

Call to make municipalities more professional

Municipalities have to focus on improving their human resources capabilities to address challenges and to reduce spiralling debts of about R81bn owed to them for services they have delivered.

By [Khulekani Magubane](#) 21 Mar 2013



The enormous sum is growing exponentially, according to the South African Local Government Association (Salga).

Municipalities, which buy essential services such as water and electricity in bulk, are finding it harder to supply other services, including road improvements, because of non-payments.

Salga presented a blueprint for local government, known as the *National Human Resources Management and Development Strategy*, to a plenary of local government figures and municipal managers in Johannesburg this month. The strategy is aimed at helping municipalities provide infrastructure services to meet the basic needs of residents.

The strategy also outlines what it calls an "emerging maturity model for local government" based on developmental goals, long-term investment models, integration with partners and maintaining control of finances.

But municipalities have experienced a number of problems - such as the billing crisis in Johannesburg - and remain under pressure to provide essential services where demand outstrips supply.

Salga's chief executive Xolile George says the challenges of corruption, management and the loss of scarce and needed skills were compounded by weak bill collection systems in some places.

Strategy

"It is not a different strategy from what we have been doing but we want to use our human resources more efficiently to help meet the objectives. National government wants to be clear on that instruction: Where there is no dispute money must be paid," George added.

He says Salga is considering expanding the reach of auditing committees and public accounts committees to a municipal level to weed out corruption and poor performance.

Democratic Alliance deputy federal chairman Mmusi Maimane says a solution is important as the running of municipalities should not be compromised in favour of the poor.

"There are many processes that take place on these issues. We must run processes efficiently. When we are in government we must be efficient in spending. For example, Johannesburg has inefficient rate

collection," Maimane says.

He says another challenge is that municipalities are finding it difficult to attract scarce skills and to ensure greater accountability through the Municipal Public Accounts Committee.

The president of the Institute of Municipal Engineering of Southern Africa, Frank Stevens, says if municipalities are unable to collect money owed to them, service delivery will be seriously compromised.

Skills

"In order to meet their service obligations, municipalities need to budget for new capital projects, ensure the operation and maintenance of assets is undertaken correctly and be able to cover their staff costs," he says.

Stevens says local government could not function without suitably qualified, registered and experienced technologists and engineers, whether permanently employed or sourced from consultants and contractors

"The country faces a serious shortage of technical staff resulting in the need to consider measures such as a 'scarce skills allowance' - several municipalities already offer such incentives," he says.

Salga aims to have more flexible remuneration structures for workers, especially those with skills. They also aim to introduce a non-pensionable scarce skills allowance.

Salga is considering creating a local government academy to co-ordinate capacity building in municipalities and ensure retiring workers leave the utility only once they have passed on their skills to younger workers.

Salga's executive director of municipal institutional development, Rio Nolutshungu, says the association has a human resources strategy to respond to local government's backlogs. The strategy, which has already been signed by local government leaders, was presented in Midrand this month and is to be adopted by municipalities immediately.

"The strategy is aimed at assisting municipalities to make better use of their human capital and ensure good performance and development. We need a state with local government departments that are accountable," Nolutshungu says.

Salga deputy chairman Mpho Nawa says the goals are in line with a 2011 national conference resolution to "professionalise the sector". Nawa says improved human resources should ensure the right systems are applied when recruiting staff to ensure that they are "not just qualified but committed."

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