the selection were population size and good performance and/or improvement in service delivery. In South Africa, we identified Tswelopele, Moses

Kotane and the Cape Town Metro for the study; and in China, the the municipalities of Xinyu City, Shaoxing City and Qugdao Municipality were selected. The research methodology comprised focus groups in selected communities and in-depth interviews with local government stakeholders.

The policy and planning environment

In South Africa, national policy informs municipal service delivery plans and basic service level standards. However, the study found that this policy context is often experienced as a hindrance to innovative thinking and scope for municipal management. For instance, the White Paper on Sanitation is still just a white paper whilst the MPMA is silent on certain issues that

leave grey areas', specifically with regard to informal settlements according to officials from the Cape Town Metropolitan Council. Furthermore, the mandate to provide toilet facilities on the basis of a 1/25 ratio is only achieved on average, but 'as a goal it is simply not good enough'. Thus standards set for municipalities are often felt as limiting or simply too minimal and should take into account differences in the challenges and capacities of local governments.

In China, the national government also sets the legal and policy framework and technical standards in terms of the provision of basic services. The provincial government plays a similar role while the municipal government administers the services. The study found that, as in South Africa, the national and provincial service standards should be more widely and stringently enforced to equalise services across a diverse population.

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Another challenge identified by local government stakeholders in both countries was the need for better long-term planning for in-migration. In the Cape Town Metro, for example, the study highlighted migration as a critical factor that impacted on the demand for municipal infrastructure and services, but did not match the capacity of the Metro to meet that demand.

In Chinese cities, migration similarly impacted negatively on the provision of municipal services as government expenditure on infrastructure and public services was based on the taxes collected from the permanent residents. More migrants thus mean more extra-budgetary income to cope with the additional services.

Community participation and consultation

Residents and community and government leaders in both South Africa and China identified crucial well-established community consultation and participation processes in the municipalities as crucial. In China, the neighbourhood committee serves as a bridge between residents and government, enterprises and voluntary organisations,

while in South Africa, residents can engage with their local ward committee at regular meetings, and also with appointed community development workers.

However, in South Africa we found vast discrepancies between the perceptions of the quality and efficacy of participatory mechanisms of residents, on the one hand, and local government stakeholders, on the other. More often than not the stakeholders indicated that there was meaningful engagement with the communities while residents' responses were generally negative and suggested a range of issues from lack of local government interest in the community to a lack of knowledge of, or interest in, government representatives on the part of residents themselves.

Focus group participants in Khayelitsha expressed the following views with regard to their local officials: 'Once they get chosen you don't ever see them'; 'I don't even know who they are'; '...Overall once a person is elected in a position they don't bother because it's about money... they now have a status, they are not the same as the people on the ground'.

These perceptions were often compounded by the fact that citizens were not always aware of who was responsible for providing and maintaining a particular service (municipality or outsourced provider such as Eskom), as well as the appropriate channels to follow in the event of problems with a service, as was the case in Moses Kotane.

In China, some citizens perceived the neighbourhood committee as an extension of the Communist Party rather than an autonomous body aimed at actual engagement with and determination of community needs. In fact, although the committee was autonomous by law, in reality its degree of autonomy was not very high. A participant in the focus group at the Diangongchang Community, Xinyu City said, 'The community development needs the support of the government. But now most communities tend to serve the government'.

Improving citizen participation mechanisms and processes is therefore essential for advancing service delivery initiatives and perceptions of municipal performance. In China, the neighbourhood committee should be allowed to operate with due autonomy to be properly empowered. And in South Africa, standardised processes should be followed for ward committees' engagement with communities to improve communication and participation with residents. In addition, adherence to established reporting structures between councillors and municipal management is necessary for effective engagement.

Public-private partnerships

The study also indicated that public-private partnerships and engagement with local NGOs were effective tools to enhance service delivery, buttress limited skills and capacities, and assisted municipalities with services that were not their core competency. In the three selected Chinese cities, for example, water, electricity and sanitation services were provided by companies rather than the government-run institutions. However, these companies are public holdings rather than private enterprises.

In the City of Cape Town, recycling initiatives are provided through a private company. Public-private partnerships are also important to facilitate development initiatives through, for instance, partnerships with developers and banking institutions in order to improve access to land and housing.

Lessons of best practice

The case study areas selected for this study established that although real progress can be made in providing the most basic services to citizens, there will always be challenges. And although every challenge is unique and depends on the context, there are parallels and points of intersection which allow us to learn from one another.

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