

INNOVATION IN LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES: TOOL SHOWS OFFICIALS LACK CAPABILITY

Local municipalities are at the coalface of service delivery. We expect officials at this sphere of delivering basic social services to communities to be the drivers and managers of innovations at the local level, yet little information exists on their ability to do so. *Drs Sikhulumile Sinyolo, Irma Booyens and Peter Jacobs* share new evidence on the innovation capabilities of municipal officials and the tool used to assess innovation maturity.

Inadequate service delivery has led to unrest in various municipalities across South Africa. In many cases, innovation, including the introduction of new or improved approaches and technologies to improve the operations of a local municipality, may be the answer to these challenges.

However, we can only attain successful innovation in service delivery if the capacity of the municipal officials to implement and manage these innovations is increased. As a starting point, we need to identify the current strengths and weaknesses of municipalities' innovation abilities. To obtain reliable, timely and meaningful information about innovation capabilities requires appropriate measurement tools.

This is crucial, especially in light of the innovations that are being piloted across the rural district municipalities as part of the Innovation Partnership for Rural Development Programme. This programme puts the municipalities at the forefront of the implementation of these innovations.

A local tool

There is, however, a lack of an appropriate and adequate instrument for understanding and measuring the innovation capabilities of the municipal officials in South Africa.

The tools designed in the developed country contexts are not a good fit for developing countries such as South Africa.

These approaches rely heavily on the conceptualisation and measurement of innovation in the private sector, despite the differences in the functions and objectives of the public and private sector in South Africa.

To address this gap, the HSRC was tasked by the Department of Science and Technology to develop the Municipal Innovation Maturity Index (MIMI) for South Africa.

What is the MIMI?

The MIMI is a tool for measuring innovation capabilities at the local municipal level. It focuses on the capabilities of individual employees and municipalities to learn and implement innovation towards improving public service delivery. The idea is to determine the 'innovation readiness' (maturity) of local municipalities to adopt innovations aimed at improving the delivery of basic public services, particularly water, sanitation and energy services.

The index includes indicators that focus on maturity in relation to the municipality's knowledge generation and sharing activities, collaboration

and partnerships for innovation. It also measures their level of innovation understanding, openness for innovation, leadership and management support for innovation. Furthermore, the index deals with issues of good governance as well as organisational enablers of innovation.

The MIMI structure

The MIMI consist of a 33 item scales, grouped into four sub-constructs.

The sub-constructs include: (a) organisational enablers of innovation; (b) leadership and management support; (c) individual activity; and (d) individual capabilities.

The overall index is formed by merging all the item responses.

The MIMI, unlike many other innovation assessment instruments, does not rely on Likert-type scale responses. The latter is used to measure attitudes, feelings or opinions, and respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements, for example, 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree'.

The MIMI uses maturity level descriptors, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: MIMI maturity levels

Maturity level 1	Maturity level 2	Maturity level 3	Maturity level 4
Limited, if any	Define & apply	Manage & entrench	Share learning externally
Limited, if any, awareness or evidence of innovation on the part of individual officials or the organisation.	Innovation is defined, applied and repeatable. Officials understand innovation principles, but innovation activities occur irregularly.	Innovation is managed and innovation principles are entrenched in the organisation. Officials seek to optimise and evaluate solutions, and improve on these for internal benefit.	Innovation is open and outward looking. New knowledge is applied creatively, based on evidence, in different contexts and shared with others outside of the organisation.

These descriptors, which are provided for each item, help the officials to understand their levels of innovation maturity, to interact with the tool, and to identify the gap between their current levels and the higher maturity levels. This approach enhances the reliability of the instrument.

Developing the MIMI

The process of developing the MIMI involved several steps. The first step involved consulting relevant literature to get a preliminary understanding of conceptual or theoretical issues pertaining to designing tools to measure local municipality innovation.

The first instrument draft was then designed, anchored on the literature. Experts and municipality officials then conducted reviews that resulted in several revisions of the instrument. The instrument was then piloted in six local municipalities, involving 18 respondents.

The results of the testing phase were presented in learning forums and other platforms, leading to major revisions and improvements of the MIMI.

Results from baseline data

The HSRC used the revised instrument to collect data from six municipal districts, interviewing a total of 34 municipal management and operational officials.

Overall, the initial analysis of the baseline data indicates that the instrument is valid, in addition to being a strong and powerful tool for understanding innovation capabilities at local councils.

Municipalities have not reached a stage where innovation principles are entrenched in the organisations.

Figure 1 shows the simple average maturity scores from the baseline survey data. The overall mean score for all the four constructs was 2.5, meaning that the surveyed municipalities' maturity level is between maturity level 2 and maturity level 3. This suggests that, while the municipalities are aware and understand innovation, they have not reached a stage where innovation principles are entrenched in the organisations.

Municipalities are far from being at maturity level 4, which is about outward looking behaviour where municipalities share information and practices outside for greater impact.

Figure 1 indicates that the average scores for the three constructs were the same, with only the organisational enablers construct receiving a lower average score.

This implies that improving the innovation maturity of these municipalities would require a holistic intervention that will address the organisational, leadership and the individual capabilities.

Concluding remarks

The MIMI results have shown that levels of innovation maturity in municipalities are currently low, with most municipalities operating at the level of innovation just above awareness and definitions. This suggests that more needs to be done to foster and entrench an innovation culture at local municipalities.

The focus should be on learning and creating an enabling environment for innovation, otherwise the innovations being demonstrated in these municipalities would not be successfully implemented and rolled out on a larger scale. Management and leadership need to provide more support to enhance innovation activities in relation to addressing service delivery challenges.

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Figure 1

