



Deepening Local Democracy Conference

“Repositioning Ward Committees as organs of people’s power, finding innovative ways to enhance public participation towards a citizen centric governance and deepened local democracy.”

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Sunnyside Park Hotel

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1 Purpose

The primary purpose of this concept note is to introduce key partners and participants to key contextual issues that inform the necessity for the proposed conference on inclusive local governance.

2 Rationale

The birth of the new constitutional dispensation in 1994 ushered in a new epoch in the South African political landscape and created structures of government that enjoyed a de facto legitimacy. Accordingly, the South African Constitution contemplates a democratic society that is participatory in nature, a model of governance which balances between an aggregative and deliberative forms democracy and an open society in which the government is based on the will of the people. The notion that communities should have a say and be empowered to exert direct influence in decisions that would impact on their social, material and environmental well-being is virtually undisputed.

In terms of section 152 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic municipalities are enjoined not only to create a conducive environment for effective community involvement but to actively create a culture of keenness amongst communities to play an instrumental role in local governance and participate in the affairs of municipalities. In terms of this objective, municipalities have an obligation to encourage communities and their organizations to become involved in local government matters. However, the concept of “participation” has been widely used in the discourse of development. Linking citizen participation to the state at local level raises fundamental and normative questions about the nature of democracy and the character of the state. Yet twenty-two years later it is clear that it is time for South African to re-assesses its strategy of how citizens engage in local governance. Although there are extensive provisions in various legislative prescripts to enable this engagement, research has shown beyond doubt that existing mechanisms have largely been dysfunctional. This dysfunctionality is not just a product of Government but also the inability of citizens and Civil Society Organisations to take maximum advantage of legislated mechanisms or be propositional in how they participate in local governance.

The aim of the conference is to provide a space of meaningful engagement between key actors in local governance to deliberate, share insights and ideas, critically question and collectively find solutions to enhance citizen engagement in local governance. This is meant to contribute to the emergence of a transparent, accountable and responsive local government that facilitates innovative and meaningful opportunities for citizens to engage in local governance thereby improve the service delivery contract between the state and citizens.

Practitioners in local and others institutions of government, academics, representatives from civil society, traditional leaders, and other interested parties will be invited to attend this conference. The conference speakers will be drawn from people who have over the years, researched or worked in local governance.

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The Sub-themes as stated below are structured to correspond with the proposed three grand debates planned for the conference:

- 1. *Building and consolidating a citizen centric local governance system towards a capable developmental local state***
- 2. *Drawing lessons and collectively crafting a way forward to identify innovative approaches to improve and enhance the current mechanisms of community involvement and public participation in municipalities managing the balance between invited and invested spaces and collectively leveraging therefrom***
- 3. *Formalising and structuring strategic partnership between municipalities and civil society formations re activating civil society to play an instrumental role in local government***

The approach to be adopted in this conference is going to be open and objective in terms reflections on:

- a) Creating a symbiotic partnership between municipalities, communities and civil society
- b) Acknowledging the progress made thus far and shaping the future
- c) Exploring ways to empower municipalities towards a paradigm shift in terms of leadership and institutional mind-set to lead and enable the process of community involvement and public participation.

3 Objectives of the Conference

The objectives of this conference are to:

- a) To mobilise civil society organisations, academics and practitioners in government to collectively rethink innovative modalities to facilitate meaningful citizen participation in local governance;
- b) To facilitate a space for the collective to draw lessons and insights from tested pilots of alternative mechanisms to the legislated ones;
- c) To identify pilot sites for implementation and testing of other alternative innovative models for citizen participation in local governance; and
- d) Where necessary, to initiate a process of legislative review of existing mechanisms for citizen participation in local governance.
- e) To explore innovative mechanisms to structure municipal specific – civil society engagement approaches

4 Partners that are organising the conference

The conference is organised through collaboration by a number of actors, chief amongst those being the Democracy Development Programme, Afesis-corporplan and the South African Local Government Association. All three partners have the relevant expertise and experience in the subject matter and bring this onto the table. The brief profile of each of the organising partners is as follows:

4.1 Democracy Development Programme (DDP)

DDP is a Durban based NGO which has worked in the field of good governance, public participation, community building and the strengthening of civil society organisations through targeted capacity building and civic education. Our work is focused at the local level though the organisation has been continuously involved in advocacy initiatives at the regional and national level.

DDP is a founding member of the Good Governance Learning network (GGLN) and serves as the secretariat for the KwaZulu Natal Provincial coalition. For more information about the DDP visit our website at www.ddp.org.za.

4.2 Afesis-corporplan

Afesis-corporplan is an East London based NGO whose work in local governance, land and sustainable human settlements has a national footprint. It was established in 1983 as a paralegal advice centre in 1992 it was registered as a Section 21 company. Post 1994, Afesis-corporplan's work has focused on deepening participatory local democracy, a theme that cuts across its work to date. To learn more about the work of Afesis-corporplan visit www.afesis.org.za. Afesis-corporplan is also a founding member of the Good Governance Learning Network www.ggln.org.za

4.3 South African Local Government Association

SALGA is an association of municipalities in South Africa recognised in terms of Section 163 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as a Schedule 3A public entity. SALGA also serves as the representative voice of all 257 municipalities. For the past 20 years, since its establishment, SALGA has endeavoured to bring focus to its mandate of supporting local government transformation in a complex environment, characterised by a highly diverse membership-base of municipalities. In terms of its amended Constitution, SALGA is a unitary body that consists of a national association and nine provincial offices. The organisation's mandate rests on six primary pillars as outlined below:

- a) **Representation** (Advocacy and Lobbying) refers to representing the interests of members in legislatures and other policy making and oversight structures. It also refers to engaging with various stakeholders, public debates etc. in the interest of Local Government.
- b) **Employer Body** refers to being an effective employer representative for members. This employer representation is carried out in collective bargaining in terms of the Labour Relations Act in various structures including but not limited to those established in the South African Local Government Bargaining Council.

- c) **Capacity Building** refers to facilitating capacity building initiatives through among others induction and training of councillors and representing member interests in the Local Government Sector Education Authority (LGSETA).
- d) **Support and Advice** refers to the provision of tools and services that enable municipalities to understand and interpret trends, policies and legislation affecting Local Government and to implement the said policies and plans
- e) **Strategic profiling** refers to enhancing the profile and image of local government as an important and credible agent for the delivery of services. Profiling focuses within South Africa, the African continent and the rest of the world.
- f) **Knowledge and Information Sharing** refers to building and sharing a comprehensive hub of Local Government knowledge and intelligence that will enable informed delivery of other SALGA mandates. The intelligence built here should also be a useful reference point for all who seek Local Government information thus ensuring that SALGA is able to better inform the public and policy debate.