



# **Municipalities, politics, and climate change: an example of the process of institutionalizing an environmental agenda within local government**

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### **(150 word abstract below extended abstract)**

#### **Abstract**

Research calls for a better understanding of party politics in local governance in Africa, highlighting how political issues can influence the delivery of services and other goals at the municipal level. Environmental sustainability is one such goal that will become increasingly important as new realities such as resource scarcity and climate change affect the development paths of municipalities. However, research has not examined the influence of politics and political change on the institutionalization of environmental issues within local governments. This paper investigates these issues using a case study of a South African municipality that has made considerable progress in institutionalizing environmental issues (particularly mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change) in the last decade. At the same time, the municipality recently underwent a complete change in political leadership. Our case study suggests that a number of factors can promote the growth and persistence of an environmental agenda within local government: (i) the presence of political champions; (ii) the presence of networks between the municipality and other organizations, and the presence of dense social networks within the municipality; (iii) the presence of benefits for the municipality from engaging in environmental initiatives. Political issues can enable the process of institutionalization by providing political champions with the necessary power to initiate an environmental agenda, and by stimulating innovation in environmental governance because of competition between political parties. However, political issues can also hinder institutionalization through political instability (which pushes the achievement of short-term goals, leads to losses in champions and changes in social networks) and clientelism (which can lead to the discontinuation of environmental projects).

#### **Abstract (150 words)**

Political issues can influence the delivery of services and other goals, such as environmental sustainability, within municipalities. However, the influence of political

factors on the institutionalization of environmental issues within municipalities has not been examined. We investigate these issues using a case study of a South African municipality that has made considerable progress in institutionalizing environmental issues (particularly climate change related) in the last decade, despite a change in political leadership. The presence of the following factors promoted the institutionalization of environmental governance: (i) political champions; (ii) networks between the municipality and other organizations, and dense networks within the municipality; (iii) benefits for the municipality from environmental actions. Political issues can enable the process of institutionalization (e.g. by stimulating innovation through political party competition) and also hinder it through political instability (which for e.g. disrupts patterns in champions and networks) and clientelism (which can cause environmental projects to be discontinued).

### *Introduction*

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that global environmental change issues, such as climate change, are critical for cities (e.g. Bulkeley, 2010). Of particular interest is the resilience of urban areas in developing nations, given that they are increasingly vulnerable to climate change impacts (e.g. Carmin, Anguelovski, & Roberts, 2012) and yet face heavy development challenges. Although achieving urban adaptation to climate change will involve a wide network of actors, one key player is local (or municipal) government. Municipalities have a potentially key role to play in addressing climate change because: (a) they are the level of government closest to where the impacts of climate change will actually be felt; (b) “communities are the scale at which the behaviour of individuals is most directly influenced” (Burch 2010a: page); and (c) the local level is the scale at which responses will be put into action (e.g. Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005). Therefore, municipalities are the level of government generally most directly responsible for planning and implementing adaptation strategies suitable for the area in which they are located (e.g. Bulkeley, 2010). Municipalities have the potential to address climate change through many of their critical functions, such as land use planning, utility provision, transportation infrastructure development, waste management, community education, disaster management, storm water management, health, or environmental management (e.g. Burch 2010a; Measham, et al., 2011). Indeed, municipalities have been recognized as playing a significant role in responding to climate change (e.g. Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013), and a recent survey of climate experiments (purposive interventions designed to respond to the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change) in 100 cities across the globe reveals that the vast majority these experiments are led by the municipalities (as opposed to other actors such as the public sector or civil society) (Bulkeley and Broto, 2013).

However, given the social, economic and political structures of many developing

countries, mainstreaming climate change and other global environmental change issues (by which is meant the process of including these considerations into governmental policies and practices) is expected to be challenging because of existing strains on resources and capacity. South Africa, in common with many other developing countries, faces many pressing social, economic and environmental stressors, in addition to the challenge of climate change (e.g. Ziervogel & Taylor, 2008; Winkler & Marquand, 2009). South Africa's Constitution and government policy (e.g. the Local Government Municipal Systems Act No. 32 of 2000) give local government the mandate to provide the services and infrastructure that are necessary to meet the basic needs of the poor and connect community-led development to national development objectives. However, municipalities in the country are struggling to fulfil this developmental mandate, with some failing altogether (CoGTA, 2009). Against this backdrop of service delivery backlogs, local governments also critically need to engage with the challenge of planning and implementing adaptation strategies, given that South Africa is predicted to suffer from the impacts of climate change (e.g. Cartwright, Parnell, Oelofse, & Ward, 2012).

Although municipalities have the potential to enact more sustainable and resilient paths of development, currently they are affected by a host of barriers to action that have inhibited the successful pursuit of climate change action, both in South Africa (e.g. Pasquini, Cowling, & Ziervogel, 2013) and elsewhere (e.g. Burch, 2010a). An increasingly established literature on the barriers to adaptation (e.g. Measham et al., 2011; Baker, Peterson, Brown, & McAlpine, 2012; Ziervogel & Parnell, 2012) shows that local governments face numerous constraints, including knowledge and understanding barriers, regulatory barriers, capacity constraints and other barriers. One under-researched issue that we have recently drawn attention to is that of the effects of political issues on local government operation and performance (Pasquini et al., 2013).

Politics are central to local government, as they are for other spheres of government. However, research has not considered in any methodical way how municipalities come to address climate impacts (or other forms of environmental sustainability), or begin to consider how to do so, in the face of political instability, party politics and political competition. Some research exists to show that these issues can inhibit the smooth functioning of municipalities and therefore the delivery of services and other goals, such as environmental sustainability.

For instance, the literature recognizes the problems of the short-term cycles of elected government: the time scale of political decision making is relatively short, which pushes a need for demonstrable results in terms of improved services and visible projects (e.g. Rakodi, 2001; Andersson & Laerhoven, 2007). These short time scales are unlikely to favour the achievement of environmentally sustainable development, as global environmental changes typically manifest over much longer time scales. Research has

also touched upon a variety of issues, associated with party politics and political competition, which can affect municipal governance. For example, clientelism - the exchange of public goods and services (e.g. public housing, employment contracts) for political support (e.g. votes, participating in party rallies) – can disrupt municipal governance (e.g. Lindell, 2008; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2011). Some studies mention community members or constituencies only accessing certain services if they have particular political party affiliations (Bawa, 2011; Rubin, 2011). Research also mentions the need for local politicians to ‘toe the line’ with respect to their party’s preferences, above their duty to their constituencies, to maintain their position in the internal party hierarchy (Bawa, 2011; Buire, 2011). Studies on ward committees<sup>1</sup> have shown that these become either meaningless or powerless structures because of political biases (Piper & Deacon, 2008; Memela, 2005, in Booyesen, 2007). And other literature mentions the need for greater consideration of governance arrangements, politics and decision-making effects on spatial planning in developing countries (e.g. Rakodi, 2001; Boamah, Gyimah, & Nelson, 2012).

Despite various effects of political instability, party politics and political competition being mentioned in the literature, there is no systematic, comprehensive consideration of how they affect the overall functioning of municipalities. Little is still known about local-level party politics, and there is a strong need for a better understanding of the complex dynamics of party politics and their influence on urban and neighbourhood governance in Africa (e.g. Lindell, 2008; Pieterse & Van Donk, 2008; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2012; Bénit-Gbaffou et al., 2013). This research is necessary for achieving environmental sustainability in local municipalities, in part because previous work of ours has shown that political instability, party politics and political competition can affect the mainstreaming of climate change considerations within municipalities in South Africa, through its negative effects on municipal functioning in general (Pasquini et al., 2013).

To recap, while there has been acknowledgement that political issues (political instability, party politics and political competition) can affect municipal governance, there has been no in-depth and systematic consideration of their effects, in particular of their effects on the mainstreaming of climate change and other environmental change issues within municipalities.

Because of these knowledge gaps, we target here an example of a South African local municipality that in the last decade has made considerable progress in institutionalizing

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<sup>1</sup> Ward committees can be established in each ward of a metropolitan or local municipality. Chaired by the ward councillor, ward committees are intended to consist of up to ten people representing ‘a diversity of interests’ in the ward. They are intended as mostly a communication channel between the community and the metropolitan or local council, operating through the ward councillor.

policies, practices and processes related to environmental issues, including a strong focus on mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change. Since its move towards environmental sustainability, the municipality underwent a complete change in political leadership following the 2011 South African local government elections. Despite this (and highly unusually for South Africa) the municipality retained its green orientation (we use “green” in our paper as a shorthand for “environmentally sustainable” or “environmental sustainability”). The municipality therefore makes for an ideal case study of the way in which political (and other) effects can both assist and hinder the process of institutionalizing an environmental agenda within local government. We examine the mainstreaming of environmental issues in the municipality both before and after political change, and draw conclusions and make recommendations about how the environmental sustainability of municipalities can be increased both despite and because of political arrangements, influences and changes. We note here that our case study municipality is not an example of an urban municipality. However, disentangling the multifaceted, sensitive and often hidden effects of local-level politics on the mainstreaming of climate change and other environmental change issues is extremely complex, especially considering the lack of prior research on this topic. For this reason we focused on a small municipality where these effects could be tracked with greater ease, and hence where the processes by which a municipality becomes and stays green in the face of political change could be more readily understood.

### *Case study and Methods*

For reasons of confidentiality, we omit naming our case study municipality or providing details that would aid its identification. Our case study is a rural municipality covering an area of some 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population size of around 50,000 people. It is located in the Western Cape Province, for which global climate modelling suggests that there will be significant climate change impacts (DEADP, 2008). Our case study municipality formed part of a wider research project that looked at various issues tied to climate change adaptation and environmental governance in eight municipalities in the Western Cape Province. In- depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted from July 2009 to March 2010 with three administrative staff (officials) and three councillors from each of the eight municipalities. The interview questions focused on: (i) the experience of the municipality with extreme weather events, including actions taken/needed to prepare for extreme weather events and the constraints and needs to implementing action; (ii) the respondent’s knowledge and beliefs regarding climate change, adaptation, and ecosystem-based adaptation; (iii) the municipality’s policies/actions on climate change and adaptation, including constraints and needs to implementing actions; and (iv) relevant organizational/social issues in the municipality (such as the political composition and stability of the municipality, collaboration between positions and departments, effect of the municipality’s actual or hypothetical engagement with climate change issues on the

municipality's status).

Out of all the municipalities examined, our case study municipality was highly unusual because of its attempts to mainstream environmental issues, and also because it appeared to retain its 'green' orientation following political regime change after elections. For these reasons, a repeat visit to the municipality was undertaken in July 2012. During this visit, seven officials (five senior managers, one middle-manager and one junior manager) and six councillors were interviewed. The research design was structured to invite participants from a cross-section of municipal roles and responsibilities, given that environmental adaptation and governance requires an integrated approach. The interviews focused more specifically on issues tied to political change within the municipality, and on the effects thereof on environmental governance. The interview questions explored the way the municipality (council and administration) chose to manage the environmental outlook and initiatives of the municipality following political regime change. Questions investigated topics such as:

- Whether environmental visions and initiatives had remained the same or changed, discussing both the current status of past initiatives the municipality had undertaken and any present/forthcoming initiatives;
- The reasons for the municipality either choosing to maintain or discard particular visions/initiatives;
- Which individuals were championing environmental initiatives at political and administrative levels;
- Where and how funding for green initiatives was sourced and managed;
- Where knowledge on environmental issues was sourced;
- How the municipality raised interest among the local constituencies for environmental issues.

To help validate our interview and observation data, we gathered and reviewed the following key municipal documents in both rounds of fieldwork: Integrated Development Plans (a plan for a municipality that gives an overall framework for development), Spatial Development Frameworks (which set out the "spatial vision" for the municipality), Annual Reports and Budgets. We examined other relevant information where it was available, such as municipal websites and a variety of documents supplied by respondents (which varied widely, from disaster management plans to presentations on sustainability issues targeted to schools). The interviews were conducted and recorded (with the permission of the participant) by the lead author (LP). All interviews took place on site, mostly at council offices, and lasted between half an hour and one and half hours. Participants were contacted by email or telephone and told about the full nature of the study, the other cases involved, and why they were selected for participation; they were also assured of full confidentiality. Interviews were transcribed, and manually coded and

analysed using qualitative techniques. Transcribed texts were initially coded by labeling related data with numerous category codes. In a second stage, coding categories were eliminated, combined, or subdivided to identify repeating ideas (the same idea expressed by different respondents) and themes (a larger topic that organizes or connects a group of repeating ideas) that connected codes. Many of the findings we present here were derived as a result of open discussions generated by the questions outlined above.

### *Results and Discussion*

#### ‘BECOMING GREEN’: THE BEGINNING OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA

Our case study municipality started developing its environmental agenda in 2006, following the local government elections. The municipality’s new Mayor and Deputy Mayor both happened to be individuals with strong personal interests in green issues, particularly the Deputy Mayor. The latter convinced the council to allow her to attend some of the courses offered by a Master’s programme in sustainable development at one of the Western Cape universities. Armed with increased knowledge as well as contacts from the Masters programme, the Deputy Mayor embarked on a programme of environmental education and change of the municipality. For the first year, she struggled to gain traction. However, the municipality experienced three severe floods, over a four-year period, which proved remarkably costly for them (mainly through the removal/damage of infrastructure and development). This experience catalysed institutional and behavioural change, leading the council to begin to look into the detail of the causes and management of environmental disasters. In the Deputy Mayor’s words, “[it] was maybe even a positive thing that we did have a number of incidents [disasters], to turn the non-believers into believers”.

According to respondents, in less than the five-year political term, these two senior councillors were able to implement a mind-set change among the council and the administration of the municipality. These councillors, particularly the Deputy Mayor, represented a sea change in the culture of the municipality, and their persistence, dedication and efforts led directly to initiatives geared towards sustainable development, in particular around climate change mitigation and adaptation (please refer to Table 1). For instance, under the leadership of these two councillors, the council took a decision to appoint, for the first time, both an environmental officer and a head of disaster management. The former in particular proved to be a key appointment for the municipality, as the individual concerned revealed himself to be a very strong environmental champion in his own right: after three years with the municipality he took up a post elsewhere, and has since made a name for himself within the Western Cape (among other municipalities, the Provincial government, academics, practitioners and NGOs) as a tireless environmental leader. Reportedly, the actions of the municipality led



to attitude changes among the municipal residents as well, as the municipality began to make efforts to spread their green vision to the community. For example, the Deputy Mayor personally embarked on a programme of environmental education (with climate change as an integral component) among the municipality's schools. The municipality also started an hourly radio slot once a week. The municipality's Integrated Development Plan included their green vision. As other examples of awareness-raising, the municipality's environmental efforts were profiled in national TV programmes, as well as in the municipality's own monthly newsletters.

What is especially instructive from our case study is the demonstration of the importance of obtaining the buy-in of the entire structure of the municipality, i.e. of the rest of the council and all the municipal departments. In other words, strong political leadership was able to create an organizational mind-set change such that environmental responses were not isolated in either an organizational or policy sense.

For this mind-set change, the municipality's social networks were crucial. Social networks affect the flow and the quality of information, with actors relying on people they know rather than impersonal sources (e.g. Granovetter, 2005, p. 33). Norms (the shared ideas about the 'right way to behave') are also more firmly held the denser a social network is, where density refers to the proportion of possible connections among nodes that is actually present in the network (e.g. Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003; Granovetter, 2005). Greater density makes the probability of norms being encountered, discussed and fixed more likely, and larger groups have lower network density (all else being equal) than smaller networks (because people have limits on how many social ties they can sustain). Therefore, the larger a network, the lower is its ability to define and enforce norms (Granovetter, 2005). We suggest that the small size of our case municipality (with a total staff complement under 500 people, with most political and managerial staff located within one principal building) creates denser social networks than would be found in large municipalities, and thus greatly facilitated the establishment and spread of the new environmental norms.

In terms of social networks, the contacts the Deputy Mayor had formed through her association with the University also proved important. Social network theory argues that weak social ties are responsible for the majority of the transmission of novel information (e.g. new knowledge, new opportunities) between groups, by drawing in more peripheral communicators and extending access to a wider set of contacts and knowledge resources (e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Tucker, 2013). Weak ties are those formed with, for example, acquaintances, the people that one does not see as often as those who one forms strong ties with (e.g. close friends, family, close colleagues). Because the people with whom we form close ties tend to move in the same circles we do, the information they receive overlaps considerably with what we already know. Acquaintances, by contrast, know

people that we do not, and thus receive more novel information. Many of the green initiatives initiated by the municipality relied upon the knowledge and opportunities that the Deputy Mayor drew from the weak ties formed while taking the Master's in sustainable development. Despite the removal of the two senior political champions in the next set of local government elections, the municipality's transition towards sustainability continued in the face of political change, and we discuss the likely reasons in the following section.

**Table 1.** Initiatives taken by the case study municipality relevant to sustainable development (in particular climate change-related aspects) - not intended as a definitive list of all initiatives taken by the municipality, as a comprehensive survey was not the aim of interviews.

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### **Initiatives**

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- Participation of municipal staff and politicians in related conferences, workshops and/or courses
- Conducting relevant research and studies, by working in partnership with other institutions e.g. research on future sustainable farming directions
- Implementation of weather early-warning systems
- Implementation of flood risk reduction measures e.g. regular maintenance of storm-water drainage systems; construction of additional storm-water drainage systems
- Implementation of fire risk reduction measures e.g. establishing fire-breaks
- Implementation of drought risk reduction measures e.g. issuing water tanks to previously disadvantaged rural areas
- Implementation of food insecurity risk reduction measures: establishing food gardens in previously disadvantaged areas
- Natural resource conservation and rehabilitation measures e.g. establishment of municipal nature reserves; encouraging private landowners to set up nature corridors and conservancies; working with conservation bodies to conserve the environment and to restore the wetlands; encouraging communities in the municipality to restore natural vegetation; alien vegetation clearing
- Addressing water scarcity through water supply management: sinking boreholes; clearing alien invasive vegetation; requiring new developments (over a certain

size) to make provision for a water tank

- Addressing water and energy scarcity through water and energy demand management e.g. awareness campaigns to encourage water and energy saving (for e.g. by establishing less water- demanding gardens, switching off lights)
- Establishment of a Disaster Management plan (though all municipalities are mandated to do so, many are lagging behind in the task)
- Control of development: identification of development at risk; control of informal settlement spread
- Awareness-raising undertaken among communities e.g. school education programmes; radio & newsletter programmes
- Establishment of recycling schemes
- Establishment of renewable energy farms (detail omitted to prevent identification of the municipality)
- Establishment of collaborative relationships with various environmental bodies and one academic institution
- Appointment of relevant staff (head of disaster management, environmental officer)
- Inclusion of green vision into Integrated Development Plan; drafting of sustainable development framework

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#### ‘STAYING GREEN’: MAINTAINING AN ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA

As mentioned, in 2011 local government elections were held in South Africa, and our case study municipality switched political alignment. South Africa has over 100 registered political parties, though only 13 are represented in the National Assembly of Parliament. The African National Congress (ANC) is the majority party, with 264 of the 400 National Assembly seats. The party controls eight of the country's nine provinces, while the Democratic Alliance (DA) has controlled the Western Cape since 2009. The DA is South Africa's official opposition party, with 67 seats in the National Assembly. Our case study municipality has a council of 15 members, nine of whom were ANC before the 2011 elections, five DA, and one Independent. Since elections, seven DA councillors lead the municipality in a coalition with one Independent and one member of

a smaller political party, with six ANC councillors in opposition. Normally, it is common practice in the Western Cape that when the political alignment of a municipality changes (normally between the ANC and the DA, and any coalitions these may have formed at the local level), the new ruling party discontinues visions and projects implemented by the previous ruling party, as a way of ‘making their mark’ and distancing themselves from the policies of other parties. Other authors have noted similar effects for South Africa (Seethal, 2005), Mexico (Montero, Castellón, Rivera, Ruvalcaba, & Llamas, 2006) and Thailand (Charuvichaipong & Sajor, 2006). In our case study municipality we found that the new council voluntarily continued the old council’s commitment to a green agenda. In the context of our wider research, this is a highly unusual finding. We suggest a number of reasons for the continuation of the municipality’s green agenda, which we explore below: (i) the similarity in environmental norms between the old and new council; (ii) the power structures present in the council; (iii) the benefits brought by the green agenda; (iv) the entrenchment of green norms, issues and actions in the municipality.

First, the new council repeated sentiments very similar to those expressed by the (long-standing) administration, and by the previous council members.

“If you want to, if our children ... want to have a healthier life in the future, we must start doing it now, in your household, recycling and all [that environmental] stuff, you see”. *Councillor A* (previous council member; ANC councillor).

“for the sake of our youth and our ... future and all that kind of things. The environment is one of our big things that must be in a good condition. It must be ... it must be that my child and my child’s child can live in this land, with no ... big environmental problems and ... that kind of thing”. *Councillor B* (current council member; DA councillor)

“that is the one point where I think politicians must actually step back and realise that the natural environment and the earth that we live on ... doesn’t ask what your political ties are. It doesn’t matter. You have got to do things. You have got to keep and preserve your area for the future”. *Councillor C* (current council member; DA councillor).

“I think that what we did that was really different from just making sure that you understand that if you don’t do this then everything is going to go horribly wrong, ... is linking it to our heritage. Even when we set our vision out ... it wasn’t just for the purpose of making sure there was a future but it was the responsibility of what we inherited”. *Councillor D* (previous council member: previous Deputy Mayor; ANC councillor).

These sentiments were expressed despite the finding that only one or two of the current

ruling-party councillors had sat on the previous council as members of the opposition.

At least in part, the pro-green attitude of the new council could derive from the spreading of green norms among the municipality's communities. In the words of the official responsible for sustainable development: "we made an effort to take the vision out to the community. So they already knew about this. Even though they weren't directly involved in the council" (*Official A*). As noted above, the municipality placed significant effort into raising awareness of green matters among the community. It is possible that social network issues at work in the municipality played some role in the green attitudes demonstrated by the new council members, since in our wider research no other municipality had such a high proportion of environmentally-conscious councillors. Therefore we do not expect these attitudes to be a reflection of, for example, a general increase in societal awareness of green issues across the country. We speculate that, much as was the case within the municipality itself, the small size of our case municipality's towns creates denser social networks than would be found in large towns and cities, and thus played a part in spreading and establishing new environmental norms, and that this in turn could have had an impact on the environmental attitudes of the new councillors before they were elected to council. However, much further research is required on the topic, in conjunction with research on the rise of community awareness around green issues, and on the relationships between education campaigns, community awareness, voter demands, and political choices.

The second reason for the continuation of the municipality's green vision is likely to be the power structures within the council. The municipality, as many others in the Western Cape, works under a mayoral executive system, where the Mayor is assisted by an executive or mayoral committee (made up of councillors) which is nominated by him/her, and which therefore does not usually include opposition parties. This gives the Mayor, as well as his political party or coalition, substantial power, because the work of the council is co-ordinated by the Mayor. Further, the Mayor, together with the executive, also oversees the work of the municipal manager and department heads. This system is very efficient in providing a strong direction to municipal strategies and policies (Béni-Gbaffou, 2008: 12). Significantly, the current Mayor in our case study was one of the couple of councillors who was a member of the council (in the opposition) before the political changeover, and is personally committed to green issues, as the quote below demonstrates.

"I think the leadership that [the council] are now getting [from the current Mayor] is very strong and very specific and [the current Mayor] was one of my most hardened supporters. Even though they were opposition previously. ... Previously I included [the current Mayor] in most of our task groups and focus groups and so on [...]. So perhaps [...] [the current Mayor] had already bought into it at such a

degree that it was easy for [the current Mayor] to continue with the vision”. *Councillor D* (previous council member: previous Deputy Mayor; ANC councillor).

The ex-councillor commenting was one of the two who played a fundamental role in driving the green agenda within the municipality under the old political regime. The current Mayor herself confirmed her interest in green issues:

“I have always liked the environment, and [...] I would like to feel that I at least have done my bit in my private life and the municipality”. *Councillor E* (DA councillor).

In addition to the Mayor, another member of the executive committee was strongly personally interested in green issues (*Councillor C*, quoted above), and thus we expect that the attitudes of these two powerful councillors will have a strong impact on maintaining the green vision of the municipality.

The third reason influencing the new council’s decision to maintain a green agenda is likely to be the benefits that this agenda has brought to the municipality. These benefits consist of:

- (i) Community support for the green initiatives: “It [the green agenda] is very positive in the public, definitely. The public wants it. So why should we come now and say no ... we don’t want it. The public likes it. The public just doesn’t want to spend a lot of millions on it. [...] But they want it” (*Councillor F*, current council member; DA councillor). As exemplified by the quote, councillors are unlikely to move directly against public opinion and preferences, since community support translates into voting support. The small size of the municipality’s communities probably helps the council to be “in touch” with the desires of its citizens, given that all councillors, both those in power and those in opposition, live within these small, highly-connected communities.
- . (ii) Greater visibility and recognition for the municipality at regional, national and international levels, from the projects and initiatives implemented, which have won the municipality not only informal recognition, but also formal recognition through awards.
- . (iii) Funding and learning opportunities for green initiatives, which are linked to greater visibility, and in turn raise community (and voting) support because of the benefits brought by these initiatives. As just one example, the municipality obtained funding for a ‘landmark’ project of theirs implemented in a previously disadvantaged ward of the municipality, an example of an eco facility. The

facility runs economic entrepreneurial projects with a permaculture garden that provides food to the local community. As another example, the municipality were invited to travel overseas to learn more about renewable energy and energy efficiency. The role that externally-obtained financial resources can play in raising institutional capacity for taking climate change action has been noted by other authors (e.g. Anguelovski & Carmin, 2011; Carmin et al., 2012).

A final reason for the municipality to remain green is likely to be the considerable progress made on such issues under the previous council, which suggests that green objectives and processes have become so entrenched that discontinuing them is not only disadvantageous, but also impractical.

“The main thing here is that a lot of money was spent ... a lot of research was done ... a lot of trips overseas [were] done. So why let that go to waste [...] [T]he ground work was done. So ... it would be very stupid [for] us to just let it go”.  
*Councillor F* (current council member; DA councillor).

The councillor’s quote suggests that the new council recognizes the value of the work that was done. Discussions held with the official in charge of sustainable development suggest that regardless of whether this is the case or not, at least certain projects had progressed so far that it would not be expedient or possible for the council to discontinue them. For instance, recycling initiatives of the municipality were being continued and expanded. As another example, a green energy generation project (a project significant in terms of size and scope) was also continued. This institutionalization of green practices is related also to the fact that green norms and values had, under the previous political regime, become a part of the municipal officials’ attitudes and practices as well. The municipal officials were not replaced after the elections, and therefore probably played a part in maintaining environmental objectives and projects, as heads of departments also often given guidance and suggestions to councillors. The quotes below illustrate how officials are contributing to maintaining green values, norms and projects across the change in political leadership.

“Why change on something that is working ... if you look at our IDP ... and all those green visions and goals ... that we have, they are still there ... we are all in agreement that we want to reach those goals [...] now we are setting up an environmental plan”.  
*Official B*.

“Our vision is to go energy neutral by 2020 [...] we are trying to get [the community] on board with projects like that one ... called the Green Genie ... to minimize your waste as much as you can”.  
*Official C*.

“I think our municipality is very pro-environment. That is the reason why I think the municipality respects Cape Nature [the provincial conservation body] and why they [are] working with us”. *Official D.*

After being asked why he felt the green attitude of the municipality had not changed after elections, one of the senior managers replied “if you look at the management. [It’s] not even about the politicians. [...] it is a consistent team of top managers that [doesn’t] chop and change” (*Official B.*)

In previous work of ours (Pasquini et al., 2013) we have noted how political stability (in terms of the frequency with which the political alignment of a municipality shifts) plays an important role in the effectiveness and functioning of municipalities: political instability brings a number of negative consequences for municipalities, such as changes in vision or delayed implementation of municipal actions. Importantly, senior staff are often replaced, aggravating the loss of continuity in the municipality (see also Smith, 2011). The literature argues that appointment of senior managers on the basis of political criteria instead of merit-based criteria leads to loss of efficiency, professionalism and expertise (e.g. Cameron, 2010). The senior administrative staff in our case study municipality were not replaced after the 2011 election, and we discuss this surprising finding in the section below.

#### BENEATH THE SURFACE: POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS THREATENING GREEN ENTRENCHMENT

As discussed, a number of factors enabled the municipality to retain its green orientation and sustain its move towards greater environmental sustainability, despite the change in political ruling party. However, we found that beneath the surface of this apparently smooth transition, political issues still made their mark. First, although the overall ‘green’ vision of the municipality stayed the same (and at least some projects were continued), some respondents noted that the new council switched priorities and emphasis over which environmental projects were supported. An opposition member of the council, who had sat on the previous council when his party was in power, stated that one of the municipality’s previous flagship environmental projects was no longer receiving support. His implication was that the project did not fall in a ward that was important, in terms of voting support, for the current ruling party. His suggestion mirrors similar insinuations that we encountered during the course of our wider research, namely, that ruling parties in a municipality will discontinue or reduce support to projects and programmes in wards that are not relevant to them in terms of the voter profile. Deliberate efforts by parties to marginalize existing local projects or structures perceived to be aligned with another political party have been noted by Seethal (2005), Fourchard (2012) and Bénit-Gbaffou et al. (2013).



Proving these statements is, naturally, extremely complex, given the obvious reluctance of municipal officials to discuss possible political scheming, and the ready willingness of councillors to discredit members or practices of opposing parties. What seems relatively clear is that political influences still affected the specific development and implementation of the municipality's green vision, away from certain paths towards others. An interesting (albeit highly sensitive) avenue for future research would be to consider the detail of which projects were discontinued, which new ones were prioritised, and the reasons behind these choices. Are these choices made on rational grounds, or, as suggested, are they due to political convenience and manoeuvrings? If so, what are the implications of this for starting and maintaining green agendas within municipalities?

Additional evidence for the pervasive influence of political scheming is the finding that the current opposition party, which used to be the ruling party, was attempting to challenge the environmental decisions made by the new council. The opposition was thus attempting, for political reasons, to backtrack on the green outlook that it had implemented when in power, as the quote by the official in charge of sustainable development for the municipality demonstrates.

“They [the opposition] do challenge [the green vision] ... because it is politically expedient to challenge that, but at the same time the argument that I [made] earlier [is] “but ... you are the guys that made this decision three years ago, what’s changed?” It is a difficult one for them to do a complete turn around [on] ... therefore the continuation of the green issues has been quite successful”. *Official A.*

The quote highlights that the very fact that the opposition had previously been so strongly supportive of the green vision effectively blocked them from performing a complete about-face on green issues. However, the quote also suggests that only the risk of a loss of credibility is what prevents the opposition party from attempting to block the current implementation of green issues.

Finally, as discussed above, we found that the continuity in green norms within the municipality was probably assisted by the fact that the administrative leadership of the municipality (the heads of department) has remained in the municipality for a long time. In most cases, the managers had been working for the municipality since before 2006. This finding is very surprising as it is common practice for municipal managers and heads of departments, as we mentioned, to be replaced in the case of political regime shift, as councils with different political orientations look to work with staff that will be amenable to their dictates (see also Seethal, 2005). In the municipality, political leadership switched from one party to the other in the 2006 elections, and then back again in the 2011 elections. Yet the senior administrative staff remained in place. When queried about the reasons why they thought they had (unusually) not been replaced, most

managers generically responded that they ‘just got on with their work’ and that the political parties recognized and respected that, and were extremely reluctant to discuss the subject in any depth. However, all the senior managers hinted that in the aftermath of the 2011 elections, things had not been as smooth as they might appear on the surface. One of the respondents was more forthcoming than the others on these issues, and regarding the fact that the senior administration had been able to keep their jobs, remarked that “it’s not easy ... what you see is not really what you experience” (*Official D*). The very hesitancy of managers to discuss the issue, specific comments dropped by a few of the respondents, and discrepancies between the stories of some respondents, point to the likelihood of a very different story to that simplistically given by the respondents taking place.

As best we could determine, it would appear that most of the current heads of departments (as well as the municipal manager) were not in fact heads of departments at the time of the 2006 elections. Although most worked for the municipality already, and were in senior positions, they were not at the highest administrative level, which is the one that ‘gets the chop’ during political regime change. Following the 2006 elections and the departure of the then municipal manager and many of the heads of departments, many were promoted into their current positions. In the 2011 election, despite political change, they were not replaced. It would seem that the reason why they were not replaced following the 2011 elections may have at least something to do with the suggestion that these particular individuals were appointed by the (currently) ruling political party, back when it was in power before the 2006 elections, and were therefore familiar to it. However, these findings are highly uncertain and are merely suggestions, and attempting to probe into such complex and highly sensitive political realities is likely to require in-depth, possibly ethnographic research. The only result we are reasonably certain about is that matters are not at all as straightforward as the simplistic stance taken by respondents, epitomized by the following statement “I would say that we are lucky in the sense that we keep the politics out of it” (*Official B*). Our conclusion following interviews is that the continuity of managers has been threatened by political forces over time, although we are unable to comment on the details that these forces took and why, in the end, top-level management survived political change in 2011.

#### *The process of institutionalizing an environmental agenda*

A key challenge for achieving environmentally sustainable development at the local government level is the institutional mainstreaming of green issues. Our case study suggests a number of factors that can promote the growth and persistence of an environmental agenda within local government. First, the presence of one or more champions is fundamental. Research on climate governance in cities has shown that the presence of local champions – both elected politicians and municipal officials - is central

to a climate agenda being initiated and maintained (e.g. Holgate et al., 2007; Qi et al., 2008; Sanchez-Rodriguez, 2009; Anguelovski & Carmin, 2011; Measham et al., 2011; Carmin et al., 2012). In our case study the process of environmental innovation was kick-started by political champions (though the leadership later exhibited by the environmental officer assisted the process).

Following innovation, local governments need to formalize and institutionalize their environmental work in order to facilitate its implementation and strengthen its legitimacy, coordination, and support across sectors and departments (Anguelovski & Carmin, 2011: 170). We note further that such institutionalization is necessary if an environmental agenda is to persist beyond losses of/changes in champions and networks, because it decreases the likelihood that environmental and climate action will be reversed (e.g. Burch 2010b). Innovations get institutionalized, in practical terms, through the creation of new positions and new job descriptions, through the provision of training and knowledge to existing staff, and through the introduction of new (or the revision of old) goals, plans, policies, regulations and projects: i.e. through attaching new practices to key organization-level routines, systems and processes. Central to the institutionalization of urban environmental and climate action is the spreading of new norms and values and “ways of doing things” (routines). Institutions are composed of both formal rules (e.g. regulations, policies) and informal norms (e.g. conventional wisdom) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutional rules and norms shape what is seen as the appropriate way to behave, and in turn impact on municipal decisions and actions: institutional rules and norms thus shape municipal governance (e.g. Lowndes, 2001).

Networks are a means through which institutional rules and norms are spread (e.g. Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003; Tucker, 2013), and are the second key factor to institutionalizing green governance in our case study municipality. Both the weak external ties formed between the municipality and other organizations, and the strong internal ties between the municipality’s actors, proved important for advancing the green agenda in our case study. The networks that the Deputy Mayor formed with external organizations greatly assisted her (by supplying sources of ideas, knowledge, support and opportunities) with kick-starting the process of environmental innovation. Strong ties within an organization facilitate the flow of richer, detailed, and redundant information and knowledge resources between individuals and groups (e.g. Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003). Central to the ability of the political champions in our case study to rapidly change the prevalent norms within the municipality was the presence of dense social networks that facilitated the diffusion of new green norms. We note that although environmental innovation was started by the political champions, important to its institutionalization was also the leadership later exhibited by individuals within departments, who were likely instrumental to maintaining environmental norms despite political changeover. Self-evidently, leaders and networks need to stay in place long enough for environmental and

climate action to become institutionalized, which is a point we will return to shortly in discussing the ways in which political issues affect the processes of innovation and institutionalization of environmental governance in municipalities.

The third factor of major importance for the institutionalization of environmental governance were the significant and visible advantages that accrued to the municipality from environmental actions, whose benefits were reaped in the short-term (which is fundamental given short political time scales). Carmin et al. (2012: 20) note that the potential to advance existing urban agendas, to achieve a competitive advantage, or to demonstrate national, regional, or global leadership are important drivers behind institutional change.

We have found that political issues can both enable and constrain these processes of innovation and institutionalization. Political and organizational structures can provide change agents with the necessary power to kick-start and embed the change process. As we have seen, where a municipality follows the mayoral executive system, the Mayor and his/her executive committee hold a lot of power. Our case study demonstrates how such a structure can enable executive councillors to quickly set in motion an environmental agenda: the positions of our case study political champions enabled them to leverage power over institutional resources, decision-making and norms (Burns, 2000) to achieve desired outcomes, in a faster manner than would have been the case for individuals located in less powerful positions. Thus particular political/organizational structures (in this case, a mayoral executive system) can create positions that allow institutional entrepreneurs (in our case, green entrepreneurs) to assume the role of champions, by affording them opportunities and the resources to exert power (e.g. Maguire et al., 2004).

Party political competition can also promote innovation in environmental governance where parties may see competitive advantages in “going green”, which we have seen can take the form of voter support, greater recognition and visibility, and funding and learning opportunities. This finding is of particular importance in the context of the short time-scales of political decision-making, which as we outlined previously, push a need for demonstrable and thus short-term achievements, which hinders the institutionalization of new policies and approaches, and inhibits following through on initiatives (Rakodi, 2001). “Local politicians worry about staying in power [...] and will perform only those tasks that are congruent with their interests” (Andersson & Laerhoven, 2007, p. 1091). Environmental change issues such as climate change manifest over time scales typically much longer than election cycles. Thus short-term (and generally not environmentally related) achievement is more likely to lead to re-election, of both the particular councillor, but ultimately of a certain political party (although this also depends on other factors such as national politics, or rules on the number of terms which may be served).

Political issues can hinder the institutionalization of green governance in other ways. Political instability can remove environmental leaders/champions and disrupt social networks before institutionalization can take place. Political leadership in a municipality can change at the end of every (short) political term, as well as within a political term. It is important to note that political instability not only can result in a change in political champions, but also administrative champions, given that senior officials are often replaced. Our findings also suggest that party political competition can result in an “about face” on environmental governance for political expediency. In the context of party political competition, the finding that the current mayor supported the environmental agenda of the party in power before political transition (i.e. her opposition) appears highly unusual in the context of the little that is known about party political dynamics. While we do not have further data on this apparently collaborative relationship, an important avenue for future research would be to investigate the frequency and conditions under which opposing councilors may come to establish collaborative relationships, a topic about which nothing is known. Finally, political issues in the form of clientelism can also disrupt green governance: it would appear from our case study that specific environmental projects are prioritized or discontinued at least partly on political grounds, depending on the ward in which they occur.

To minimize the disruptive effects of political issues on the achievement of green governance at local government levels, we suggest that green governance must be rapidly institutionalized, as significant effort would then need to be expended to de-institutionalize it: once a particular path has been institutionalized, path-switching becomes progressively less likely as time passes because of inertia, the accumulation of learning and the investment of resources in a particular path (e.g. Burch, 2010a;b). In the section below we provide recommendations for achieving rapid institutionalization, based on our findings.

### *Recommendations and Conclusions*

We have seen that the institutionalization of green issues needs to occur rapidly, so that it takes place well enough ahead of political changes and will be less affected by political competition and clientelism. What helps this rapid entrenchment? Here and elsewhere (Pasquini et al., in press) we find that political champions appear fundamental for rapid change. It may thus prove important to focus on the education of councillors (senior councillors in particular) and political parties, which may require those organizations working closely with local government to consider this issue. In South Africa one such organization might be ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), a global association of cities and local governments dedicated to sustainable development. Another might be SALGA, the South African Local Government Association. Because councillors appear to take direction mainly from their party political structures (e.g. Lindell, 2008; Bawa,

2011; Buire, 2011), targeting political parties with education, information and awareness-raising interventions might prove a better strategy than focusing on a particular municipality or the councillors within it. Further, because councillors are continually replaced (through elections, through changes in party political lists), targeting dominant political parties and attempting to put green issues on their political agenda might be one way to attempt to create a 'pool' of political champions for environmental issues.

Creating and sustaining change, as we have seen, is also dependent on the existence of dense social networks within municipalities, and also on the existence of networks between municipalities and other individuals or institutions that can connect them to knowledge and opportunities. The question is then how to improve these networks. Small municipalities are likely to have denser social networks within the municipality than larger municipalities are (given that smaller groups tend to have denser networks than larger groups, as people have limits on the number of ties they can sustain). On the other hand, larger municipalities like cities are likely to have more weak ties, i.e. better connections to experts, scientists, practitioners and others who can connect them to knowledge and opportunities for sustainable development (seeing as cities represent concentrations of resources, including knowledge and expertise). Our current and future work is focused on examining the detail of social network characteristics on the resilience of municipalities, and on making appropriate recommendations. A preliminary observation we would like to make here is that larger municipalities will likely have to consider how to create denser social networks among the politicians and staff of the municipality (possible strategies might be changes in reporting structures and requirements, spatial arrangements, or increased opportunities for interaction among members of different departments). Smaller municipalities (and/or the stakeholders working in/with them) will have to consider how to increase their links to external sources of knowledge and support that can provide the opportunities these smaller municipalities often miss. This will probably entail, among other things, advertising climate change funding and opportunities better to municipalities.

In a similar vein, greater opportunities and incentives for municipalities to engage in projects and practices that will place them on paths of greater environmental sustainability must be created (an example of an opportunity/incentive could consist of co-funding for investing in renewable energy projects). Political parties may be more proactive on tackling global environmental change issues if the benefits of taking action are made much more significant in the immediate or short term, and visible both to the municipality and its constituent communities. We suggest that de-institutionalizing an environmental agenda is unlikely if it brings continued benefits to the municipality and thus to the ruling political party: an incoming ruling party is more likely to appropriate the environmental agenda for their own image and gain, as appears to be the case in our case study.

As previously mentioned, our case study municipality did not escape the consequences of political regime change entirely without consequences. It would appear that luck, or mostly likely other factors that we were unable to determine because of their highly sensitive nature, played a part in maintaining the municipality's green orientation. Much further research is required to uncover these complex political realities, if we are to keep 'luck' out of institutionalizing environmental issues in local government. While waiting for such research, there are a few possible options for increasing the mainstreaming of climate change and other environmental change issues within municipalities. One option might be to establish a professional career civil service, whereby government staff would remain in post through successive political administrations, which might give greater continuity to policies and practices for environmental sustainability in each municipality and within the wider region (Montero et al., 2006). In other words, senior administrative appointments should persist beyond political time-scales. In South Africa's case, this would mean de-linking the appointment of senior officials from political office-bearers, a move that at least one municipality in the Western Cape has recently experimented with (*pers. comm.*, 15 August 2013, Berg River Municipality Municipal Manager), although legislation does not currently provide for separating the appointment of the Municipal Manager from the Council's responsibilities. Future research investigating the consequences of this policy change on climate change and environmental mainstreaming would be critically useful.

Another option might be to ensure that efforts to spread 'green' norms within municipalities target all levels of the administration (as in many cases existing staff are likely to be promoted to replace senior staff that either were removed or chose to leave). Stakeholders attempting to assist a municipality to develop paths of greater environmental sustainability may wish to consider working with officials senior enough to have some influence within the municipality, but not so senior that they risk being removed during times of political change. And finally, attempts could be made to spread green norms among voting constituencies and political parties, entities that appear to strongly influence the choices of councillors, although the extent and ways in which they do so requires attention from researchers.

Academic work and theorisation focusing on the role of party politics in urban governance is scarce, particularly in African contexts (Bénit-Gbaffou et al., 2013), and our work contributes to this under-represented field of research. Despite the shortage of research in this field, some patterns associated with political effects on environmental governance have emerged in our case study municipality. Our findings have high relevance for theory in the field. In terms of horizontal party competition (at the municipal level between the ruling party and its opposition) and its effects on municipal governability, Bénit-Gbaffou et al. (2013: 37) note that research on this topic would "deal with high turnovers of administrative and political staff, leading to a loss of continuity,

institutional memory and expertise”. Our current and previous work confirms this suggestion. Horizontal party competition can thus disrupt municipal governance. However, our case study of green governance shows that while political instability (caused by party competition) can threaten the institutionalization of green governance, political and institutional structures can create the necessary circumstances for champions to rapidly embed a green agenda in local government, and further that party competition can also benefit the institutionalization of green issues where a “competitive advantage” accrues to a party from “going green”.

In terms of clientelism, research has found that it can offer alternative channels for “getting things done”, thus allowing municipal residents to obtain municipal services that would otherwise be unavailable (e.g. Auyero et al., 2009). Thus from some perspectives it can enhance municipal governance. However, Bénit-Gbaffou et al. (2013: 28) contend that in general clientelism seems to benefit the most politically resourced agents, and decrease government transparency and accountability, and that at local government levels it often leads to fragmented (at times contradictory) initiatives and policies. Our findings lend credence to the idea that clientelism results in fragmented municipal governance, with the suggestion that different environmental projects receive varying levels of support and attention depending on which party rules a municipality. Much further research should therefore explore the implications of such fragmentation on the achievement of sustainable development paths by local governments, as sustainability is often seen to require an integrated approach.

Burch (2010a) reports party politics as a critical feature in climate governance in the City of Vancouver (Canada); while the focus on party politics is not a central theme of her paper, what is noteworthy is her finding that party politics can both constrain and enable climate governance, in similar ways to what we have found: either by stimulating competition between parties, or by the abandonment of projects by the municipality on purely political bases (her findings are particularly interesting given that few municipalities in Canada have a political party system). There is thus the suggestion that party politics may affect environmental governance at local government levels in similar ways despite vast differences in contexts: contrast a developing county like South Africa with a developed country like Canada, and a rural municipality like ours with an urban municipality like the City of Vancouver. Bénit-Gbaffou et al.’s (2013) findings, which are similar to ours, further support the idea that political effects on municipal governance are similar across scales, as they are drawn mostly from metropolitan-level examples. We suggest therefore that our findings on political issues are likely to be applicable to municipalities regardless of scale, given also that previous work of ours on barriers and enablers to managing global environmental change challenges in municipalities shows there to be few differences between different scales of local government (Pasquini et al., 2013; Pasquini et al., in press) (although certain issues are certainly tied to scale, such as



social network effects).

By stressing the realities of political issues on the mainstreaming of an environmental agenda in local government, we have sought to allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between politics and municipal/urban governance. Hence, we have sought to develop a better understanding of how to guide municipalities towards institutionalizing an environmental agenda and thus towards achieving more sustainable paths of development.

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