

## **Local Government Brief: 10/2014**

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### **Community Protests**

*Local Government Briefs are monthly electronic updates for municipalities on critical areas of law, policy, facts and data affecting the sector.*

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The eruption of protests continues to be blamed on the lack of municipalities' capacity to deliver services in their communities. The protests are often attributed to poor service delivery, corruption, incompetent/unskilled municipal officials, poor leadership and management in the sector.

Of course municipalities are at the coalface of service delivery; hence, they are easily accessible to take the brunt for community demands which is posed directly at them. Communities do have rights to raise concerns with their government where they feel certain issues need to be raised and addressed. That is the essence of citizenship, as also envisaged in the Constitution. It is unfortunate that the interactions between communities and municipalities are largely in the form of protests, and are increasingly becoming violent in nature, often resulting in unnecessary loss of lives and damage to property. It is a concern that violence and destruction of public and private properties have become essential characteristics of the protests.

At times the protests are triggered by genuine demand for basic services for which municipalities are responsible for. For example, water issues in some of the Gauteng and Mpumalanga municipalities, sanitation issues in the City of Cape Town and pre-paid electricity issues in Bronkhorstspuit. On the other hand, the protests are triggered by issues that are not directly related to local government's mandate. For example, aside from metros, communities expect municipalities to deliver housing which is a provincial function and municipalities are merely delivery agents.

However, a study conducted by SALGA in 2009 to gain insight into municipalities' perception of underlying causes of the "service delivery protests" pointed out that municipalities have significantly delivered services to their communities. The research suggested that the issues are far more complex than they seem. For example, there were more protests in areas where significant progress has been made in delivering vs. areas where significant backlogs still exist such as in rural areas. Knysna and Bitou in the Western Cape have been listed in the top ten list of the best performing municipalities by Municipal IQ Productivity Index 2009, but had protests.

On the contrary, local municipalities like Mbashe in the Eastern Cape and Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal have been rated as the worst performing municipalities but did not experience protests. Municipal IQ Municipal Productivity Index, 2009, pointed out that there is a generally positive trend in productivity in almost all municipalities yet there is still an upsurge of protests.

The findings of the study further attributed the protests to issues of relative inequality/deprivation, pressures of urbanisation and migration, electioneering and political contests, unemployment, ineffective communication and tender irregularities. Notwithstanding that these issues are not a local government competency; communities continue to hold municipalities responsible for these challenges.

Communities do not care which sphere of government is responsible for delivering different services. Municipalities which are the sphere of government closest to communities therefore continue to take the brunt of disconcerted communities. SALGA regards the protests as serious grievances from communities. Simultaneously, SALGA is determined in finding a sustainable solution to this address challenge. It is however necessary for SALGA to first comprehend the socio-economic climate in which the protests are taking place, as well as the patterns of the protests.

In order to gear municipalities towards effective delivery of services, it is necessary to ensure that we fully comprehend socio economic climate at local government, how the protests

evolve over time, the patterns and trends thereof. SALGA will undertake a study on protests, focusing on the following:

- The socio economic environment within which protests are taking place ;
- Identify institutions that would play a role in mediating the relationship between communities and municipalities;
- Assess SA's intergovernmental relations framework with the aim to establish how it positions local government in relation to influencing policies relating to issues that are often raised by communities;
- How to forge a stable framework of interaction between communities and municipalities, ensuring also that municipalities are proactive and responsive to communities; and
- Outline the role of different actors and stakeholders.

SALGA will conduct a research focusing specifically on community protests in order to establish early warning and rapid response systems in the local government sector.