

EDITORIAL

Government has adopted a 'turnaround strategy' for local government, and Parliament has established a multiparty committee that will pay attention to the problems associated with local delivery and governance. This move by Parliament is welcomed because the state of our local democracy is a matter of concern to the general public.

It is worrying that violent protests, widespread corruption, unaccountable leadership and political infighting seem to define the reality of local government. These problems must be tackled decisively, relentlessly and politically, because they are deeply political and cannot be solved through technical fixes. We need action, not more talk, from political parties, as well as government!

The Community Law Centre will continue to work with the government and civil society to strengthen local government. While we support the turnaround strategy's general aims and strong focus on our right, as citizens of this country, to expect performance and accountability from government, a more realistic and focused approach is needed. In a municipality where factionalism, patronage and corruption rule, there is no democratic government to speak of, and asking it to produce its own turnaround plan is a fruitless exercise. Creating a new bureaucracy to coordinate the turnaround strategy across government is also not the right way to go. Pretoria cannot run the entire system of local government and should not attempt to do so. Increased bureaucracy begets inertia and exhaustion, not drive and results.

Rather, government should concentrate on the most urgent problems, set achievable targets to show results there, take decisive and pragmatic action, assess progress forthrightly, and work tirelessly to build a new national consensus.

Government should also begin to moderate its more unrealistic policy expectations. Continuing to set abstract targets and policies that apply across the board, irrespective of local government's actual capacity to deliver them, is a formula for unrealistic and unmet promises that will further undermine public confidence.

We believe that if the government and its partners focus their full effort on just four key areas, and if direct, simple and measurable approaches are used, local governance will improve. These are the four key areas:

- ensuring that every municipality in the country has the basic capacity for sound administration and to deliver basic services, which translates into qualified and professional managers and technicians who are insulated from undue political interference;
- rooting out corruption, incompetence and profiteering with all the legal and political means necessary, and strengthening oversight, accountability and enforcement across the board;
- tailoring policy, fiscal and support incentives to ensure continuous performance improvement in key areas, rather than chasing abstract, nationally determined targets, by

8 stretching those municipalities that should do more to do more,

8 helping those that could do more to do more,

8 helping those that can't do more to do the basics well, and

8 rebuilding those that are dysfunctional; and

- continuously improving the quality and impact of regulation and oversight by strengthening national capacity for regulatory impact assessments; improving the quality of data, its collection and analysis; and creating a single clearing house at Cabinet level for all local government policy.

Simplifying or streamlining regulatory frameworks, policy goals and reporting systems wherever possible would also go a long way towards making things easier for municipalities.

The editors

