

PUBLIC OFFICIALS' SKILLS AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

INTERIM KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS REPORT

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1. Background and Introduction

Under the 1996 Constitution, South African local government was given a critical mandate to “provide democratic and accountable government for local communities, ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner, promote social and economic development, promote a safe and healthy environment and encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government” (SALGA, 2015: 11). The Local Government Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 contributed to this mandate through the implementation of Integrated Development Plans (IDP) as the main planning instrument for a municipal area (Sheoraj, 2015). The 1998 White Paper on Local Government translated the constitutional objects and duties into the concept of ‘developmental local government’, and defined the new mandate as “local government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives.” This approach requires collaborations and leadership steering the public administration in this direction.

The National Development Plan (NDP) identified capacity issues as a leading challenge that undermines the creation of a capable, democratic developmental state that is able to respond to the immediate social and economic challenges that South Africa is facing (National Planning Commission, 2012). The Auditor General South Africa (AGSA) notes that problems exist in most municipalities, such as a high vacancy rate for key positions or key officials lacking appropriate competencies; decline in adequate consequence management for poor performance and transgressions; and decline in the response rate for improving internal controls (AGSA, 2018). Further to this, the Municipal Demarcation Board (2012) notes that not all municipalities are able to perform their functions, with the majority mired in capacity issues that undermine institutional effectiveness.

Service delivery by local governments is hampered by capacity constraints in critical areas of municipal governance and administration (De Visser, 2009: 24). Generally, municipalities lack the technical knowledge, skill and expertise necessary to perform core operational and financial functions (Municipal Demarcation Board, 2012). This shortfall includes skills in planning, engineering and project management. In addition, municipalities are unable to fill vacant posts, with vacancy rates being an important issue in municipal governance and administration (Sheoraj, 2015). The lack of leadership, management and technical skills and knowledge within local government, in particular, is seriously affecting the quality and efficacy of governance. There have been many initiatives and programmes to address these issues, with varying degrees of success (Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2015).

Capacity constraints can be defined as the lack of adequate and suitable human, scientific, technological, organisational, institutional and resource capabilities to deliver on the constitutional mandate of government (Soko, 2006; Development Network Africa, 2006). Capacity constraints might exist in three different dimensions, that is, at the system level, at the institutional level and at the individual level. These constraints could be evidenced in many different ways, such as, an absence of qualified people, an absence of people who are qualified and meet ancillary criteria, the quality of certification possessed by job incumbents, deficiencies in attributes like experience, and skills less likely to be certified, like leadership capabilities (Development Network Africa, 2006).

Chapter 13 of the NDP on building a capable and developmental state identifies a number of training and capacity building initiatives which should be used to enhance the skills of public officials and capacitate them to meet their responsibilities (NPC, 2012). Some of the key initiatives or interventions identified in the NDP include the following:

- Develop technical and specialist professional skills. Reinvigorate the state's role in producing the specialist technical skills to fulfil its core functions. Develop appropriate career paths for technical specialists.
- Take a proactive approach to improving relations between national, provincial and local government. The state needs to recognise the wide variation in capacity, particularly at municipal level, and devolve greater responsibilities where capacity exists, while building capacity in other areas.
- Where capacity is more limited, particularly in many rural areas, municipalities should be allowed to focus on their core functions and not be burdened with too many extra responsibilities. A more pragmatic fit between roles and capacity will only partly resolve challenges in the intergovernmental system. It is inevitable that there will be disagreements about how responsibilities are divided, and national government should intervene when necessary to mediate disputes.

The NDP (NPC, 2012: 408) confirms that *'the uneven performance at national, provincial and local government results from interplay between a complex set of factors including tensions in the political-administrative instability of the administrative leadership, skills deficits, the erosion of accountability and authority, poor organisational design, inappropriate staffing and low staff morale.'*

One of the key institutions which assists in capacity building and training of public officials is the National School of Governance (NSG), which has to play a significant role in overseeing the professional common purpose in addressing the systemic challenges of public service delivery through the learning and development of public officials. The NSG replaced the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA). One of its objectives is to integrate lessons and experiences from the past to develop and improve on current skills levels, and empower the current generation of public servants; and develop a conduit for producing future public servants with a vastness of competitive opportunities and abilities to innovate.

Supporting, at least in principle, the work of the NSG is the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), an autonomous association of all 257 South African local governments. One of its key mandates is to build the capacity of municipalities as institutions, as well as the leadership and technical capacity of both councillors and officials.

As the literature notes, there are major disparities, economically and politically and in terms of location (urban versus rural), performance and capacity (either human resource, financial and institutional) across municipalities (Monkam, 2014). This makes comparisons and offering packaged solutions almost impossible.

With the aim of developing an understanding of the capacity realities and support requirements of municipal officials to inform training and capacity-building interventions through a skills and capacity assessment, one of the key methods used in this study was to conduct qualitative in-depth one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders. This technique was important to better understand the support

requirements of municipalities, gathering insights on the nuances and the possibilities for improving skills, and overcoming capacity constraints. Fourteen one-on-one qualitative interviews, some involving more than one person at a time, have been conducted with key stakeholders in the public, private and civil society sectors (See List in Appendix 1).

The list of key informants was constituted of academics, members of key stakeholder organisations on local government such as SALGA and CoGTA, municipal managers (MM) and members of civil society organisations (CSOs). Most of the key stakeholders were selected irrespective of their provincial location in order to have a broad overview of issues concerning skills and capacity from a national perspective. In the research process, practicalities required online and telephonic interviews, especially in the context of COVID-19 health and safety protocols. The online interviews were conducted using platforms such as Zoom, Teams, or Skype. Nevertheless, a few of the interviews were conducted face-to-face before the nationwide lockdown was implemented towards the end of March 2020.

This report is structured around interconnected themes that emerged from the key informant interview data collected in terms of challenges around efficiency, skills and capacity in local, district and metropolitan municipalities across the country. Despite conducting fourteen interviews, we acknowledge that the findings presented in this draft report are preliminary and that the insights from the key informant interviews must be triangulated with the views of senior-, mid- and entry-level public officials to give us a more comprehensive and balanced picture of the skills and capacity constraints municipalities are experiencing. It is against this background that we plan to conduct a few additional key informant interviews. The online survey with municipal officials will also be continued to further enhance our understanding of how public officials can improve their skills levels and capacity to deliver better services to communities. It should be noted that the online survey is not part of this report, but the findings will be included in the final project report.

2. A challenging Institutional and Organisational Environment

Public officials, at various levels and regardless of their skills, are confronted by an unsupportive institutional environment characterised primarily by rigid hierarchies and a dysfunctional interface between politicians and officials. This affects performance, job satisfaction and the capacity for new skills to be applied. This all unfolds in a context with extremely low and declining levels of public trust in government in general, and local government in particular. While this is related to issues around corruption and underperformance in service delivery, it is also a reflection of the limited role many local authorities have adopted in practice, and the resulting distant relationship between local government and citizens / residents.

2.1. Conflicting political–administrative interface

Overall, the picture of the internal municipal environment is mostly one of negative power struggles between the political and the administrative spheres, a challenging organisational culture that negatively affects the morale and agency of officials, and a bureaucratic and rigid institutional

structure that prevents the adequate absorption and application of new skills, policies, regulations and practices.

For some observers, local government is an over-regulated environment that puts pressure on officials to fulfil the many requirements of other departments. The many regulations and a compliance-driven approach creates a difficult working environment with complicated internal procedures. Attracting and retaining skilled people and making the most of the skills officials do have or have gained is difficult in this context. Even when the technical skills are available or good managers are in place: “The set-up of municipal institutions prevent[s] good leadership [from] operat[ing]”. This, according to one of the interviewees, is somehow related to the issue of ‘local State capture’ which in his experience occurs often but “is totally overlooked”.

In terms of the political–administrative interface, political interference is visible in “the politics of the day, the encroachment of politicians on officials’ [sphere of responsibility] and also officials who are affiliated to a political party”. This interference and institutional context has led to the development of a “commanding authoritarian language from politicians” that is very unappreciative of officials’ skills and expertise and causes officials to feel pessimistic about their ability to undertake their tasks in a professional manner, creating dissonant workplaces. There aren’t adequate spaces for politicians and officials to engage with each other on key issues in a constructive manner. Public officials often feel unprotected from this tension, and political priorities often override formally approved implementation plans and administrative needs. The common feature is a power-play relationship where politicians’ decisions overrides officials’ decisions. As a Key informant participant indicated, the ‘dissonant’ workplace environment “creates a climate of instability and fear; people are always alert for being attacked. Their brains are [in] defence mode and they can’t think creatively”. Especially good officials at Municipal Manager level get caught up in politics and feel that they can’t do much to counteract these pressures. “Officials fear politicians when trying to solve problems. They do their best but know that as soon as there is a small error they can be thrown out. So it’s better to rather not do much. That is the culture.”

As an experienced consultant and previous civil servant interview participant observes: “The major challenge I see in most senior officials, especially managers, [is] political interference; also within people themselves, their own political involvement and sensitivities. [There is a] tension between the right thing to do as a public official, versus the right thing to do given political and social expectations.”

2.2. Organisational culture in local government: the long pathway to excellence and creativity

The organisational culture is described as a tense and bureaucratic environment characterised by a culture of commanding, under a compliance-driven mentality that, as one respondent explained, “is killing agency and innovation” as it prevents people from collaborating across boundaries and being creative because people “won’t speak freely”. Although “organisational principles exist in various municipalities on paper, the extent to which they are followed is questionable. Those principles are there, but [are] not transformed into actions in given municipalities”.

This is further affected by a lack of coherent management systems, which makes it impossible to make good decisions. There is no political will supporting innovation, and resistance to a new way of doing things. As an experienced senior official who has worked in various municipalities puts it: “The internal institutional environment is a very challenging and fearful space where officials don’t dare to speak up, either because they are scared or sceptical (...) There is no value [placed on] excellence and striving towards it; rather, [there is] a culture of mediocrity. There is a general attitude of not taking jobs seriously or [performing them] with a sense of duty, a culture of doing the minimum.”

A senior representative interviewee of a well-established NGO working closely with communities and local authorities agrees that the organisational culture in most municipalities is negative – officials don’t feel valued. This organisational environment enables the many officials who want only job security, rather than the few who are there because they are committed to public service. The representative spoke of one senior manager she knows who, while working in middle and senior management for ten years in a metropolitan council, has never had his performance assessed, or even participating in a team-building exercise – *“they are on their own”*.

There isn’t a culture of excellence supporting high quality service delivery, oversight, coordination and coherent planning between departments. Instead, “chaos, disarray, mistrust, poor oversight [and] lack of accountability” characterise organisational culture in local government. It is difficult to imagine, said this interview participant, any official or councillor feeling motivated to try to achieve excellence *“when the sector as a whole is viewed as a failure. It would take a dedicated and strong-willed official to thrive in that environment.”*

2.3. Capacity constraints in municipalities: role of political inclinations of officials and mismatch of skills

The senior NGO representative interviewed commented that the local sphere of government receives only about nine percent of the national budget [with other income requirements to be raised locally], whereas about forty percent goes to each of the national and provincial spheres of government. There are many departments in these spheres of government that are more dysfunctional but aren’t the subject of the ‘negative narrative’ to the same extent as local government. The messaging, including in official reports such as those by the Auditor-General, creates and reinforces the widely held view that municipalities *“have officials and leaders who don’t know what they’re doing”*. In consequence, said the same NGO representative, for many officials, local government is generally *“not an environment that supports innovation and creativity”* or that *“boosts the morale of officials”*.

The interview participant also identified a *“deep”* or entrenched organisation-wide lack of trust – between councillors from different political parties, between officials and oversight committees, and with councils distrusting the intentions of senior officials. The interview participant attributes this to the prevailing political deployment arrangement in terms of which councillors don’t necessarily take the decision to appoint the municipal manager (MM) and approve the appointment of other senior officials, but regional political party structures make these strategic decisions. The result is that the municipal council isn’t always convinced of the skills and intentions of the MM, whose conduct,

decisions and advice are then subject to suspicion and challenge. The same suspicion applies to the subsequent appointment of any official by the MM.

Problems that often arise from the practice of deployment include the “*mismatch of skills*”, the “*political inclinations*” of deployees and their “*inability*” to “*draw a line*” between the interests of the political party that deployed them, and the interests of the municipality they manage and the residents they’re supposed to serve. Ultimately, this results in “*a clash of vision and intent*” that finds expression in decision-making that prioritises the interests of the political party, or particular individuals or businesses over the broader public interest.

A few interview participants reported that it is common to have a high turnover or rotation of team and thematic leaders, as well as long-term acting appointments. This combination creates a climate of uncertainty where officials can’t make meaningful decisions and undertake appropriate long-term planning that enables predictable service delivery.

2.4. Resistance of rigid bureaucratic and institutional set-up to agency and innovation

Of great concern for this study is the impact that the organisational structure and systems have on overcoming capacity constraints. As one study interviewee points out: “*Skills and performance are constrained by an environmental problem; a dysfunctional regulatory environment that inhibits creative thinking and good performance, regardless [of] how skilled you are*”. There is a large mismatch between skills development plans, training efforts and the actual capacity of municipal officials to implement the skills acquired. As a senior public official interviewee explained:

The difficulty comes with a municipal system that is not responsive to those skills. There are instances where well qualified people join the municipality, but there is no system capacity to absorb and use those skills ... There is no institutional receptiveness to apply new knowledge; it is a contradiction. Even when officials get exposed to new skills, the system does not encourage officials to apply them.

A senior NGO interview participant acknowledged that National Treasury has established necessary standards and procedural requirements to strengthen the capacity and skills of certain senior officials, such as MMs, but said it remains to be seen whether this will have the desired effect of improving the overall performance by municipalities. A limitation of this overly rigid requirement of having completed only particular courses is that it fails to recognise relevant prior learning and experience, recognising only certain formal qualifications. The result is that people cannot move from senior positions in the private sector, where they have acquired skills that cannot simply be taught but can often best be acquired through experience, into local government where they are desperately needed. The permeation or transfer of skills is therefore constrained by these rigid formal requirements.

For example, it should be relatively easy for someone who is a company secretary (or a CFO) for a big corporate to come into the public sector and lead [a] department [in] any municipality. ... Obviously, they’ll need time to understand the sector ... but they will bring a particular way of doing things, a culture of doing things, that might strengthen the institution.

Similarly, the bureaucratic and rigid institutional set-up seems to be also preventing the absorption and application of new policies, regulations and practices. As an NGO manager and urban justice activist interviewee explains:

We have seen that when policies and procedures are updated and improved, it takes a long time for officials to change their thinking and update their skills to steer implementation in the new directions. For instance, with the new housing policies, we asked ourselves, do officials take time to think how to implement it and what skills are required? This is important not only for senior level officials but for planners and those officials working on the ground. ... The upgrading [of] informal settlements policy allows for innovation and flexibility, but municipalities still go back to the RDP narrative and set-up of 'relocation' houses. While the policy speaks about the importance of public spaces, you don't see municipalities thinking of this. The system seems to prevent creativity on how human settlements should be [designed and developed]. There needs to be a shift towards 'human settlements' thinking, towards thinking how people could live in these places, but the mind-set is still locked into just housing provision.

This senior NGO interviewee identified further contextual or organisational factors that constrain the attraction and recruitment of relevant scarce skills in local government, which includes the reputational risk that may arise from accepting employment in the sector. Political control of the sector is so strong that even the most innovative recruit would struggle to have an impact on the effectiveness of local government *"because there are so many things that are out of [one's] control"*. In part, due to the rigid legal framework described above, but also because of the influence exerted by senior political party office-bearers on the local government environment. The legal framework and actual practice have led to a *"very murky relationship between party politics and local government"*. The NGO representative also explained that the separation of powers between the executive and political branches of the state in the local government sphere is not well-defined and emphasised in the legal framework, or well-respected in practice. The result is, for example, that senior political party members will take the senior positions in a municipal council, such as the executive mayor and members of the mayor's executive committee. The less senior political party office bearers are then elected to municipal oversight bodies, such as the municipal public accounts committee (MPAC), which is intended also to hold the mayoral executive committee to account. The representative emphasised that although the MPAC is vital, this *"oversight structure is not provided for in law"* and its authority is not well-defined or established.

The result is a highly undesirable and unrealistic situation in which junior party representatives are supposedly 'expected' to exercise authority over their seniors. In reality, *"the system is designed to fail"* because ensuring effective oversight is contrary to the junior party members' own political self-interest in advancement within their party and therefore within government, which undermines any incentives to ensure good governance: *"One just has to look at the Auditor-General's annual reports to see that MPACs just don't work"*.

The same NGO representative recently undertook a training project supported by a funder for MPAC members in several municipalities in various provinces. It was confirmed during the project that, in addition to MPACs being comprised of junior public representatives, they receive no training or support from their seniors or from municipal officials to enable them to perform their task effectively.

Additional contextual factors giving rise to challenges for local government include socioeconomic conditions. *“Poverty, unemployment, corruption and inequality are at the core of the way things are with the lack of good governance generally. People are deployed to provide ... a platform for various nefarious activities”,* and they do so, often because they are poor, but also because they are ambitious, and *“they view this as the quickest way of getting by”*. You can’t understand local government without understanding this context, the NGO interviewee emphasised.

Lastly, at a broader developmental level, but interconnected with the capacity challenges, one participant in the group interviews people commented noted that *“municipalities have lost [sight of] their overarching societal developmental goals and they have been reduced to a very narrow service delivery machines approach”*. Many municipalities have adopted the narrative that they are about service delivery, not economic development, and this is entangled with the revenue model that is based on delivery of services: *“They’ve lost capacity to do social and economic development, which [is] usually allocated to a small department with junior staff and small budget”*. Regaining perspective and reconnecting the mandates and skills of officials with local government’s larger societal developmental mandate and goals seems fundamental to steer internal institutional challenges in the right direction. Internal and external collaborations are an essential aspect of this shift in strategic orientation.

3. Collaboration: The stumbling Block and the Cornerstone

All participants in this phase of the study identified in one way or the other the lack of collaboration as a major issue. This includes intra- and inter-governmental collaboration, as well as collaboration with external stakeholders, such as communities, parastatals, NGOs and the private sector. The perception is that in the political sphere, and at senior management levels, people have relatively weak capacity to engage in collaborations, partnership building, coalition politics and in engaging the private sector, community groups, etc. For a senior public official interviewed in the study, there is a need to train politicians to enable them to better understand and manage the administrative-political interface as it is having a broad and significant negative impact on the capacity of public officials to operate, deliver and assemble key collaborations.

Municipalities, but specially metros, can’t perform without good intergovernmental relations and partnerships with other institutions, not only provincial and national, but local. The lack of effective relationships with parastatals, for instance, has caused delays of decades in major infrastructural projects.

As he went on to explain, in terms of internal collaborations, there is very little happening by way of working together or even cooperation between officials. *“Collaboration is actually punished by the system, with stories of departments punished for transferring resources to other departments”*. The internal default is silos, and competitive and non-collaborative approaches. *“It usually needs third party intervention for collaboration. Coordination is different to cooperation, so people hold coordinating meetings, which are called in through power. But people often see it as a waste of time.”* There is very little coordination between departments in terms of information and resource sharing, lacking systems that coordinate and direct information relevant to various departments. This is a

broadly shared perception. *“Transversal challenges need joint planning. It’s not only the municipality or one department. So how can we work together? Jointly, how do we actually work together to get to a point of integrated service delivery?”* As the key informant interviewee explained, it’s about working smarter, collaborating and sharing resources both within and across nearby municipalities. *“Technology can assist communication within the institution, for instance, by having a central repository of information that all departments are able to access and share.”* But, beyond technological fixes, this is an important governance challenge that reflects a gap in planning and management skills.

Services like housing and waste, as a senior official explains, need a lot of collaboration across different departments and even municipalities:

Collaboration requires blending your mandates, resources, plans, but this is actually discouraged and even punished by a compliance-driven system where officials are expected to primarily stick to and fill indicators.

In the same way that internal collaboration is needed for complex institutions like municipalities to ensure effective service delivery, inter-governmental collaboration is essential. This applies both between municipalities, especially those physically close to each other, but also distant ones and between different spheres of government and institutions. Strategic planning processes are quite routinised, and there is a ‘design problem’ with mechanisms like the integrated development plan (IDP). *“The IDP is supposed to be an integrative mechanism between provincial and municipal [governments], but is not effective in really giving guidance to and capturing the initiatives of other spheres of governance.”*

However, there is no support and learning between municipalities, and instead they are often competing rather than sharing skills and lessons. There are many opportunities for collaboration and sharing, and municipalities, as well as other relevant institutions, need to carefully look into them.

The senior NGO interview participant indicated that the severe dysfunctionality in the local government (LG) sphere is:

...due to the poor oversight, especially by national or provincial line function departments that have oversight responsibilities in respect of LG. Local government is mandated by law to report monthly and quarterly to [National] Treasury ... and quarterly to CoGTA. You would assume that before the Auditor-General comes at the end of the financial year that the departments that have oversight functions over LG and that receive by law [quarterly] reports on LG performance would pick up challenges long before the Auditor-General.

One hears about this so often that there must be a *“mismatch of skills or poor performance in those departments”*, which has an impact on the poor performance by LG.

Another essential layer of collaboration is engagement with external stakeholders, namely, communities and organised civil society. Public officials, both as individuals and as part of a larger system, are overall and everywhere struggling to build partnerships with citizens and local communities. When it comes to the interface between officials and communities, the energy and focus is largely on responding to issues, rather than preventing problems through adequate planning and engagement. As another NGO interviewee noted: *“Having more sustained engagements [and] relationships will help communities and officials.”*

External collaborations, namely, engaging with communities, needs to be a strategic target of municipalities and driven by the MM. As a senior official interview participant explains, when municipal leadership drives the process and organised groupings are involved, a lot can be achieved.

For instance, in 2017 we engaged strategically with economic stakeholders [from] 10 specific sectors such as agriculture, automotive, SMEs, etc. We had individual sessions with them all. We had to agree on priorities for them and build that into our IDP priorities, then go back to them to share how we incorporated these and invite them to keep refining this with us. We had a closed [feedback] loop and that was very important, and it has to be sustained. This sustainability needs leadership; have this in Standard Operating Procedures for public consultation, and include various municipal departments in the process.

The experiences shared by interviewees highlight that even if many municipalities, especially the better resourced ones are good at planning, they are not necessarily good at implementation. Most implementation of services require a deep understanding of local realities and collaboration to be efficient and sustainable. Collaboration requires access to information, which is itself a problematic area of governance in practice.

As an NGO manager interviewed explained, more needs to be done on access to information, going beyond placing certain information online, to ensure that the conditions for poor people to access information are there.

Many municipalities see IT and social media as the new sexy thing to engage constituencies and stakeholders, but it can limit engagement and accountability if you mainly provide information through an app or website in the limited way the platform allows, [which] very often is customer-oriented: reporting or grading services, but not for canvassing bigger issues.

Overall, as a few interviewees pointed out, the tendency to go on-line and use ICT as the main communication platform needs to be done ensuring broad access and not at the expense of engaging meaningfully (i.e. substantively, and in a manner that is open to new ideas and to change) with external stakeholders. Overall, processes to engage with communities are a big challenge highlighting important skills gaps.

In the view of an NGO manager interviewed, the challenges and issues around skills and capacities in municipalities is not only about officials, but also about politicians. Both officials and politicians need to work together, so there are some skills they should all have. He explains, *“both officials and politicians should come and work together and need to be capacitated in people engagement skills”*.

As a senior public official explained, *“your community is a key stakeholder”*, so engagement skills are essential for *“collaborative governance and integrated planning”*. In his view, special emphasis on leadership and engagement skills needs to be placed on key posts like MMs and mayors who set the tone and steer the organisation and oversee implementation of mandates. This will facilitate the collaborations that are currently lacking and that are needed at various levels.

4. Capacity Constraints and Skills Development Strategies

Interviewees spoke of various constraints and shortages that exist across municipalities, but highlighted the need to differentiate between smaller and bigger municipalities when studying challenges and proposing solutions. Overall, in their view, the key challenges include: the absence of adequate management systems, including weaknesses in monitoring project implementation, shortage of skills conducive to creative thinking and people-centred approaches, good leadership that nurtures both internal and external collaborations, the absence of spaces and tools for officials to reflect and share knowledge and skills internally, and the importance of – but also traps when – municipalities embracing IT-oriented solutions as the cornerstone to address challenges.

4.1. Absence of a functional approach in knowledge management systems

Capacity and skills constraints in municipalities are undermined by the weak planning and implementation of skills plans and capacity building interventions, which are generally dysfunctional. The shared perception is that capacity development is not prioritised and well-implemented, and that the ‘little things’ that can go a long way are often ignored. Currently, rather than identifying and developing the skills needed to improve the quality of service delivery and promote development in its broad sense, skills have become mainly a means to a better job, often not in the organisation. A differentiated approach is required, as different skills are required at different levels. Similarly, the operationalisation of skills and capacity development strategies is widely perceived as flawed, both in terms of providing and accessing relevant training, and the stumbling block that very often officials struggle to apply the knowledge gained through training. A core finding is that strategic investment in soft skills is essential to tackle the main capacity and performance issues. This will be discussed further in the next section.

The senior NGO interview participant believes that it is difficult to properly assess whether a particular municipality has inadequate human resources, at least in terms of its staff complement, because very few have undertaken a capacity and skills audit that is responsive to a properly developed and comprehensive strategic plan. The latter is a necessary precondition for developing a suitable municipal structure and, then, identifying what constitutes an appropriate staff complement with appropriate qualifications and skills. In any event, *“the structure development process is ... very politicised”*. While this process *“should be an executive management function, it becomes a political function with unions ... [and] political parties involved”*. The result is that the structure doesn’t necessarily fit well with the strategy, and some municipalities are over-capacitated in some areas and under-capacitated in others. However, *“they have no way of knowing because the strategic [review] process doesn’t allow for the [organisational] structure to be revised in line with the strategy”*.

This situation is made more complex by the oversight and capacity assessment roles of several other institutions, such as AGSA, CoGTA, National Treasury and the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB). There isn’t one single place to go to find out whether a particular municipality has adequate capacity. These institutions are *“not necessarily in sync or talking to each other”*. The same senior NGO representative added: *“The strongest voice on local government has been the Auditor-General, which*

links capacity to money disappearing” and the ability of LG to spend their budgets effectively and appropriately. “We tend to pay more attention to what the Auditor-General says, even though others may offer a more comprehensive view of LG capacity. There are just too many people talking about the capacity of LG, but not talking to each other.”

In terms of technical skills, the smaller municipalities are the ones lacking basic technical competences such as planning, engineering, IT support and management processes and software. On the other hand, one senior manager from a metro was described as not having a functional laptop for the past two years, although skilled staff are available to ensure that the internet is functional and wifi is available. The study interviewee attributed this to rigid and complex procurement policies. The manager concerned has resorted to loading municipal software programmes onto his personal laptop in order to be able to perform his tasks remotely due to COVID-19 physical distancing precautions and protocols. Sometimes, this is because policies and procedures are not in place or are inadequate to deal with ‘everyday’ risks, such as the need to work from home if a fire or a flood damages municipal offices.

However, while many agree that particularly smaller and rural municipalities struggle to attract professionals as engineers and accountants, in many instances the required technical skills to operate and the number of staff are available, but there is inadequate planning and there are no strategies to share skills between departments and municipalities. A contrary view was expressed by the senior NGO interview participant, who reported that many senior municipal officials working in cities have indicated that they would rather work in smaller municipalities because they are less politicised and the “drama” is “less intense”. These senior officials “want to get things done” and are willing to “explore moving to smaller municipalities”.

Therefore, management skills and systems are a key concern for some of the study interviewees as it is essential for good project implementation. “You need intelligence in your management system. This is a key resource needed. It links to finances, to human resources and to capital.” Municipalities generally lack a comprehensive responsive management system allowing “a line of sight from performance area, to targets, and right down to the people that are actually doing the job”. For some sceptical observers, this is not in place because of ‘legacy systems’ which are inadequate and part of the status quo of how officials do things: “Changing this is difficult as it will reveal the inadequacy of the system or what has not been done over many years”.

According to a senior official interviewed, while technology solutions in the form of software and IT hold great potential and are undoubtedly a key element for improvement in many aspects of government operations, these investments require careful planning. In his experience, it “is common to see smaller municipalities investing in expensive and advanced IT systems with the hope that this will sort [out] many problems, but they don’t even have people with the basic skills to operate them”. In his view, human resources department should step up and play a leading role in supporting managers in mapping and understanding the work of the municipality and identifying the skills required to operate more efficiently and effectively, and to avoid wasting resources on inadequate skills and capacity expenditure.

The bigger and better-resourced municipalities, although much better placed due to having many academically and technically qualified officials, nevertheless still need officials with better planning and budgeting skills, and inclusive participatory approaches that, as an NGO manager explains in his

interview, *“allow creative thinking and people-centred approaches to engage with communities and citizens”* in vital but challenging processes, such as housing and urban planning. This is important, since, as an official interviewed puts it *“even if we say the opposite, we as government are [still] simply building houses, [and] not [yet] building communities”*.

Similarly, for some NGOs there is a gap around oversight and monitoring. The issue of councillors’ capacity and skills was also highlighted by one interviewee from a civil society organisation as problematic:

Both officials and local politicians are given planning and monitoring responsibilities, without the support and capacity to do that. For instance, councillors are expected to provide budget input, but they are poorly capacitated to do so. Usually they only receive a week’s training on [the] complex functioning of a municipality. There is too much responsibility and expectation, but with little capacity, setting them up for failure.

While most staff do have the essential level of skills to perform their tasks, they don’t often go beyond the basic tasks expected of them, as there is little incentive to do so, not even for reasons of personal growth, according to the senior NGO interview participant. *“There is a certain level of complacency and comfort in the public sector, where people just don’t push themselves or innovate.”* As performance assessments are often not conducted, even in some metros, and good performance is not appreciated, staff are not encouraged or enabled to identify a personal development plan. Those who do get promoted into higher positions often have to acquire the requisite skills once in the new position, meaning that there is likely to be a slightly longer period in the new post during which the official might underperform while still acquiring the requisite skills.

Also, officials often lack the capacity to monitor key areas such as service delivery processes and overseeing contracts and service delivery agreements (SDAs). As a government interviewee explains, although they could allow communities who are on the ground to support oversight by accessing this information and supporting the monitoring of agreements and processes, *“municipalities rather don’t share information [in order] to not make mistakes visible”*.

In line with this, key informant interviewees also spoke of the lack of internal reflection and spaces, and a lack of skills to deal with conflict management, confrontation and the challenging realities and interactions in communities. As an interviewee responsible for training in the public sector notes: *“Officials are not well equipped to deal with the confrontation that often occurs working in communities. They don’t have spaces to reflect on their capacity and [the scarce] skills needed to implement their own work, and [to] take stock from what they learn doing the job.”* Some of the key municipal skills needed are: *“How do we engage with citizens, and how do I become more creative?”*

4.2. Leadership and governance deficiencies

Leadership is another key area of concern in terms of skills and capacity, and has many layers to it. As a manager at the NSG explains, while developing a qualification on local government leadership, the Local Government Leadership Development Plan (LGLDP). *“we realised that is not so much about skills shortage; it’s more about not keeping pace, or not keeping up with the changing environment”*. Leadership therefore needs to be dynamic, and investing in innovation skills here is crucial.

As some participants of the study explained, the tone of the leadership dictates the overall tone in the municipality. However, very often managers are not skilled for leadership at all. As an independent coaching practitioner working with public sector officials explains: “[T]here is a huge amount of work to be done in the realm of leadership: Who am I, where is my agency, how to make decisions, defining boundaries, identifying what is needed to do the right thing, etc.”. Weaknesses in leadership affect the capacity of senior managers to develop and sustain partnerships, which seriously affects the performance of municipalities in a highly complex yet under-resourced sphere of government.

As a Municipal Manager that participated in an interview warns, this is a huge gap and challenge for all municipalities, but especially impacting the metros where “*cooperative and partnerships leadership is seriously lacking*”. In his experience, this relates to how people see their role and capabilities, and this is negatively affected by the narrow approach that managers often have: ‘I am an engineer’. As he further elaborates:

[I]n the majority of cases, managers are not skilled for leadership at all. Even leaders in strategic portfolios often don't see [the] links between departments [that are essential to their ability] to fulfil their own mandates. A housing person does not appreciate the link with land use management, etc. They run departments as silos. Managers of departments often refuse target-setting when they are not directly responsible for collaborating with other departments that are involved by default. They can't see the need for planning together, in partnerships, to actually deliver a proper house. This requires leadership. It's not about having managers of a Human Settlements department performing as builders of houses, but leading and managing the processes and partnerships needed.

Ultimately, skills in planning and in executing a plan, while understanding the inter-sectoral nature of these things, is essential at the managerial level. This is a significant skills leadership gap and challenge.

4.3. Weak implementation of skills plans and capacity building interventions

Capacity and skills constraints are undermined by the weak implementation of skills plans and capacity building interventions. The shared perception is that capacity development is not well implemented or prioritised. “*It is very focus[ed] on ticking boxes to go up the ladder, for the sake of going up in ranks, for personal achievement and benefits, rather than to have more public impact, a value-driven approach.*” Here, a limitation and concern are people being promoted above their capacity and with insufficient experience in what as described above is generally an unsupportive environment to grow, therefore placing people in roles and situations where they are out of their depth. Similarly, as one interview participant noted, there are challenges with what she calls “levels of articulation”. This arises because many people employed in the wrong position are unable to understand and execute – that is, ‘articulate’ – internal processes, which affects external results and contributes to an ‘artificial skill shortage’ as people and resources are poorly allocated.

There is a widely shared sense that a differentiated approach is needed, as different skills are required at different levels, calling for skills development strategies to be tailored in a systematic way. As one interview participant explained: “*Currently, workplace skills plans are just a shopping list with people just choosing what they want to attend without much strategic thinking about skills needed to fulfil mandates and plans*”. It is mainly compliance-driven and flawed, resulting in large-scale inefficiencies. So much so that expenditure on skills development is usually underspent as often people don't go for

training, due to lack of planning and bureaucratic procedures that prevent officials attending relevant training.

In terms of encouragement, one senior official interview participant speaking from experience expressed concerns about going this route:

I am not a great believer [in] creating incentives, [as] they are not consistent and create... weak precedents. People should do their job, because it is their job, not because they are incentivised. We should just set a precedent that we work in excellence. You incentivise by highlighting good results. If you perform, then you get extra acknowledgement. This works to encourage positive behaviours.

At an operational level, the process is also perceived as flawed. Most of the time, training is outsourced, with skills development facilitators (SDFs) coming in to coordinate. However, and most concerning, is that very often officials struggle to apply the knowledge gained through training. This happens due to a lack of strategic planning around skills needs, but also, as explained above, because, after training, officials find a rigid institutional culture that is not open and flexible to welcome and accommodate new knowledge. As a public official interview participant explained, the *“impact of training is difficult to measure because the organisational environment is not conducive to apply[ing] what is learned”*. There is a systemic problem where the lack of knowledge management systems results in skills and knowledge from individuals getting lost in the institution or misplaced: *“It is not common practice to see managers discussing with officials, after training, what was learned and deciding how this would be applied at work”*. As explained in section two, there are major institutional and behavioural barriers in place. Taking an even broader perspective, mentoring and coaching, job rotation to understand different perspectives and approaches, and succession plans to preserve institutional memory and knowledge when officials retire, are also lacking. These readily available and cost-effective internal mechanisms are ‘non-existent’ in practice, but can provide an opportunity for in-house learning and growth, and thus should be included in managers’ performance agreements.

As an experienced senior official interviewee explained:

On paper, we are ticking [boxes for] many skills and capacity indicators, but when you shift the curtain, on the ground you have a lot of unhappiness and poor relationships. So, none of the current indicators tell a useful story, only part of the story. You need to go to the ground; speak to communities and the private sector to get the whole picture.

Even more concerning, however, as another interviewee pointed out (and as noted early in this section), skills plans and approaches *“are more transactional than transformational”*. This means that skills are not seen as a way to improve service delivery by performing one’s job more effectively and efficiently, but merely as a step up the career ladder: *“The skills become a means to a better job, rather than identifying and developing the skills that will allow excellence and impact”* in their public administration tasks.

Lastly, as some of the interview participants agreed, while the overall physical and technical infrastructure is fine, the main issue is behaviour and attitude: *“Softer skills is what’s most required, it’s not so much about the technical skills”*. These softer skills are needed to tackle the challenge of being responsive, as opposed to being reactive: *“Although we are guided as government by Batho-*

Pele principles, in practice we are not people-oriented and we are lacking in our service delivery kindness and empathy”.

5. Investing in Soft Skills and Knowledge Sharing

The interviews illustrate that, while better approaches and strategic thinking is needed to improve technical skills, investing in key soft skills, such as leadership, and knowledge-management and – sharing – are fundamental to improving the way local government operates and to shifting the current situation out of its unproductive inertia. In this regard, municipal officials need to be trained and supported to implement knowledge-sharing strategies and to be better emotionally equipped and skilled to implement collaborative actions.

5.1. Investing in soft skills through development of basic capabilities to address complex problems

Building internal collaborations and team-work is fundamental to initiating the dynamic and developmental mode of governance envisaged for local government, as the current hierarchical and siloed system does not encourage this. Reinforcing soft skills will be conducive to enhancing these essential dimensions of effective governance. Similarly, related soft skills such as *“strategic thinking, listening, relationship building [and] engagement capacities”* are also needed to improve municipalities’ organisational effectiveness and impact. As one of the key informant interviewees with extensive experience in coaching in the public sector explained: *“There is a need for the professionals to have different competencies; How to assemble partnerships, how to coordinate collaborative initiatives”*. Investing in soft skills involves *“investing in people’s personal capacity and emotional intelligence to manage their work and their teams”*.

As one interview participant working for an organisation that focuses on developing collaborative skills and approaches explains, it is important to work with municipalities to support them in developing the basic capabilities to address complex problems, which require multiple stakeholders to work together.

What is lacking is an understanding that what is needed is not simply to expose people to how to learn about changed formats and systems, it’s a behavioural change; people themselves need to change from what they were doing before and how. So, it needs a process that is dignified where people are listened to and they can engage at the workplace with agency.

This interview participant believes that there isn’t widespread recognition of the need for at least some municipal officials to have the ‘people skills’ / soft skills necessary to build relationships between officials and communities that enables ‘co-creation’ of pathways to development objectives. Similarly, it isn’t generally recognised that people – both officials and community members – undergo a process of personal development if they engage in participatory processes with the necessary self-awareness and awareness of the dynamics of developmental processes. Participation in these types of processes should help develop an openness to the value of different perspectives and critical thinking skills that

enable community members to make a substantive contribution to collaborative thinking and shared planning.

These are complex skills that are difficult to acquire, and for which there is no university 'course' to 'study'. Unfortunately, officials who may have originally been placed in these critical interface roles have come to be regarded as merely 'event planners'. Too often, noted the NGO interview participant, officials who lead community engagement / public participation units or departments "*were once personal assistants to the MM*". In reality, a set of complementary skills is required, and "*we haven't really applied our minds to where and how to source those skills*". The legislative framework may be partly to blame, in the view of the NGO interviewee, because it focuses narrowly on the participation 'event', but doesn't 'unpack' the vital content of a meaningful participatory process.

Soft skills, if well-understood and -utilised, will provide support for other specialist, technical officials perform better at strategising, visioning, and creating and maintaining relationships and dealing with the intangibles of social and economic development, which is not one single person's mandate. These types of capacity development are very significant as they help officials to reflect on how to work, not only internally, but how to influence and work with an external part of the system, meaning another municipality or sphere of government, or other key external stakeholders such as community groups and the private sector.

Soft skills are closely related to personal and institutional values. This is important because:

...the values of officials have an impact on how they do their work and perform. Values need to be synchronised with work. If senior staff buy into the overall plan, and see their role in the overall plan and their contribution, this improves their performance. [Usually], the only time values get mentioned is when some consultant does a values workshop and puts these up on the wall. But this remains words, not emotionally connected and therefore not real.

In general, there is an absence of positive messages that help officials understand the actual meaning and significance of the municipality's work. "*When this connection between an individual's meaning for their life, and their work, is connected to the meaning of what the organisation is trying to achieve, it creates productivity and motivation.*" But although purpose and fulfilment can come from these approaches, interviewees report that it's not common practice to ask officials what they need or value, possibly because any performance assessments that do take place are narrowly understood and conducted.

The existing local government system then often "*clashes with officials holding good values and proactive approaches*", and this is problematic if thought-leaders and innovators in all positions receive no encouragement, positive feedback or affirmation for their work to nurture a much-needed sense of greater responsibility and community service. As an interview participant with coaching experience explains, "*in my experience, many senior officials want to add value, but many are traumatised or depressed, as they were idealistic and then became cynical*". Since senior dedicated officials are the ones setting the tone, developing their strategic skills and emotional intelligence and awareness through tools such as coaching and mentoring can be of great value to organisations struggling to inspire responsiveness and to build trust.

There is evidence of managers with few technical and financial resources managing to turn things around positively. As the study participant with coaching experience explains, while we often look at

the negative examples, it will be useful to find the great municipal officials and identify what competencies correlated with good results. *“My hypothesis is that optimism and appreciation make a difference”*. There is, for instance, a famous example of a hospital CEO in the Eastern Cape that, against all odds given the challenging contextual factors, runs an *“amazing”* facility.

There are managers capable of performing great regardless of all the obstacles. So, let’s find out from them what they are doing. What skills development did they receive? What skills do they use daily? What skills have made a difference? Ask what training specifically helped them.

How qualified people are for their jobs depends on how you look at it – how one defines and understands the task. If it is simply about performing in their portfolio, it may seem that many officials are suitably qualified, especially at senior level and in technical positions. But as a key informant interviewee explained, *“if it’s about development and being effective, very [few are]”*. Qualifications mean little if there is no capacity to ‘connect’ with responsive and proactive colleagues within the organisation as a system, and with societal needs. How are skills used to achieve system improvement and system change? This capability is lacking.

As was discussed above, and as we are reminded, there is *“low capacity to relate well. Getting teams to work together with honesty, respect and collaboration is not easy”*. Most officials come from a ‘command culture’. They lack the capacity to influence as they lack skills to develop and sustain relationships. In these circumstances, people stay in their silos, as it is safer and less threatening. *“Officials need more guidance on why they want to engage and for what purpose; Consultative, transformational and collaborative relationships, and partnering, is [on] another level. For this, you need to develop emotional intelligence.”* The current problematic relationships within municipalities, and between municipalities and other stakeholders, reinforces the urgent necessity of investing in soft skills to strengthen officials' understanding of these values and approaches.

Other essential soft skills are a framework of values that include personal and organisational ethics. The senior NGO interview participant is of the view that *“the lack of a very clear moral and ethical code in political parties [is problematic] because they have a strong influence on what happens in local government”*. If one looks at the structure of a municipal council, which has both legislative and oversight responsibilities, and is the core decision-making structure for planning and resource allocation, it is comprised of political parties’ representatives. Parties’ internal culture therefore has a significant influence on what happens in municipalities.

Given that political parties’ values are beyond the scope of this project and outside the domain of law-making, values leadership among officials becomes fundamental to a transformational agenda in local government that is consistent with the Constitution’s transformational values. Just as there is a need for officials to learn the benefit of the soft skills identified earlier in this section, there is an equally urgent need for the legal framework to be reinforced to protect and strengthen respect for the agency, independence and professionalism of municipal officials. More will be said about this in the Concluding Remarks.

5.2. Promoting learning networks and leadership dialogues between municipalities

There is a need to improve knowledge-sharing mechanisms and to share professional resources and skills across municipalities to support those least resourced and to create efficiencies: *“We need to support programmes on a sharing basis to support poorer municipalities”*. Knowledge exchanges and sharing seems to be a significant gap, as noted before, and *“unless it is mediated, it doesn’t happen”*. Organisations like the SA Cities Network, the Cities Support Programme (CSP) at National Treasury, and SALGA are to various extents creating those opportunities. However, their actual impact is difficult to assess, and tools such as Learning Networks are usually once-off or short-lived donor-based interventions.

Municipalities are generally not particularly good in communicating or showcasing useful ideas and lessons, either internally or to external stakeholders. However, it’s important to remember that *“little things can make a big difference”*. The National School of Governance (NSG), for instance, has identified that there are opportunities for coaching and for leadership dialogues, which are optimal and much-needed spaces for officials to share resources and best practices. These are envisioned as constructive leadership platforms where people can share and reflect on those things that have worked, and those that have not, *“for instance, bringing previous and newly appointed mayors to transfer accumulated experience and alert newcomers of challenges”*. These leadership dialogues could be powerful spaces to share stories of mistakes and achievements.

6. Concluding Remarks

The experiences and perceptions from the broad range of people interviewed and reported here showed that it is important to address leadership and governance deficiencies if the conditions of dysfunctionality and distress that exist in many municipalities are to be addressed.

Most municipalities in South Africa have been hampered by their inability to deliver basic services due to a lack of basic skills and financial mismanagement. Despite interventions implemented to address capacity shortages and poor performance of municipalities across South Africa, operational and financial underperformance remains severe.

The insights provided by these stakeholders in the public, private and civil society sectors contributed to helping us better understand the support requirements of municipalities. While there is still more knowledge to be gained and data to be explored throughout this study, we have shared some of the key insights on the nuanced approaches and the possibilities for improving skills and overcoming capacity constraints in municipalities above.

Some of these insights revealed, and reminded us, of:

- The negative impact of the existing regulatory environment and organisational culture on the performance of municipalities and public officials
- The challenges of attracting and retaining skilled people and making the most of the skills officials already have or gain through training
- The differentiated way in which municipalities experience and tackle capacity constraints

- The need to nurture intra- and inter-institutional collaboration, as well as external engagements and partnerships
- The importance of knowledge sharing to enhance skills and the capacity of municipalities
- The need to carefully revise skills development and capacity building strategies through a fresh lens that thoroughly acknowledges the sources of problems and particularities of each municipality
- The importance of, but lack of attention given to developing strategic soft skills which seem fundamental to improve current capacity constraints.
- The importance of a values framework derived from the Constitution

A recurring concern in all our conversations was the challenge around political interference and the absence of spaces where the administrative and political spheres of municipalities can interact in constructive ways.

Another concern shared by many participants was the way in which innovation and creativity is hampered both by the regulatory framework, and by organisational systems and cultures. The institutional inability to absorb and use skills of well-qualified people and new skills is of particular concern. There is a need to profoundly change the municipal mind-set in terms of skills development and use. Similarly, the slow absorption and application of positive and innovative new policies, regulations and practices better geared towards developmental outcomes is a bottleneck that needs to be carefully revised.

Organisational obstacles are another aspect of concern because it often discourages agency and innovation. The current culture and systems permit a culture of doing the minimum, not taking jobs seriously or performing them without the sense of duty public servants should carry.

As most skills development plans and strategies are dysfunctional, there is a need to work towards a differentiated approach as different skills are required at various levels and in different municipal contexts. But overall, tackling capacity issues and implementing skills development strategies requires a more encompassing approach where municipalities also improve their knowledge management systems and look beyond the existing mechanisms, investing their resources allocated in this area more strategically. This could include initiatives such as skills sharing, jobs rotation, coaching, exchange networks and platforms, and other collaborative efforts. This needs to be accompanied by carefully thought-through initiatives to promote relevant leadership skills to boost the capacity and agency of senior managers in relation to skills.

A common theme identified in various key stakeholder interviews and one that will require further exploration in this study is the need to strategically invest in soft skills to tackle key capacity and performance issues. This means additional research is needed to interrogate more deeply issues such as the link between personal and organisational ethics, characteristics of leadership, and the key soft skills needed for intra- and inter-institutional collaboration, as well as to infuse flexibility and adaptability into municipal processes. For instance, how specifically are these skills going to make officials better at creating and maintaining relationships, or dealing with the intangibles of social and economic development that manifest in interactions with communities?

Finally, as some of the participants of these interviews point out, important contextual and generational changes are occurring and will be shaping the way officials work and the skills needed. The yet unknown impacts of Covid-19 and the lockdown on governance processes in the long term and the arrival of a new generation of officials presents both challenges and opportunities. As younger officials arrive with a new way of doing things, and new values and understandings of life purpose and

job expectations, the need for adaptive, creative and flexible leadership skills and spaces is becoming more evident, especially in the metros. How to do this in a way that embraces the valuable knowledge accumulated already in many of these municipalities, but that gives space for innovation and necessary profound shifts in approach, remains to be seen. We hope to shed some light here using the knowledge and insights to be gained in the coming months.

In recognition of the need for this new approach, towards the end of the section on ‘Investing in Soft Skills and Knowledge Sharing’, a two-pronged approach was identified that acknowledges the fundamental benefit of (a) a set of soft skills that enables transformational leadership by municipal officials, and that (b) provides a ‘hard’ protective layer of a strengthened legal framework that more effectively enables officials to utilise the soft skills necessary to ensure their ability to be proactive, responsive and collaborative, as required by the Constitution. An overarching set of values for the two-pronged approach of the values embedded in the development of soft skills and in the need for the legal framework to strengthen and protect the independence and professionalism of municipal officials, are those values enshrined in the Constitution. The Preamble sets out the following objectives and values for our national vision -

- *‘Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;*
- *Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;*
- *Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and*
- *Build a united and democratic South Africa ...’.* (Emphasis added.)

Section 1 of the Constitution, which sets out the most important of the country’s ‘founding’ or fundamental provisions, adds that -

‘The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following *values*:

- a) *Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.*
- b) *Non-racialism and non-sexism.*
- c) *Supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law.*
- d) *Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.’* (Emphasis added.)

The approach identified here mirrors the mutually reinforcing and mutually interdependent nature of the human rights enshrined in Chapter Two of the Constitution. Thus, the improved quality of life identified as one of the objectives of the constitutional vision for a society transformed from its unequal past both leads to and enables the freeing of the potential of each person – each reinforces the other. Similarly, human dignity is promoted and respected by improving the quality of life of everyone, and also by adopting a form of government and a mode of governance that respects people’s innate dignity, but which also respects the will of the people, including by being responsive to their needs and by including them in decision-making about how to meet those needs, as required by s.195 of the Constitution. Also recognised by s.195 is that people’s dignity is respected and enhanced by providing them with accurate and timely information upon the basis of which they can play a meaningful role in decision-making that affects their lives.

This interrelationship between being and becoming is not a new notion; rather it is widely acknowledged and accepted as inherent in Amartya Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' to human development. People need certain capabilities, such as opportunities to participate and be heard, in order to realise other capabilities, such as a greater level of understanding and dignity, as well as a better quality of life. Dignity also means that residents shouldn't have to fight with or demonstrate against officials and councillors in order to secure their rights and dignity. Rather, respect for people's dignity requires officials who are responsive to the identification of basic needs and who collaborate proactively internally and externally to ensure that basic services are delivered promptly (s.237 of the Constitution) and to a high standard.

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Appendix 1: List of Key Informants

Organisation
Isandla
NMB City Development Agency
Western Cape Economic Development Partnership
Social Justice Coalition (SJC)
South African Cities Network (SACN)
Centre for Small Towns Regeneration (CSTR)
Public Administration Leadership and Management National School of Government
SALGA
Trainer, coach and facilitator - Public and PVT Sector
School of Built Environment and Development Studies, UKZN
CoGTA, KZN
Local Economic Development, UKZN
DUT, UKZN
NMB, Senior Public Official
Afesis-Corplan
School of Public Management and Administration

Appendix 2: Key Informant Interview Guide

PUBLIC OFFICIALS' SKILLS AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT Open Society Foundation South Africa (OSF-SA) and HSRC Study

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Public Officials

Introduction

Instructions:

- Introduce the purpose of the research
- Explain the purpose for the focus group discussion
- Explain the research guidelines such as anonymity and confidentiality
- Clearly define the expected length of the FG discussion

Discussion ground rules:

Explain group rules, these include

- Listening to each other
- Not breaking another person's word
- Raising your hand to speak
- Indicating your "number" before you speak (this is an identifier for audio record purposes)
- Respecting and maintaining the confidentiality of the focus group discussion

Structure of the Questions of the Focus Group Discussion

The intention of the questions below is to elicit detailed feedback from you as a public official that speaks to the objectives of this study. This will be a semi-structured discussion. The use of probing questions such as "please explain further", "what else can you tell us?", "can you elaborate on that", "do you have any examples to share?", "what else can be done?" etc. will be useful.

Thank you for agreeing to participate and for completing the consent form.

Questions

Question	Follow up / probes
Capacity and skills of public officials	
1. What are, in your view and experience, the major challenges facing public officials working at municipalities across South Africa?	Can you also share your view on the influence of poverty, unemployment, corruption, and the continuing effects of racism on the capacity constraints of municipalities?
2. What do you think of the general functioning and performance of this municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do you think most of your colleagues (other officials) perceive the performance of the municipality? ● Do you think the municipality has enough resources (human, financial and technical) to perform well? ● Do you think municipal officials have adequate skills to deal with their duties?
3. What contextual factors impact on the performance of this municipality?	What are the external technological, social, economic, geographic, cultural and natural factors that affect the performance of the municipality?
4. How are other government departments or external organisations affecting the performance of the municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have you experienced or heard of interference from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Political leaders? ○ Other government departments
5. What can you tell us about the organisational culture of the municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the main organisational values of your municipality? ● What are the ethical standards of the organisation?
6. How important are your personal needs and values in terms of performing your job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do you think your work contributes to your personal well-being? ● Do you feel that having job security has an influence on your performance? ● Do you feel that the municipality cares about your well-being as a person and worker? ● Do you feel staff gets acknowledged for their contribution to reach the departments' targets?
7. What do you think about the availability of the necessary resources to perform your job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Please list the key resources you need to perform your duties well (financial, human and technical). ● Is there adequate supply of up-to-date materials and equipment to do your job – please explain with day-to-day examples? ● Is equipment (i.e. phone lines, computers, internet, etc.) usually operational?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is technical support usually available? ● Is your workplace comfortable? Describe what makes a working-place comfortable in your experience and how does it make a difference?
8. How will you describe current leadership practices and challenges in the municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you think managers are skilled to perform leadership duties? Explain strengths and weaknesses. ● What do you think needs to change for better leadership practices? ● What could be done to encourage good leadership?
9. Do you think staff receive enough clarity on their role and responsibilities before commencing with their duties and support to perform them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you think staff know their job description and where they fit into the organogram? ● How and who provides guidance in relation to your specific roles and responsibilities? How often are these discussed? ● Do staff understand their tasks in relation to the overall performance of the municipality? ● Do staff get information on the roles of other departments and ways of collaborating?
10. Do you think that most staff are qualified to do their job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you think the level of education and training of most officials in your department is adequate for the job they are doing? ● What are the skills lacking the most?
11. What are your perceptions of skills development strategies in your municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Please explain how training and development of employees happens in your department / the municipality? ● How is the skills plan for your department developed? ● How do you interact with other public officials to improve the skills and capacity of this municipality to engage with the community at large?
12. What do you think about the alignment of policies and procedures to the strategic planning processes of the municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you think about the strategic planning processes of the municipality? ● What policies or mechanisms are in place to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - control corruption? - encourage transparency and openness?
13. What is your responsibility towards improving community engagement within this municipality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In your experience, how are municipalities engaging with communities (mechanisms, tools) and how effective are these? ● Can you highlight the main challenges that municipalities encounter when they interact with communities?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you identify the main opportunities to improve engagement in communities?
14. Anything else you want to mention or suggest to improve capacity and skills in this municipality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different types of training? Supporting different skills? Creating incentives? Partnerships?
IF YOU HAVE ANY RELEVANT DOCUMENTS PLEASE SHARE WITH US	

Thank you