

“IS THERE A PERFECT FORM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT?”

**ADDRESS BY FATHER SMANGALISO MKHATSHWA, PRESIDENT OF THE
UCLGA, AT THE ILGM CONFERENCE, PORT ELIZABETH, SEPTEMBER 2007**

Programme Director, the Leadership and the Management of the ILGM,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, All Protocol Observed.

I bring you greetings and good wishes from the members of the UCLGA. I bring you the organisation's congratulations, too, on the occasion of your Conference. I also bring you an invitation for the ILGM to join the UCLGA as an associate member. Local government, as you know, is constituted not only by the political leadership but also by managers, administrators and officers. We in the UCLGA, therefore, would like to see the associations of local government officials joining their political counterparts in the continent's local government association.

One of the most important objectives of the UCLGA is to facilitate knowledge exchange and information sharing in African local government, and you are the custodians and repositories of the intellectual capital which should be the basis of that exchange. This is because, unlike the high turnover characteristic of political leadership in local government, you generally represent continuity. You are, therefore, holders of critical institutional memory, and upon your shoulders rests the stability of the local government sector.

In posing the question, “Is there a perfect form of local government?”, your organisation is getting into the crux of the challenge facing local government in Africa, and that is finding a model of governance truly responsive to the challenges posed by today's villages, towns and cities. Our challenge is to find the holy grail of a system which delivers basic services cost-effectively, sustainably and qualitatively; and that therefore creates conditions conducive for local economic development through both

domestic and foreign investment so that jobs may be created and our communities can afford to pay for services and the municipalities, in turn, can ensure even more basic services and infrastructure in a revolving development process.

This is a system which would undermine the vicious cycle of underdevelopment generally characterising African local government and usher in a virtuous circle of development which the continent's local communities yearn for.

I am sure it is already apparent to many of you that I am not about to define a perfect form of local government, for any form is bound, as all matters epistemological, to be subject to continuous quality improvement as it responds to the changing dynamics of local existence. What I propose to do, rather, is to isolate some of the elements one would consider almost sacrosanct for a local government to be effectively functional.

In speaking about a local government which responds to the ongoing changes of its context, I am saying any form of local government aspiring to perfection would have to have the necessary flexibility to respond instantaneously to the shifting sands of developments at the local level.

Many an African local government, for example, has failed dismally to foresee the wave of urbanisation sweeping through the continent - resulting, in the process, in the slumification of whole communities and their entrapment in ever-widening concentric circles of poverty, degradation and underdevelopment. An ideal form of local government, then, would be one mandated and empowered to set up early warning systems in terms of trends and to intervene accordingly, on its own, through scenario planning, with other spheres of government roped in only when unforeseen, especially natural, disasters strike.

This therefore presupposes a form of local government existing as a distinct sphere in an intergovernmental relationship with other spheres. From the UCLGA's perspective the distinct existence we speak of should be either constitutionalised or simply legislated. We have, in our current deliberations with the African Union - with which we are in the process of concluding an MOU - emphasised this point as an existence founded in law rather than at the whim of political leaders guarantees not only continuity but also a status of substance within a legitimate framework.

Be it through constitutional or merely legislative means, that form of legitimisation should be accompanied by a commensurate resourcing of the local government sphere based on the reach and the range of its mandate.

By resourcing we mean an empirically determined funding formula to give the relevant local government more than a fighting chance to deliver on the full gamut of the breadth of its mandate. Even in countries, such as South Africa, where local government is fully established as a distinct sphere, debates continue to rage on the equitability of the funding formula given the reconstruction and development terms of reference of municipalities in the country.

The reach and the range of the local government mandate should not be arbitrarily determined by politicians and technocrats but by the reality on the ground in the context of delivery challenges. Any form of local government ignoring this is bound to be limited in mandate and therefore overtaken and overwhelmed by those challenges excluded from its deliverables.

What this tacitly raises is the undeniable reality that more and more services are becoming the realm and the province of local government - if not by design then certainly by default. Central governments are simply too high up from the ground to be able to address the ground level, or even the

subterranean level, of needs. In any case the fundamental mandate of central government is policy formulation and norms setting.

If the local government mandate is, as we say then, ever expanding with the complexity of the modern economy, it follows that the traditional model of local government can no longer suffice. To begin with, both the conceptual intellectual capital and the skills base required to run the new type of local government are not too far off those required to run a modern corporation. Local governments have become challengingly close in complexity to corporate entities. This applies even to small municipalities as the fundamental principles are the same, and they all begin with the intrinsically dichotomous challenge of ensuring ongoing financial viability within a demanding customer service environment.

The principles go on to include multi-year strategic planning where once municipalities could dawdle on in a reactive mode.

This requirement of business-mindedness, however undesirable, has effectively transformed local government more from a political character to a service orientation. That is why internationally, particularly in the developed world, voting patterns at the local level seldom mirror those at the national levels, and the mandates of local government go well beyond what we in Africa imagine and include, in some instances, what we would consider national government deliverables. Those societies have come to make a clear distinction between the central and local government spheres by having the former set macro development policy and the latter implement that at the micro level of the day to day existence of communities.

Dare I aver that this is a system which, if not perfect, certainly ensures accountability. Any form of government which goes as close as possible to the people in terms of the services it offers is inherently accountable. What we tend to emphasise here at home is consultation more than accountability

to our clients. The result thereof is local government effectively held to ransom by a contradictory set of interest groups, with service delivery either slowed down or totally compromised by laborious and cumbersome processes.

Consider, for example, the protracted rezoning process when, in the absence of environmental degradation, a municipality should simply be accorded the latitude to decide on the basis of its City Development Strategy. Alas, your average rezoning process takes ten to fifteen months, and that is excluding any substantive opposition - a situation which effectively means a slowdown of much-needed economic mobility and mobilisation.

What I am trying to say, Programme Director, is that our ideal form of local government is one considered, and empowered, to operate as a business entity, for demands made on municipalities today are different from those of even a decade ago.

My ideal form of local government should also exhibit uncanny planning skills. We speak so much about integrated development without fully understanding it because we tend to be limited in planning skills. When we complain about traffic gridlocks in our cities we are actually inadvertently admitting our planning weaknesses. When we fight developers for clogging our sewer networks we are subconsciously admitting our failure to plan. We are effectively running behind development instead of leading it, and in the process costly rectifications are required where resources could be proactively deployed.

Consider 2010 as an example. Even as we talk the truth is that the coordinated approach required - and I am talking about one where virtually all sectors of our society, including the man in the street are already being drilled on their role as ambassadors of the country - is still not in place. Planning is currently more on the soccer infrastructure and, to a lesser

degree, on the accommodation side. What are we, as municipalities, doing to occupy the space we should by right be occupying given that all the action and all the activities will be happening in our cities and towns - with major implications for our local economies post-2010 as we are adjudged worthy tourist and investment destinations or cities and towns non grata.

On that note of caution about the single biggest international challenge we will soon be facing, ladies and gentlemen, let me please end, but not before highlighting that an ideal form of local government should also play the international game smartly as through a carefully crafted and implemented international relations strategy a local government can leapfrog its way to excellence both in management and service delivery.

The best form of international relations in local government today are a perfect combination of altruism and hard-nosed business consciousness. International relations can ensure access to best practices in service delivery and much-needed economic investment.

I trust, Programme Director, that I have pointed at at least a few requirements for any local government to at least stand a chance of success. The caveat, however, is that it must exist first as a self-standing sphere in subsidiarity top the more senior spheres and it must be resourced according to its mandate. To expect anything in a contrarian environment, as is largely still the case in our continent, is to ask for the impossible.

I thank you all.