

A CALL FROM CIVIL SOCIETY TO DEAL WITH THE CRISIS IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE



We the undersigned, individual citizens and residents, civil society organisations and social movements, invite fellow South Africans to join this call for **EFFECTIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE IN OUR COUNTRY.**

We are making this call, now, 20 years into local government, in the wake of the alarming Consolidated General Report on the local government audit outcomes by the Auditor-General for the 2018-19 financial year. This report indicates that while a lot of milestones have been achieved in local government over the years, a lot more could have been done to address persistent service delivery challenges that continue to widen the inequality gap across our country. The report points out clearly that the availability of money is not a challenge in many municipalities but the management of public finances is. In spite of all of its efforts over the years, government has failed to inspire ethical and moral leadership in local government, the kind that will ensure well governed and well capacitated municipal institutions.

This latest report indicates that the number of municipalities with poor financial management is increasing and not decreasing; this is matter of capacity and leadership.

As the country grapples with the aftermaths of Covid-19, sound financial governance in our public institutions has never been more necessary as it is now as we rebuild our economy. South Africa is our home and in it we must thrive, all of us, not just an elite few. We therefore can no longer sit back and watch the state of play in local government continue unabated.

We agree with the Auditor-General that:

- While there is “not much to go around, yet not the right hands at the till”.
- “The safe and clean hands that can be relied upon to look after the public’s finances in local government are few and far between.”
- Municipalities are “crippled by debt and being unable to pay for water and electricity; inaccurate and lacklustre revenue collection; expenditure that is unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful; and a high dependence on grants and assistance from national government”.

We are not surprised by this report and the negative picture it paints of both the state of our municipal finances and the conduct of many of the custodians and managers of our municipal finances. We have seen for ourselves over the years the lack of consequences for transgressions in local government and the recycling of suspect individuals from one municipality to the next, leaving a trail of destruction wherever they are deployed.

We raise our concerns not only because we see and experience failures in service delivery but because we pay rent, service charges and municipal taxes and we contribute to the national revenue through our economic activities and taxes including Value Added Tax on goods and services which includes municipal services.

The state of play in local government continues to threaten our Constitutional rights to housing, health care, food security, clean water, decent sanitation, recreational facilities, access roads and other basic infrastructure and social security. These must be met where we live, work and reside in our municipal areas. These are also key services which are supposed to drive and enhance local economies.

We understand our position and role in our municipalities to go beyond that of mere consumers of services, but that we are to co-create solutions to service delivery needs and partner in creative ways. We have since been elbowed out of decision-making through suspect Integrated Development Planning processes, poor performance assessment mechanisms and lack of public accountability platforms.

While we have real concerns about the lack of competence and integrity of many of our elected municipal councillors and municipal officials, we firmly believe that a majority of ordinary municipal employees go to work each day to do their best and act honestly. We decry the closing down of the spaces for these employees to innovate and be creative in their jobs, and for disruptive interference with their daily duties. This is as a result of the quality of public representatives in many municipalities across the country, enabled by the interface between party politics and local governance.

We understand that there is a need for systemic and legislative changes in order to insulate local government from the kind of political interference it has endured and the disruptive results thereof.

We cannot go on like this. We have to start somewhere and because municipalities are where we live, we believe that we must start to correct these problems here in our municipalities.

Therefore we insist on the following measures:

1. Oversight must be strengthened in particular, that of Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPACs), Audit and Strategic Risk committees, by, among other things, enabling adequate technical skills through the appointment of skilled persons from outside of the Municipal Councils.
2. Make access to information and transparency a cornerstone and bedrock of local government and have clear standards for information access and consequences for non-compliance. Make contracts and service level agreements public, so that we can monitor the services rendered in our communities, especially those implemented by third party contracted parties. Make the employment process transparent, interview senior municipal officials in the presence of the public – after all they do hold senior public office.
3. Regularise the establishment and publishing for comments of a municipal pre-budget policy statement in preparation for the annual budgeting cycle to indicate how the municipality was adapting and planning for the realities caused by Covid-19.
4. Professionalise local government by putting an end to the deployment of cadres into critical positions of leadership in municipalities such as senior and middle management. Keep your deployment processes only in Council appointments and not in the administration. We require the employment of officials who have the necessary qualifications, experience or aptitude to do the job they are appointed to do. We require a professional cadre of municipal leadership and technicians.
5. Establish a performance monitoring system for public representatives and assess their performance regularly.

6. Continue the review of the legislation regulating local governance as was agreed to be done by Parliament in 2019, and engage civil society for the sectors' input.
7. Report on the extent that municipalities adopt and implement mSCOA (Municipal Standard Charter of Accounts) as an enterprise wide management system, which includes the financial management system. This has the potential to act as a catalyst to drastically reduce wasteful and fruitless expenditure.

Most of these measures are not new proposals and none of them are contrary to existing law. However legal changes may be necessary to institutionalise some of these measures.

We place the implementation of these measures squarely in the door of CoGTA and the Presidency, while we expect the Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance in the National Legislature to monitor implementation and SALGA to engage its members for support as this is aimed to strengthen the sector.

We continue to pledge our support to assist in turning local government around.

Signed by:

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| 1. Afesis-corplan | 26. Motane Community Based Enterprise |
| 2. Alliance for Rural Democracy | 27. Ntinga Ntaba kaNdoda |
| 3. Ahmed Kathrada Foundation | 28. PLANACT |
| 4. Barry Giesken | 29. Public Service Accountability Monitor |
| 5. Bavuse Trading Enterprises | 30. SILA Foundation |
| 6. Benchmark Foundation | 31. Sinosizo Siyaphambili |
| 7. Built Environment Support Group | 32. Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa |
| 8. Blacksash | 33. Soul City Institute for Social Justice |
| 9. Black Womxn Caucus | 34. South African National Civic Organisation |
| 10. Breakthru Community Action | 35. Trust for Community Outreach and Education |
| 11. C-19 Coalition | 36. Unemployed People's Movement of South Africa |
| 12. C-19 Cash Transfers Working Group | |
| 13. Cala University Students Association | |
| 14. Centre for Community Development | |
| 15. Democracy Development Programme | |
| 16. Development Action Group | |
| 17. Dullah Omar Institute | |
| 18. Feed A Family East London | |
| 19. Food Not Bombs Jozie | |
| 20. Goedgevonden Development Committee | |
| 21. Invest In Youth Invest In A Nation | |
| 22. KwaZulu Natal Deaf Association | |
| 23. Land Access Movement of South Africa | |
| 24. Lawyers for Human Rights | |
| 25. Masimanyane Women's Rights International | |

