

# Strategies to restore confidence in South African Local Government

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## ABSTRACT

*The now apparently unrealistic expectations of the public generated by the democratic transformation in South Africa led inter alia to public disillusionment due to a failure of government to deliver basic services and create conditions conducive to local economic development. Confidence in government, but specifically in local government, is therefore at an all-time low. In this article, specific strategies are therefore proposed to ensure that confidence can be restored in government not only to attract cooperation from citizens to the agreed policies and programmes of government, but also to ensure that stability, peace and development can be attained. Leadership in all spheres of government is of utmost importance as the absence thereof leaves government vulnerable to non-compliance and in a dysfunctional state. Furthermore, to enable municipalities to have access to training, operational guidelines and specialised skills, finances must be available to ensure financially viable local government. Coupled with government's efforts through the Back to Basics campaign, the above-mentioned strategies are discussed to restore confidence in local government.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The onset of democratic transformation in South Africa in 1994 had a profound influence on local government, which progressed from being a third tier of government to an equal, autonomous sphere of government. However, a combination of financial pressures, public service reform, demographic shifts and increasing citizen expectations are driving a fundamental re-appraisal of what – and how – the public sector delivers. The challenges also offer an opportunity to re-think the shape of public services and those organisations that deliver these. From working with new providers to collaborating with other organisations and finding new ways to interact with customers and citizens, public sector organisations must search for new ways to drive improvement in a tighter fiscal environment. These

pressures bring a vast array of challenges to public sector organisations which, if positively experienced, can culminate in increased confidence in these organisations.

The changes have been complicated by the global financial crisis experienced since September 2008. The crisis, however, created opportunities for emerging market economies such as South Africa to increase economic growth. This can, therefore, strengthen local government's ability to attain the above-mentioned objectives and by doing so, enhance confidence building from the side of the citizenry. Apart from this, the South African government also approved a comprehensive local government turnaround strategy (LGTAS) as well as the National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 based on five strategic objectives to ensure that local government will play its meaningful role as envisaged in the 1996 Constitution.

The performance of local government in South Africa to deliver quality services is often questioned against alleged financial irregularities, maladministration and corruption and mismanagement. It is, however, clear judging from the recent local government public service delivery protests that these efforts had little effect to turn local authorities around or to ensure that local authorities can deliver satisfactory services to improve the quality of life of citizens and so strengthen confidence in local government *per se*.

Confidence in institutions, especially in government, is vital in achieving stability and development in every nation. It enhances confidence in institutions and consequently attracts cooperation of citizens to the agreed policies and programmes of government. In contrast, low confidence, whether caused by unethical behaviour or by ethical but incompetent behaviour, causes friction and creates hidden agendas, interpersonal conflict and defensive and protective communication. The question, therefore, exists as to how confidence can be restored in local government. The reasons for the situation should, therefore, be analysed and strategies proposed to strengthen confidence in local authorities. In this article, the above-mentioned aspects will be addressed.

## RESEARCH PROCESS

Regarding the research method, a literature study of appropriate sources containing authoritative publications, books, journals, the internet and official documents such as departmental policies was conducted to gather information, while field operations included the use of focus groups. These groups comprised 50 public servants in managerial positions – level 12 and upwards – and enrolled at the University of the Free State in postgraduate Public Administration and Management studies in 2015.

## DISCUSSION

### Confidence in government conceptualised

Confidence has been identified as one of the most frequently examined constructs in contemporary organisational literature and a myriad of definitions of confidence have consequently arisen. Depending on the nature of the research, confidence has been identified



as a trait (and described as an individual difference called propensity to confidence), as an emergent state (referring to cognitive, motivational or affective states that are dynamic and vary as a function of contextual factors as well as inputs, processes and outputs), and as a process through which other behaviours, attitudes and relationships are either weakened or bolstered (Burke, Sims, Lazara & Salas 2007:609). Confidence not only varies in terms of these three forms, but can also exist at a variety of levels within and outside an organisation. It can exist at the team, leadership, organisational and/or inter-organisational level. Seeing that confidence is strengthened or weakened due to the experiences, interactions, and context within which the relationship exists, confidence is likely to develop differently in relation to team members, team leaders and towards the organisation as a whole (Schoorman, Mayer & Davis 2007:348). In this context, confidence is thus seen as operating in a single dimension with no-confidence, where a greater level of confidence, and hence lower levels of no-confidence, is associated with improved organisational performance. Burton (2015:2) is, however, of the view that confidence and no-confidence are independent attitudes, such that an individual's no-confidence in an organisation may impact on his or her performance in a way that is quite different from the impact of confidence. For the purposes of this article, confidence/no-confidence will be discussed in line with the former distinction – that is, in a single dimension.

Hardin (2003:11) argues that no-confidence, and not confidence, motivates citizen participation in government. Citizens are motivated to act because they believe that government may be oppressive, self-serving, or unable to administer the particular needs of individuals or groups. Limited resources, a lack of information by government and open communication channels to service these needs can, on the one hand, cause dissatisfaction, disgruntlement and no-confidence. On the other hand, complete confidence in government may dampen citizen participation if it leads to apathy and indifference with citizens. This type of confidence may express itself in resignation, disinterest, or uncritical acceptance, leading to an uninformed and misguided government—which will also cause dissatisfaction, disgruntlement and no-confidence.

Confidence is the nexus of the compact between government and its citizens. Public confidence emanates from a socially centred government that is responsive and capable of articulating public needs through pro-poor policies and delivering necessary services in a transparent and accountable manner. This synergy acts as both a precondition and a result of good governance. Public confidence in government is a key requirement to achieving stability, peace and development in each nation. Confidence enhances trust in institutions and attracts the cooperation of citizens to the agreed policies and programmes of government. In recent times, however, confidence in government has shown a downward trend, affecting governments in both developing and developed regions (Klein 2008:3; Local Government Briefing 2014:3). Factors playing a role in this regard are poverty, human rights abuses, inequality, the environment, HIV/AIDS (developmental-related issues); and drugs and crime, and peace and safety (governance-related issues). Global statistics backing these claims are as follows:

- almost one billion people continue to remain poor;
- a mere 5% of the world's richest earn 114 times more than the 5% of the world's poor;
- daily, more than 30 000 children die of preventable diseases;
- global warming has increased the spectra of natural disasters and altered the world ecology;

- as many as 61 countries do not have free press;
- at least 106 countries restrict important civil and political liberties;
- there is no-confidence in how governments allocate and spend public resources and see corruption as a rising scourge;
- 90% of countries do not meet transparency and accountability criteria in budget preparation and more than one third of these countries provide minimal or no budget information to their citizens (Sachs 2015:2).

In general, failure to *inter alia* achieve equitable development and the absence of accountability and transparency in public governance continues to dent public confidence in governments. One of the factors contributing to the improvement of confidence in governance is performance (Schoorman *et al.* 2007:349) and attention will, therefore, subsequently be focused on the performance of local government in South Africa and the reasons for no-confidence in government.

### **Performance of local government and reasons for no-confidence in government**

The new local government system has succeeded in its goal to radically overhaul and transform local government in South Africa, but performance in respect of service delivery remains questionable. This has been attributed to the fact that local authorities had to deal with issues such as the non-payment of services, access to adequate resources and national transfers (Allan 2006:34), although the above-mentioned three arrangements suggest that financial means can no longer be used as an excuse for non- or poor performance.

A key concern of the South African municipalities is that of capacity i.e. not only to deliver and sustain quality services, but in the ability to spend its revenue. Instead of a general increase in spending, both capital and operational expenditure fluctuated greatly. In the late 1990s to 2001, capital expenditure shrunk by 8,5% and 14,6% respectively, while operating expenditure increased in terms of spending on the provision of free basic services such as water and sanitation, but also in terms of the growth in the salary bills of municipalities, raising questions as to why the latter increased at the expense of infrastructure spending (Allan 2006:35). However, the growth in capital expenditure that was experienced during 2002/2003 (12%), 2004/2005 (13,8%) and 2006/2007 (15,6%) hopefully marked a new and consistent trend taking the current (2014) 12% into consideration (Local Government Review 2014:9).

Further indicators of incapacity include the growing utilisation of consultants in local government, unacceptably high levels of underspending in poverty-stricken areas and the increasing number of alternative service providing structures (De Villiers & Michel 2006:9). Questions are also posed concerning the extent to which policy intentions that are linked to performance are accomplished; thus, the implementation of policies. The mere existence of a policy and its impact is no guarantee that it will be translated into action attaining the results intended.

Legislation and regulations referred to are *inter alia* a comprehensive Local Government Turnaround Strategy (LGTAS) in 2009, the Operation Clean Audit of 2014 to 2019, the New Economic Growth Path (NGP) launched in the national sphere in 2010 as well as the National Development Plan – 2030 (RSA: National Planning Commission (NPC) 2013:30).



These policies have complementary goals to not only combat the worldwide financial meltdown in 2008, but also meet the basic demands of all citizens by a reduction in unnecessary government expenditure, the release of resources for productive investment and to strengthen local government’s role in financial management for improved service delivery.

Despite all these measures, as many as 95 of 278 municipalities (divided into local, district and metro municipalities) were in financial distress (a term specifically used to indicate the number of municipalities approaching ‘financial crisis’) in July 2013. Although more audits were completed according to the *Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act*, 56 of 2003, in 2012, the number of disclaimers, adverse or qualified audit opinions increased from 110 to 127 in 2013; 43 municipalities were not audited due to their failure to submit annual financial statements on time, with the majority of these unlikely to receive a favourable audit outcome; only 50% of municipalities achieved at least a financially unqualified audit opinion (up from 45% in the previous year); while there were merely 17 clean audits in the country, which means that fewer than 5% of municipalities were on par with the required benchmark (UWC Report 2014:5).

The UWC Report, furthermore, indicates that it is unlikely that the Operation Clean Audit 2019 targets (of which one is that 75% of municipalities should achieve an unqualified audit) will be achieved and that additional interventions and periodic adjustment to actual trends will still be required if the new targets are to be met. Apart from the above-mentioned, policy and planning are often done at top management level without sufficient participation by frontline operational managers—resulting in a disjuncture between strategic and operational plans and a gap between policy, planning, budgeting and implementation (Maranya 2006:9).

While it is certain that these factors do, individually and collectively, influence the performance of local governments, they do not provide adequate explanations for the shortcomings of a substantive number of local authorities in South Africa. The factors fail to explain why, despite the existence of a democratically elected government, so many citizens appear to have little confidence in the working of local government. The SA Reconciliation

**Table 1: Confidence in local government**

Confidence in institutions, 2006–2013 (%) Year	Presidency	National government	Provincial government	Local government	Parliament
2006	77.0	73.1	65.5	50.3	69.4
2007	68.2	62.7	56.6	43.2	61.6
2008	57.4	57.9	49.8	40.0	56.0
2009	54.5	57.1	49.0	38.5	54.9
2010	66.9	65.8	57.9	43.1	64.5
2011	64.5	65.0	56.4	42.7	61.1
2012	63.7	65.4	61.2	49.8	62.9
2013	55.1	54.5	51.8	48.6	54.5

Source: Local Government Briefing 2014

Barometer Survey, a nationally representative public opinion poll conducted annually by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (Local Government Briefing 2014:5) indicates that the confidence in local government dropped by 7,91% since April 2013 (see Table 1) and in addition, approval of government's performance dropped by over 20% on issues such as transparency and accountability, correct appointments, crime, inflation, narrowing the income gap and combating corruption.

The lack of confidence is, furthermore, associated with particular risks, such as:

- Service delivery risks with the implications that
  - Staff do not get paid – and so refuse to work;
  - Bulk services do not get paid for – so services could be cut;
  - Contractors and suppliers do not get paid; and
  - Repairs and maintenance are invariably among the first expenditures cut, placing service delivery – as well as future revenues – at risk.
- Fiscal risks culminating in
  - Poor financial management processes and systems expose the municipality to corruption;
  - The municipalities are failing to properly utilise the resources available to them by failing to collect available revenues; and
  - Poor financial management increases the cost of borrowing to municipalities.
- Political interventions with the following consequences:
  - Some municipalities have established top-heavy *political offices*, which have proven to be unaffordable. Often these offices provide political advice on administrative matters, thereby undermining and duplicating the role of the municipal manager, chief financial officer and senior managers.
  - Political interference in administrative decision-making processes compromises municipal finances, including supply chain management. The interference in some municipalities impedes revenue collection. This is related to the fact that the political office bearers do not want to antagonise their voting communities (Local Government Briefing 2014:18).

The lack of confidence manifests itself in a variety of ways. Mafela (2006:12) points out that the absence of the necessary measures to enhance revenue-raising powers of local government lead to the undermining of the confidence of local communities in municipalities to meet their service needs. According to Fourie and Burger (2009:145) the problem of local government debt is *inter alia* that it will undermine private sector confidence as both households and companies will come to fear the prospect of future distortive taxes to deal with compromised public finances. This implies higher taxes and brings to the fore the affordability of rates and tariffs; that is, if rates and tariffs are too high, many inhabitants will be unable to afford them and will simply not pay; the level of services being provided by a local authority must justify the payment of rates; and the administrative systems regarding the collection of revenues must be effective to the extent that inhabitants feel compelled to pay. It, therefore, boils down to a failure to engage with the processes of local democracy and the systems of municipal government.

A lack of engagement, in turn, leads to a lack of accountability and responsibility on the part of elected and appointed officials – which, furthermore, leads to the proliferation of



private and community initiatives (Benit-Gbaffou 2008:695; Van der Waldt 2012:372). The outcome of is that I municipal councils lack popular support and legitimacy. At the same time, they are also able to operate with limited public accountability. As a result, corruption is endemic, public funds are misappropriated and service delivery is poor or non-existent (Pillay 2004:595).

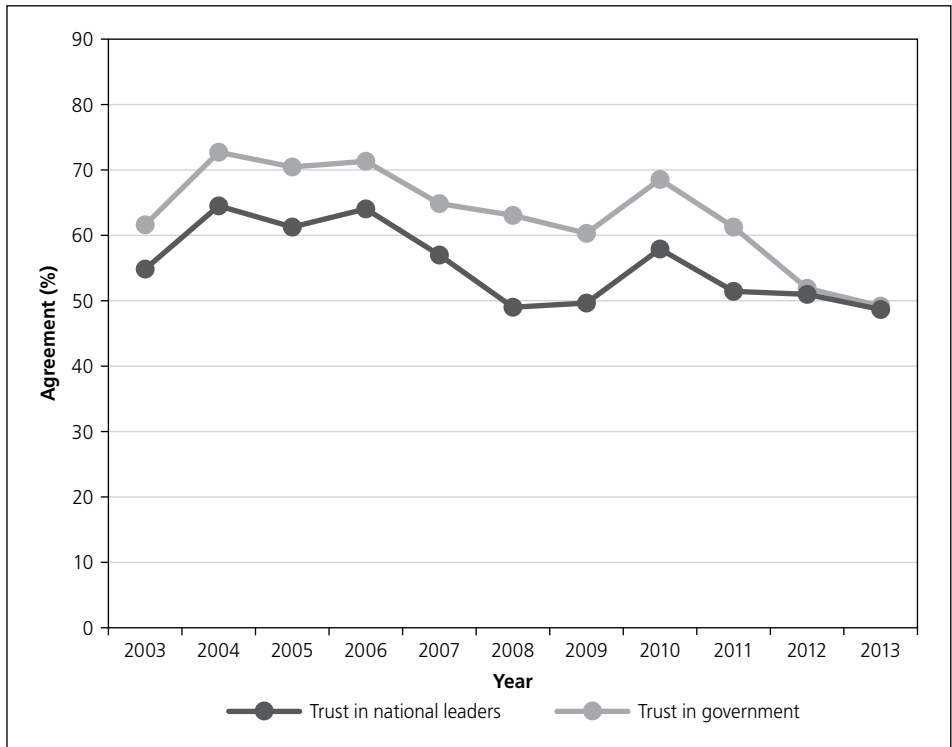
Seeing that the performance of local government as alluded to above is not satisfactory to increase confidence in local government, mechanisms such as leadership and financially viable local authorities to deliver improved services to encourage confidence, need to be investigated.

## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CONFIDENCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Building confidence is acknowledged to be both an individual and an organisational-level task and the role of the leader is to create a culture that integrates what the organisation claims to believe and how it actually behaves in a critical element in optimising organisational performance (Oketch 2005:10).

Figure 1 shows that confidence in leaders and Parliament has been decreasing over time. In 2003, a majority of 61.6% of South Africans agreed with the statement that Parliament

**Figure 1: Confidence in national leaders and Parliament, 2003 – 2013 (% agreement)**



Source: LG Briefing 2014:6

can be trusted, while 54.5% agreed that national leaders can be trusted. Ten years later in 2013, confidence levels for Parliament had decreased by 12.7% to 48.9%, and by 6.2% to 48.3% for national leaders. Over this time, declines in confidence levels for both Parliament and leaders occurred over the 2006–2009 period, with a relatively sharp incline in the 2010 period, only to decline again to record lows in the following years.

To restore confidence in local government, at least two levels of analysis in the concept of leadership should be identified; that is, the behaviours and actions of individuals, and the organisation (municipality) as unit of analysis, working with other agencies in the locality and having particular responsibility for addressing the needs and aspirations of the inhabitants. Puth (2002:70) and Nel, Van Dyk, Haasbroek, Schultz, Sono and Werner (2004:332) distinguish between the concepts leader and leadership. The authors argue that it is viable to distinguish between the person, the position and the processes in terms of leadership. The idea of leadership as a set of processes concerned with the influencing of people and achieving objectives are reflected in the definitions of leadership by Heifetz (1996:10) (mobilising people to tackle *tough* problems); Mulgan (1997:102) (strengthening the capacity of citizens and communities to govern themselves); and Cumming (2001:2) (creating a strong sense of direction for the organisation and the people in it and the values that need to go alongside this direction), enabling local governments and other stakeholders to develop a value system of responsibility to the future. Each and every individual should play a leadership role in shaping visions of the future and encouraging local government as organisation to look beyond immediate pressures in order to direct innovative actions to address a stronger external focus and responsiveness towards inhabitants. Current literature concurs with the perspective that confidence is based on the ability, benevolence and integrity of the person and is closely connected to leadership behaviour (Caldwell & Hayes 2007:265; Fransen, Haslam, Steffens, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper & Boen 2015:90).

Increasing demands are posed for more visionary and effective leadership. The ability to enunciate an engaging and compelling vision for the future of the organisation, to focus it upon long-term opportunities and goals, and to inspire others, are all among the most important abilities required of leadership at local government level/sphere. The external roles which local governments need to undertake to improve service delivery and in so doing create confidence in the organisations, furthermore necessitate particular competencies, including intellectual strength, vision, management, relationship skills and personal roundedness (Ali in Rosenbaum & Kauzya 2006:136), which will contribute to articulating the needs and aspirations of local residents. Leadership on local government level should furthermore be

- creative and propose innovative problem-solving solutions;
- promote equity in service delivery;
- develop approaches to poverty alleviation;
- reconnect with the stakeholders;
- make the institutions more relevant;
- promote transparency in governance;
- promote democratic institutional development *inter alia* through dialogue with citizens; and
- promote public sector ethics to enhance confidence within the institution itself (United Nations 2008:6).



Once these prerequisites have been met, local government as an institution could be regarded as effective through the use of leadership, and confidence will be restored.

Further improvements in confidence in local government will, according to Sewell (2003:76), depend on the available resources. Emphasis should be placed on what can be done to deliver more, better and different services. Capacity constraints, however, exist in local government, including poorly designed or fragmented programmes. According to the Financial and Fiscal Commission (2014:17), for capacity-building programmes to be successful, there is a need to address the underlying challenges. This means that government interventions should be aimed at bringing about long-term solutions to ensure that municipalities operate on their own with no intervention from other spheres of government. There is, therefore, a need for a shift towards enabling municipalities in a more practical and sustainable way by providing operational guidelines, access to training and availability of specialised skills. Finances will play a leading role in this regard. Deloitte Local Government Unit (2012:20) proposes six key priorities that need to be addressed to ensure financial efficient local government. *Firstly*, leadership and strategic human resources should be recruited, retained and developed as the absence of leadership leaves municipalities vulnerable to non-compliance and in a dysfunctional state (Lewin 2014:12); *secondly*, an environment of responsiveness, high performance and clear accountability in respect of performance management must be created; *thirdly*, a people-centred culture of service delivery and customer care along with the *Batho Pele* principles – putting people first must be established; *fourthly*, it must be ensured that planning, governing structures, people, processes, systems, infrastructure and oversight mechanisms are optimal and aligned to the mandate as defined by a realistic IDP and applicable legislation, which ties in with the *fifth* priority that economic and financial viability and prosperity of the municipality must be ensured, recognising its developmental mandate to help facilitate growth of the local economy and the creation of jobs. *Lastly*, sound financial management and budgeting must be ensured (RSA Treasury 2013:15).

However, emphasis should not only be put on financial measures to ensure efficient local government, but cognisance should also be taken of the use of non-financial measures such as product quality and customer satisfaction to ensure better long-term performance by local government as these will assist managers in refocusing on the long-term aspects of their actions to ensure the restoration of confidence in local government.

Concerted efforts from government's side to restore confidence in local government are undertaken continuously. In his State of the Nations Address, President Zuma (2015:10) alluded to nine points to ignite growth and create jobs that could potentially restore confidence in local government as the service entity closest to inhabitants, namely encouraging private sector investment, unlocking the potential of SMME's, cooperatives, township and rural enterprises; and state reform and boosting the role of state in water and sanitation infrastructure. Minister Gordhan (2014:2) also presented the *Back to Basics* strategy document to improve service delivery. This will be done by committing the national government to four priority steps, namely support (funding, building capacity); monitor (real-time monitoring of key indicators); intervene (civil claims, assets forfeiture, applicable agencies of government); and enforce (ensure adherence to norms and standards; otherwise, disincentives and sanctions). The essential element of the approach is a responsive municipal administration where there is

- political and administrative stability;
- council, committee and management meetings are held on a regular basis with a good relationship between the political and administrative arms;
- spending is aligned with the Integrated Development Planning (IDP): the capital budget is fully spent and 7% of the budget is assigned to maintenance;
- proper financial management results in clean/unqualified audits;
- institutional management is characterised by clear policy and delegation frameworks; and
- community satisfaction is measured annually (Gordhan 2014a:3).

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) was tasked to introduce regulations to ensure that reporting on these indicators is legislated so as to ensure that reports are submitted and analysed and corrective actions are taken where necessary.

The above-mentioned, however, necessitates that there should be a sound business plan; responsibilities for driving, implementing, maintaining and resourcing strategies should be allocated; and regular monitoring and evaluation of the successes should be undertaken to ensure successful implementation—and thereby, building confidence in local government.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion it is clear that the South African government succeeded in its goal to transform local government, but despite the introduction of appropriate legislation, additional financial resources and particular programmatic interventions in their performance in respect of service delivery remains questionable. Confidence, being the nexus of the compact between government and its citizens, is strengthened by improved performance, but the evidence presented highlights a decrease in confidence in South African local government activities.

In rebuilding this confidence, innovative methods need to be introduced and leaders can play a meaningful role in this regard. As a set of processes concerned with the influencing of citizens and achieving objectives, leadership can encourage local government to look beyond immediate pressures and challenges and be responsive to the needs of inhabitants. It is, however, so that leadership should not only be the responsibility of a particular individual, but that in the local government sphere, councillors, managers and front-line staff take responsibility for leadership to ensure that confidence in local government can be improved.

Confidence can, furthermore, be restored by the running of financially sound municipalities. Particular measures were proposed to ensure financially efficient municipalities to overcome the identified risks facing local government finances. Efforts from the government, such as the *Back to Basics* campaign were also highlighted as a strategy that can be used to build confidence in local government.

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