



EXAMINING THE ROLE OF WARD COMMITTEES IN ENHANCING PARTICIPATORY LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Lessons learnt from the implementation of the
Ward Key Performance Indicators Matrix
in seven municipalities and 30 wards
over a period of 6 years



“ Learning organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

Peter Senge (1990:3)

About Afesis-corplan

Afesis-corplan is a development non-government organisation (NGO) based in East London, South Africa. Established in 1992, the organisation has contributed to community-driven development, sustainable settlement development and good local governance for more than 20 years. The organisation's work contributes to a wider effort by its development partners both in government, business and the civil society (in particular the Good Governance Learning network) to deepen participatory democracy and good governance. Afesis-corplan views itself as a learning organisation, and draws from its work to contribute to a national effort of continuous improvement of theory and practice.



I. Introduction

South Africa's commitment to participatory governance is lifted through the country's Constitution and other pieces of legislation. While in many instances implementation has lagged far behind the ideals of legislation and policy, it has to be said that never in the country's history has law, policy-making and development practice been as democratic and participatory as under the present dispensation.

Ward committees were conceived as an institutional mechanism that would contribute towards bringing about people-centred, participatory and democratic local governance. They were to support the elected ward councillor in creating a bridge between ward communities and the political administrative structures of a municipality. The Municipal Structures Act, 1998 specifies that a ward committee may make recommendations on any matter affecting the ward to a ward councillor or through that councillor to the municipal council (Section 74(a)).

The primary function of a ward committee is to be a formal communication channel between the community and the council. A ward committee therefore, is an appropriate channel through which a ward committee can lodge complaints and it is obliged to forward such complaints to council in the most effective manner.

According to the then Department of Local and Provincial Government (DPLG) now Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) published ward committee guidelines (2005), the primary function of a ward committee is to be a formal communication channel between the community and the council. A ward committee therefore, is an appropriate channel through which a ward committee can lodge complaints and it is obliged to forward such complaints to council in the most effective manner.

Other roles and responsibilities of ward committees include:

- i. To create formal unbiased communication channels and cooperative partnerships between the municipality and the community within the ward;
- ii. To ensure contact between the municipality and the community through the use of, and payment for services;



- iii. To create harmonious relations between residents of a ward, the ward councillor, geographic community and the municipality;
- iv. To facilitate public participation in the process of development, review and implementation management of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP);
- v. To act as an advisory body on council policies and matters affecting communities in the ward;
- vi. To serve as official recognised and specialised participatory structures in the municipality;
- vii. To serve as a mobilising agent for community action;
- viii. May receive and record complaints from the community within the ward and provide feedback on council's responses;
- ix. May make recommendations on any matter affecting the ward to the ward councillor or the local council, the executive committee and the mayor;
- x. May execute other functions as delegated by the municipality;
- xi. Ward committee members shall participate in the stakeholder cluster forums;
- xii. Ward committees shall be represented in the council study groups by their chairpersons.

The national guidelines further state that:

“A ward committee may, subject to available capacity and resources, conduct an annual satisfaction survey in order to assist the committee in the execution of its functions and powers. The satisfaction survey should be administered in the ward by ward committee members under the supervision of the ward councillor and with the administrative support of the municipality” (2005:39).

The guidelines suggest that “it may be more useful for ward committees to actually measure — using simple indicators- the performance of services against benchmarks set in the IDP, this plus indication of local satisfaction levels, would constitute a valuable form of feedback” (2005:39). Section 2 of the guidelines details the role ward committees are to play in municipal performance management.

It is to this end that Afesis-corplan developed the Ward Key Performance Indicators (WKPI) matrix as a simple tool that ward committees and civil society could draw from in monitoring municipal performance with an intent of enhancing citizen participation in municipal performance management. The project is where the lessons captured in this document are derived.



3. Background and Context

In order to clearly understand how ward committees have evolved over time, one has to look back at the original intent for which they were established. The guidelines are clear that no executive powers were to be delegated to ward committees members and that they could express dissatisfaction with the non-performance of their ward councillor through writing in to council.

With regards to the composition of the ward committee, the guidelines taking a cue from the Municipal Structures Act, 2000 call for equitable representation of man and woman, diversity of interest groups such as youth, religious groups, sports culture, health and welfare, business, environment, education, older persons, etc.

Numerous research reports including Afesis-corplan's previous papers lament about a crisis in which the ward committee space is taken over by political parties.

The selection procedure can either be sectoral or geographic. In the case of the former, the different interests groups in the ward are first identified and then organisations and individuals representing each sector are invited to stand for election onto the ward committee.

In the case of a geographic representation, the municipality identifies the different geographic areas, villages or clusters of farms that will represent an equitable geographic spread of the residents of the ward, and then calls for nomination from each area. Voting to elect the ward committee members takes place at a community meeting (Smith and de Visser, 2009).

In all the municipalities where Afesis-corplan has directly worked with ward committees, their election has been along the lines of geographic representation with representatives largely pointed out by ward councillors or other local politicians to serve on the committee. A general criteria for a person to be elected in the ward committee (or to be fingered for a position) has much to do with their participation in branch politics more than it has to do with their



participation in community development.

It is therefore, not surprising that ward committees are used as campaigning ‘foot-soldiers’ by various political parties during elections. Numerous research reports including Afesis-corplan’s previous papers lament about a crisis in which the ward committee space is taken over by political parties.

4. Critical challenges that hamper ward committees from fulfilling their developmental mandate

As a point of departure, it is useful to remind ourselves of the critical things that the national guidelines advised ward committees to avoid:

- The ward committees were not to merely reflect and replicate the existing arrangement of political power on the elected council;
- The ward committee should not function as a communication channel for the ruling party or for any party for that matter, as the councillor and his or her supporting political structure already perform this function;
- A ward committee should not provide a forum for the losing candidate to fight the municipal election all over again. (2005:39)

A number of research reports (Ngamlana, 2007; Ngamlana & Mathoho in GGLN 2012; Skenjana & Kimemia, 2011; Kambala et al, 2012) have narrated in detail the failure of ward committees as a mechanism to meet the ideal for which they were established. Central to the reasons cited for this is the fact that ward committees went against the advice narrated in national guidelines on what they were to avoid. Research further shows that ward committees are effectively extension structures of political parties depending on the political party that is in the majority in that municipal or ward jurisdiction.

As mentioned above, ward councillors generally appoint their own trusted friends and comrades for election in the ward committee; ward meeting get manipulated to simply endorse the appointed candidates. This is further

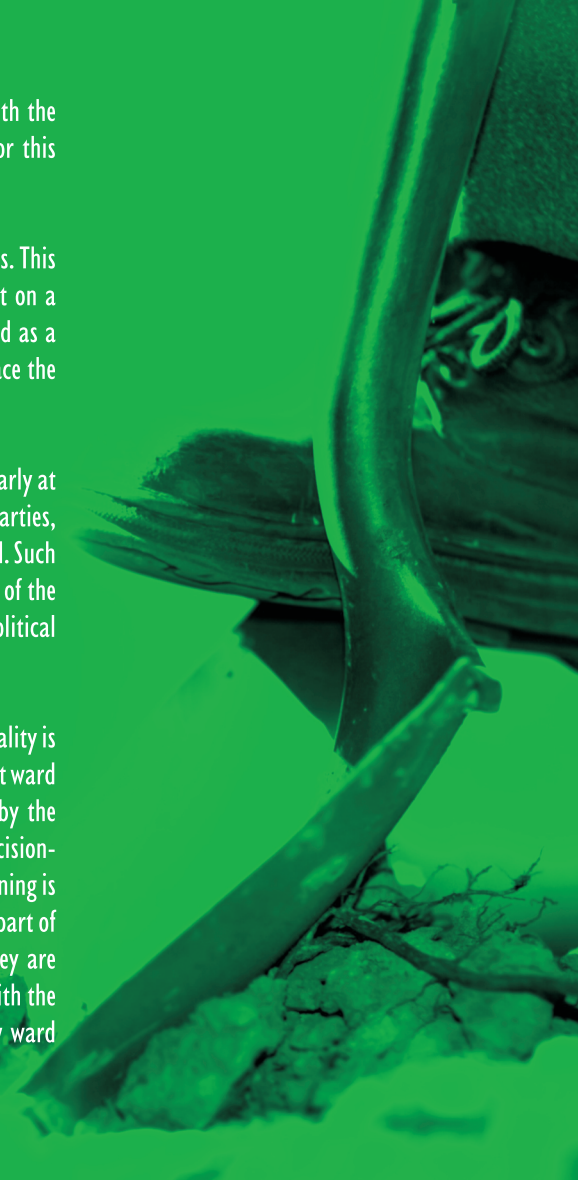


compounded by the fact that election into the ward committee is seen as an employment opportunity with the monthly stipend that is being paid to ward committees, and so councillors appoint their own people for this opportunity. In turn, the ward committee members pledge their loyalty to the councillor and his/her party.

Research also reveals that ward committees largely function as a communication channel for political parties. This is most evident in the build up to an election where ward committees abandon their duties and are sent on a politicking campaign by their political parties. Understanding that ward committee members were elected as a result of their political party allegiance in the first place, it is therefore not surprising that they would place the interests of the political party first.

The other reason for this is the nature of South Africa politics. Political parties co-opt any structure particularly at local level that could assist them in maximising their votes or strengthening their existence locally. Political parties, in particular the ruling party, is sceptical of any structures at local level for which it has no influence or control. Such structures tend to be labelled as counter-revolutionary or anti-government, as has been evident with some of the issue-based social movements. It was then just a matter of time before ward committees were co-opted by political parties.

A typical example of this is with the petitions legislative framework for local government. Each local municipality is to draw from the Systems Act to develop their own petitions policy. The ANC policy conference pronounced that ward councillors and ward committees are not to participate in protest action including petitions organised by the communities they lead. The rationale given for this is that ward councillors serve as part of municipalities' decision-making structures and they cannot protest against the decisions that they help make. The same kind of reasoning is given for ward committees, they are an extension of council, the foot-soldiers of a municipality and in turn part of the municipal leadership structures and so they also cannot protest against the municipality council they are effectively part of. This places the accountability of ward committees with the municipal council and not with the communities who elected them. This kind of reasoning is however not surprising when one looks at how ward



committees are constituted in the first instance. They are a manifestation of a municipality political arrangement and thus a manner in which the municipality's majority party expresses itself in communities and so they cannot protest against their political mother body.

If the national guidelines were followed and ward committees were truly the representative bodies of communities in municipal governance, they would champion community struggles. They would follow community struggles to the logical end, and if that means a petition or a peaceful protest, they would support and even lead that process. What use are ward committees to communities if they cannot support and champion community struggles? What value do they add when they cannot walk the whole mile with communities?

While one can understand the rationale given in prohibiting ward councillors from participating in protest actions, one still believes that where ward councillors can demonstrate convincingly how they had supported communities to address their issues with municipalities and their efforts had fallen on deaf ears over a long period of time and the community has been left with no option but to protest, then they are allowed to stand with the community. In that way, ward councillors would demonstrate in a meaningful way where their interests lay and that would curb the trend of having them targeted first by communities in their struggles against the municipalities. In the current context, ward councillors and ward committees are accountable to political parties and not to the ward citizens who elect them.

These challenges have been noted by the ANC in its 2012 policy conference which emerged with a few recommendations aimed at reforming the ward committee. Most of these recommendations were passed by the ANC elective conference later that same year. While the party acknowledged a general breakdown in the ward committees resulting from the fact that they were chaired by ward councillors and thus turned political, the rest of the recommendations were a general disappointment to civil society.

Among some of the recommendations made were the following:

- The ward councillor was to participate in a ward committee but not chair it
- Ward committees were to be doubled in number
- Their duties were to be reviewed
- The stipend was confirmed

Coming out of the 2012 ANC conference municipalities were generally reluctant to implement the double size ward committee directive for various reasons:

- i. The new role of a ward councillor in the ward committee was not clarified considering that at a ward committee space, the councillor is a senior politician and would generally expect to play some prominent role
- ii. With municipalities already struggling to pay the stipend for the 10 member ward committee, it wasn't clear how they were to be supported with the budget for the extra ward committee members
- iii. Municipalities had only just concluded the ward committee election process in 2011 which was fairly confrontational and eventful in most wards and did not have the appetite to start that all over again.

Central to civil society disappointment was that the issue of political interference in the election and running of a ward committee was not adequately addressed. Understanding the country politics as noted above, it serves in the interest of political parties to control and influence ward committees and this is a position no political party in the South African political context would let go of freely, so it was no surprising that the conference did not pronounce and give direction on this issue as clearly. In its research in Ngamlana and Mathoho (2012), Afesis-corplan called for a conducive environment for the emergence and facilitation of alternative spaces for citizens to engage the state outside of the state formally legislated ones like the ward committee.

5. Lessons Learnt from the WKPI Project

The WKPI matrix culminated from a research Afesis-corplan participated in with IDASA (Institute for Democracy in Africa) which closed in 2013 on the status quo of ward committees which later culminated in the national ward committee handbook. A series of workshops and focus groups were organised in the Buffalo City Municipality (BCM now a Metropolitan Municipality) between 2003 and 2004 which informed the development of the WKPI matrix. The matrix was piloted with the support of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in the Western Cape, Gauteng, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and kwaZulu-Natal. The pilots were done in partnership with the then Foundation for Contemporary Research in the Western Cape, Idasa in Limpopo, Planact in Gauteng and the Built Environment Support Group in kwaZulu-Natal while Afesis-corplan coordinated the Eastern Cape pilot and managed the overall project. The rationale for the development of the WKPI matrix emanated from the Municipal Systems Act which requires municipalities to:

- Develop a performance management system (PMS)
- Set targets and indicators, monitor and review performance based on those indicators
- Publishes an annual report on performance for the councillors, staff, the public and other spheres of government
- Conducts an internal audit on performance before tabling the above report
- Has the annual performance report audited by the Auditor General
- Includes in their PMS the general key performance indicators prescribed by the Minister and reports on the indicators
- Involve the community in setting indicators and targets and reviewing municipal performance

The WKPI matrix has been developed in response to the above legislation in an attempt to empower communities to play a meaningful role in

municipal performance management. According to Section 17(1) of the Municipal Systems Act, ward committees are a mechanism through which citizens are to largely participate in municipal governance. The KPIs are agreed upon with each local municipality before implementation but are generally focused upon the various elements that comprise governance, for instance, the municipality interface with the public, service delivery and performance management and the implementation of the IDP.

The matrix has been designed such that it can be used at three levels:

- By civil society organisations or community based organisations who have an unstructured or partially structured relationship with the municipality
- By ward committees or similar bodies who exist in a structured and well regulated relationship with the municipality
- By municipal officials/councillors in the course of their performance management duties.

The project over the years has been implemented in the following municipalities:

Year	Municipality	Ward(s)
2006/7	Buffalo City Stellenbosch EkuRhuleni Msunduzi	42 & 45 2 31,32,33,34,85 Greater Edendale Development
2008/9	Nxuba Great Kei Amahlathi	1,2,3,4 3 wards 3 wards
20012/13	Great Kei Amahlathi Mbhashe Buffalo City	3 wards 3 wards 3 wards 3 wards



The matrix tool was reviewed after the first pilot and again in the year 2011, the improved matrix was implemented in the 2012/13 project and had a greater focus on the role of ward committees of giving regular feedback to communities. The lessons captured below are derived from all these years of implementation of the project in the various municipalities noted above.

5.1 Lessons Summarised

i. Ward Committee Voice

Within municipal councils, ward committees are to, where necessary, make representation through the ward councillor or other council structures on issues of concern to them. The project has revealed that council does not take ward committees or their concerns seriously. Within council ward committees do not have a voice. There are various reasons for this:

- (a) Ward committees are made up of the most junior people in the political rungs and thus in conversations amongst perceived senior politicians, they do not have much of a say;
- (b) Municipalities are generally not all that serious about involving communities in performance management nor have they gotten on top of performance monitoring themselves, hence the poor audit outcomes year after year.
- (c) There is no recourse for ward committees if municipal councils do not take their recommendations seriously. Even with the presence of supporting organisations such as Afesis-corplan in the mix ward committees still get ignored.

ii. Political Will

The framework guiding the establishment and role of ward committees stipulates that to enable ward committees to effectively play meaningful monitoring role to council and to make input in council deliberations, ward councillors are to, upon receipt of an agenda of the council meeting, share this with ward committees so that they prepare and inform the meeting on issues of relevance to them. Ward councillors are to also share the minutes of the council meeting with the ward committees, or share critical issues that emerged from a council meeting with ward committees.



In all the wards where Afesis-corplan worked, ward committees lamented of not being afforded an opportunity to prepare for council meetings in advance and to make input on critical issues affecting the communities they represent. Ward councillors do not share the agenda or the minutes of council meetings with them. Ward committees attended council meetings as observers but found that they were unable to follow the discussion as they had no knowledge of what would be discussed. They said all they heard in council meetings were the words “noted” and “agreed” by the rest of council to items in the agenda they had no knowledge of. In the end this limited ward committee members’ understanding and participation in municipal decision-making processes. To turn this situation around called for political will, it called for political acknowledgement of the role ward committees could and should play in decision-making processes and the facilitation of that role. Legislation guides how this could be done, what is missing is political will to implement what is captured in legislation.

iii. Political Interference

In civil society, we generally talk of ward committees being highly political, this means that there is a high struggle for access to power and resources within ward committees. The general perception within communities is that the closer to a municipality one is, the better access to opportunities, power and resources they have and so ward committees become and contested space for access to these (a politicised space). More often than not, there are tensions between ward councillors and ward committee members as each strive to access or maintain power (in the case of a ward councillor). And so, the intentions of ward committee members are viewed with much scepticism by the municipal councils they serve.

Because if this, municipal councils have been sceptical of the intentions of ward committees with the WKPI reports and have thus dragged their feet in addressing the performance challenges lifted out in the reports. This situation gets worse after each local government election where new leadership and ward committees get elected; the trust relationship has to be rebuilt each time.



5.2 Afesis-corplan's response

In view of the above challenges that had limited the project's success over time, Afesis-corplan opted to revise the WKPI matrix tool such that it pushed municipal performance monitoring outside the boundaries of a municipality and ward committees only, but that it involved civil society as well. However, the organisation found that with the presence of civil society, municipalities were far more sceptical of the intention and aims of both Afesis-corplan and partner civil society. Through this project, Afesis-corplan has noted that municipalities are getting less transparent over time and are less interested to involve citizens and civil society in their affairs now than in the past five years for example.

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In a number of municipalities where a partnership between ward committees and civil society aimed at jointly monitoring the municipality's performance ward committees were informed (threatened) by their political bosses to not participate in the project and so in almost the same time, ward committees withdrew from the project. Only a few vocal and strong individuals in the ward committee continued participating in the project, and in such municipalities, getting feedback from council on what their plan of action in addressing the challenges lifted out of the WKPI Assessment Reports, was difficult to say the least.

6. Conclusion

Drawing from the WKPI project, Afesis-corplan has confirmed again that ward committees as a structure and mechanism for citizen participation in local governance have completely lost track of what they were initially intended to be and in their current form, cannot work themselves back to that original intent. There are numerous



challenges at various levels (at a political, socio-economical, social and structural level) that ward committees as a mechanism would have to overcome if they were to work themselves back to the original intent and we argue that the necessary enabling environment to help them do so does not exist and thus they cannot get there on their own.

Afesis-corplan has therefore realised that to work with ward committees in their current form, one would have to be mindful of the dynamics and the challenges as noted in this paper and design a program that would appreciate and take these challenges to account. The WKPI project was not designed with this in mind, and thus its success under the present conditions was not easy. Afesis-corplan is currently strategising on how best to work with ward committees going forward.

In its research in Ngamlana and Mathoho (2012), Afesis-corplan called for a conducive environment for the emergence and facilitation of alternative spaces for citizens to engage the state outside of the state formally legislated ones like the ward committee.

At the same time that the organisation is strategising on best ways to work with ward committees understanding the context and challenges in that space, it is continuing to call for an environment and an appreciation of citizen-led spaces for citizen engagement in local governance. Alternative, developmental, void of political party control spaces are necessary to effectively facilitate the active participation of citizens in local governance. As presented in this paper, ward committees do not effectively play this role for various reasons. At the same time Afesis-corplan continues to call for effective reforms (a complete overhaul) of ward committees and a conversation can be held at various levels (by civil society, government, academia, all partners together) on what that alternative mechanism could look like, what is clear is that ward committees as a mechanisms are failing to deliver on what they were intended to.

As noted in the 2009 report by CoGTA which culminated in the then Turnaround Strategy, the failure of ward committees lead to the failure of local government as a sphere and a dissatisfied citizenry. As we have seen in South Africa, the rise in service delivery protests and bleak audit reports points to a systemic failure in local governance and ward committees as a system is central in either the success or failure of local government.





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