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# The Green Voter's Guide: Active Citizenry and Local Government[1]

## 1. Introduction

The South African local government elections of 2016 resulted in fundamental changes to the South African political landscape. Given the major role played by municipalities in the delivery of basic services over the next five-year term, it is fundamental to engage with incoming municipal officers regarding several environmental concerns. The major areas of concern to municipalities insofar as climate change is involved are as follows: energy, water and sanitation, waste management, and climate resilient spatial planning.

The introduction of a *Green Voter's Guide* aims to stimulate and contribute to public discourse on how local politics and governance responds (or should respond) to environmental justice issues. The guide looks at citizen engagement with local government regarding service provision; what those services are; and what role ordinary citizens can play in determining how these services will be provided. The guide is a tool aiming to get people to think and reflect about environmental matters in their everyday lives, and to equip them to grill municipal representatives throughout their term of service.

## 2. Municipal Roles and Duties

The South African Constitution states that municipalities have the responsibility to make sure that all citizens are provided with services to satisfy their basic needs. The role of municipalities in respect of environmental management is further enhanced in section 152 of the Constitution, which requires municipalities, amongst other things, to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner and to promote a safe and healthy environment. The Local Government Municipal Systems Act[2] gives further effect to these constitutional imperatives by stating that municipalities must strive to ensure that municipal services are provided in an environmentally sustainable manner.

There are a large number of services that local government provides, the most important of which include water supply, sewage collection and disposal, refuse removal, electricity and gas supply, municipal health services, municipal roads and storm water drainage, street lighting, and parks and recreation. Noting the budgetary constraints on local government in particular, it is necessary for municipalities to secure sufficient resources for the implementation of the environmental management roles and responsibilities of local government, as described in the Environmental Legal Protocol. Municipalities have two primary sources of funding, which apply as much to their environmental roles and responsibilities as to any other. These are: funds allocated to municipalities from national or provincial treasuries; and funds raised by municipalities themselves.

These services have a direct and immediate effect on the quality of life of people in their respective communities. For example, if poor quality water is provided, or refuse is not continually collected, this will contribute to the creation of unhealthy and unsafe living environments. Poor services can also make it difficult to attract or retain business or industry in a vicinity, thus limiting job opportunities for residents.

One way in which municipalities can fulfil their mandate is to provide the services themselves through the use of their own resources – finance,

equipment and employees. A municipality may also outsource the provision of a service. In other words, it may choose to hire someone else to deliver the service, but it remains the responsibility of the municipality to make sure that the service is delivered properly. Many municipalities, however, are unable to deliver services to residents, resulting in the well-known phenomenon of service delivery protests.[3]

Service delivery protests, unfortunately often violent and destructive, have become the norm in many townships across South Africa. Lack of access to basic services is usually at the centre of these protests, highlighting the ineffectiveness with which many councils attend to basic service delivery. One of the main contributing causes to such failures is the weak link between government authorities and the communities they serve. However, protest is a complex phenomenon that interplays with historical political legacies, cultures of violence, corruption, lived experiences of poverty, and ineffective communication between local government and communities. It is sufficient to note, for present purposes, that local level protests have increased significantly in recent years. [4]

## 3. Local Environmental Engagement

### *3.1. Energy*

Energy is central to any household, and when it comes to the major forms of domestic energy consumption, according to the most recent census conducted in October 2011, 84.7% of South African households use electricity for lighting (up from 70.2% in 2001), 73.9% use electricity for cooking (up from 52.2%), and 58.8% use electricity for heating (up from 49.9%).[5] While it is encouraging that these figures show significant increases in the use of electricity, generally the cleanest, most flexible, affordable, and efficient form of energy for domestic purposes, it is still the case that a large sector of our population uses other forms of energy for cooking, and nearly half get their heating from non-electric sources. We rely on our municipalities to provide electricity, approximately 90% of which is generated by burning coal, a leading contributor towards air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Other impacts from mining and burning coal include water pollution, the destruction of natural habitat and the health and safety of mineworkers. The convenience of electricity comes with serious problems, which makes it clear that we ought to be moving towards a low-carbon economy based on renewable energy.

A few years ago, Eskom's load-shedding saw householders rushing to buy off-the-shelf renewable technologies, such as PV panels and solar water heaters, but few local authorities promoted, enforced or offered incentives for renewable energy installation. So councillors must be questioned regarding the creation and implementation of plans to transition to a low-carbon economy, based on renewable energy, as fundamental to our nation's future. Citizens and community organisations should persuade municipalities to engage in dialogues to motivate households to become more energy efficient or to adopt renewable energy solutions. Creative solutions should be solicited to challenge municipalities to change their prioritization of tariff income over the interests of the communities they are elected to serve.

### *3.2. Land use*

The geographic spatial arrangements of human settlements continue to reflect those of our apartheid past, which means that the poor continue to occupy space that is some distance from employment opportunities, health and social services, schools, and further education and training institutions. This means that a disproportionate percentage of the household budget is spent on transport; and therefore, indirectly, the poor are paying more than other social classes for the energy used to power such transport – road transportation is liquid fuel intensive and trains are powered by electricity. The environmental footprint from this inefficient (and brutal) use of land is massive – daily commuting uses fossil fuels and pollutes the air, service provision is wasteful, and densification is difficult to encourage. Local authorities are responsible for managing how land within municipal boundaries is used. They are also responsible for restricting inappropriate land use – for example dwellings in flood-prone areas, buffer zones between residential areas and industrial areas. This is typically managed through 'zoning', where areas are allocated as residential, business, industrial, recreational, environmental, etc. Long-term infrastructure development plans are required that integrate public transport, better housing, and new residential developments, in order to address the current skewed population

distribution, as well as to prepare for future growth in the population.
It is not only the influence of business and the leverage of the economically powerful that lead to conflict. The well-being of community members in marginalised townships is of great and growing concern. For example, areas of localised mine waste known as Mine Residue Areas (MRAs), may include tailings disposal facilities, waste rock dumps, open cast excavations and quarries, water storage facilities, tailings spillage sites, footprints left after the re-mining of tailings, disposal facilities, and a mix of waste that falls within the boundaries of former mine properties. Many older and poorer townships, informal settlements and government-provided low income housing estates are still located within or close to MRAs. An estimated 1.6 million people on the Witwatersrand live in informal settlements next to old mine-dumps and suffer from health conditions caused by wind-blown radio-active dust and contaminated water. This perfectly showcases the effects of the country's perpetuated apartheid-style class- and racially-segregated structure.[6]

Voters must question how new ward councillors plan to reduce the inefficient movements of people around the city, in order to curb extensive and expensive daily commutes. Residents must probe what system is in place to monitor land use so that people desperate for a place to live don't have to be evicted off land that is unsuitable for habitation. Citizens should observe how councils handle conflicts arising over competing uses of urban space, and whose interests are represented in these instances. The electorate should insist on more community dialogues concerning matters such as who should decide how a piece of land is used or zoned – national, provincial or local government, or the people living on it. Local government officials must be confronted about, and prevented from, earmarking government-subsidised low income housing projects on land close to slime dams, mine dumps and landfill sites.

### *3.3. Solid waste*

Removing and safely disposing solid waste is a municipal responsibility. How well our municipalities are doing in this regard can be measured by the piles of plastic bags, cans and bottles that pollute and deface our veld, beaches, parks and streets. Regular refuse removal is not the norm for all, leading to frustrated households dumping their waste on street corners, where it is left to the wind, rats and stray dogs. In reality, waste is never disposed of, but merely removed from our bins and streets and taken to a landfill on the periphery, and left to slowly decompose. This decomposition results in emissions of methane (a potent greenhouse gas) and in a potentially toxic cocktail of liquid that has to be prevented from polluting our groundwater. The proper management of solid waste dumps is a skilled and critically important job, and needs to be adequately funded. Even better, solid waste should be separated and the recoverable materials sent for recycling.

Citizens need to consider the ways in which prospective councillors intend improving waste collection in their areas; what plans they have to encourage recycling; as well as the steps taken to limit and eliminate litter and dumping. Landfill sites are stinky, hazardous, and add to greenhouse gas. Voters ought to enquire as to what the municipality's plans are for reducing the amount of solid waste that gets discarded, because the *status quo* is unsustainable. Waste-pickers play a valuable role in recycling waste, and office-bearers should have a plan regarding how municipalities are able to support them. Integrating waste-pickers into the municipal system could be an avenue through which jobs can be created at a local government level.

### *3.4. Water and sanitation*

Delivering water to your tap and dealing with the resulting wastewater is ultimately the responsibility of your local authority. Most local authorities buy bulk water and manage its treatment and distribution. The price you pay is only partly based on how much it costs to deliver water to you. As with electricity, it is a political decision, based on how much revenue the local authority needs to earn, and to what extent it is prepared to subsidise the careful consumption of small-volume users, with punitive charges levied on wasteful large-volume users. Households also ultimately pay for water they don't receive, since water leaks cost the country an estimated R7 billion a year. It is the municipality's responsibility to fix these leaks, and the national Department of Water and Sanitation fortunately plans to assist by training 15 000 artisans and plumbers to fix leaking taps in their communities.

Although local authorities are responsible for providing citizens with safe and affordable water, their job is made more difficult if national

government does not secure our water resources. For example, large parts of the Mpumalanga Drakensberg are covered by pine and eucalyptus plantations. National government is also responsible for protecting rivers, wetlands and aquifers from pollution, but the picture does not look very healthy. Even while acid mine drainage poses an increasing toxic threat, new water-use licences are being granted to mining companies at an alarming rate, and with little prudence by government. And, despite the appallingly poor performance of so many wastewater treatment plants, there seems to be little urgency from national government to provide the necessary finance and skills to solve the problem.

The current drought has brought the critical need for water to be well managed into sharp focus, sanitation solutions included. It is bizarre that between 30% and 40% of South Africa's world-class, treated drinking water is flushed down the toilet. Local authorities are responsible for managing this end of the water use cycle – collecting wastewater, treating it to the legislated standard, and releasing it back into the environment. Sadly, too many local authorities are simply not up to the job; a recent independent survey of sewage treatment in 72 towns found that one-third did not meet effluent specifications. Providing dignified sanitation for all needs serious investment in skills and infrastructure, and a willingness to explore innovative solutions. Engineering constraints make water-borne sanitation impossible in some areas. Money is also a consideration. There is some promotion of rainwater harvesting, but this is merely under guidelines to prevent backflow and for building purposes. Effluent usage needs to be monitored so as to restrict contamination. The use of grey water is complex due to its health implications, and policy in this regard is being reviewed and will be concluded in March/April 2017.

Community members should interrogate local government authorities on intentions to radically reduce water leaks, as well as how they will co-operate with national and provincial government to provide safe and affordable water. It is also worthwhile for communities to quiz councillors regarding how they will ensure that the sewage works in their respective areas meet effluent specifications.

### *3.5. Climate change*

Global warming appears to be affecting South Africa's weather patterns and predictions are that changes will become more pronounced over the next decades. The specific predictions are complex and couched in uncertainty, but there is general consensus that average temperatures will increase, particularly over the interior of the country. Changes in rainfall patterns are less certain, but it is likely that the western parts of the country will become drier and the central and eastern parts somewhat wetter. Shorter rainy seasons and an increase in severe weather events (droughts, floods, storms, tornados, etc.) are also likely to be part of the change. The agricultural sector is obviously the most directly affected by climatic changes and it poses problems for rural economies, but, as we have seen with the current drought, the knock-on effects are felt in urban areas too, particularly with rising food prices. National government is responsible for laws and policies to reduce carbon emissions, but local authorities are responsible for limiting damage due to natural events through the enforcement of building codes; controlling the settlement of people in unsuitable areas; maintenance of roads, bridges, and other lines of communication; and maintenance of water supplies and waste removal.

Local authorities have a central role to play in adapting to a changing climate, and municipalities need to work more closely with provincial and national government to develop their mitigation and adaptation measures. Each local government must have its own disaster management strategies in place, with rapid response systems to coordinate movement or evacuation when necessary.[7] But, adapting to climate change requires much more than ensuring flood-proof infrastructure and effective disaster relief systems. A truly resilient urban or rural community will be one where relationships and support structures within the community are good, and where relationships between citizens and authorities are open, honest and productive. Fortunately, a few municipalities have started to develop climate change adaptation plans and strategies.[8]

The training of staff and councillors on climate change should be scaled up so that they understand why biodiversity management and conservation, and environmental compliance and management systems, are important. Municipal staff in the various utility services, such as waste,

water and sanitation, and electricity services, will benefit significantly from environmental education and training. Training modules for municipal staff members and volunteers to improve adaptive capacity to weather extremes need to be developed. Citizens should interview councillors regarding the readiness levels of the municipality for the challenges of climate change. It is important for communities to find out how their local authorities propose to minimise damage caused by natural disasters and climate change and what disaster relief strategies these municipalities have in place. Civil society can ask municipalities to consider signing the Global Covenant of Mayors, which requires municipalities to report on climate mitigation and adaptation actions.[9]

## 4. Roundtable Series

On 17 September, the CPLO in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), hosted the first in a series of roundtable discussions on the Green Voter's Guide in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The speakers for the event were Ms Nomvula Mofokeng from the Department of Water Services, Policy Development and Regulation in the City of Johannesburg; Mr David van Wyk, head researcher at Bench Marks Foundation; and Mr Stephen Law, Director of EMG. Mr Law spoke about developing the Green Voter's Guide – looking at environmental issues with an everyday gaze. Ms Mofokeng gave valuable insight into the state of water in the country, focussing on the Gauteng region and the water shortages in the area. And the presentations were concluded by Mr van Wyk, who shared thought-provoking research on the drastic impact of acid mine drainage in the Witwatersrand region. The presentations opened the gates for an enriching discussion on environmental justice in Johannesburg and greater South Africa, with a focus on water.

The second roundtable was held in Cape Town on 21 September, again with three speakers: Mr Law; Ms Annabel Horn, Task Manager, Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, Western Cape Government; and Dr Robyn Pharoah, senior researcher, Research Alliance for Disaster and Risk Reduction (RADAR). Mr Law shared his research on the prioritisation of spatial planning; disaster management and climate change preparedness; water resource management; energy provision/efficiency; and waste management, during the local government elections. Ms Horn examined the important intersection between water, sanitation and social justice at a local government level, while Dr Pharoah shared her insights on disaster risk management at a local government level and how this impacts upon social and environmental justice.

The final edition of the Green Voter's Guide roundtable series took place in Durban in October, with Mr Law being joined by Mr Desmond D'Sa (Co-ordinator, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance); and Dr Selva Mudaly (President, South African Institute of Environmental Health). This discussion concentrated on environmental health and spatial planning issues in relation to municipalities, enabling participants to share experiences of attempting to engage with municipal officers and ward councillors.

The participants relayed stories of rampant intimidation preventing community members from effectively communicating their concerns to ward councillors and other relevant municipal representatives. This highlighted the disturbingly dysfunctional relationship between people and parties; for most citizens the dynamic of speaking out against a councillor or party can have dire consequences, as can be seen in the numbers of people being killed for political reasons, with nobody being answerable for the deaths. The experience of residents has led them to conclude that politicians were intent on having a scantily informed electorate so that, for example, communities of colour can be systematically targeted for the disposal of toxic wastes and the placement of hazardous industries—a practice known as *environmental racism*. Widespread environmental injustices across the country mean that community members are daily dealing with the subsequent adverse health effects of profits being prioritised over people. In addition, activists fighting for rights are criminalised, with big business being complicit in the corruption linked to government.

It was put forward that more research needs to be done and made available, because municipal officials don't always relay information to communities. Instances were cited of messages and comments being sent to Parliament, but with no feedback from municipal representatives, and nothing being done about concerns. Throughout the series, there was a recurring call for more faith

organisations to speak out against environmental prejudices. In our conversations, it was noted that citizens are not blameless either. Society's consume-and-dispose existence permits the discarding of the packages of the many goods we consume, to the delight of the packaging industry. The rapid adoption of 'modern conveniences', such as disposable diapers, has led to municipal workers in some rural Mpumalanga municipalities refusing to collect waste that includes disposable nappies, citing them as a health risk. As a result, piles of used nappies, which can take up to 450 years to fully decompose, litter the veld and waterways.

## 5. Conclusion

It is our civic duty to exact accountability from people placed in power. People must be able to shape decisions that affect their lives, experiencing democratic participation as a right instead of as an invitation. Active citizen involvement is a cornerstone of deep democracy, where citizens concern themselves with better governance in the form of more efficient and cost effective delivery of services; open budget processes; and access to information, linked with transparency, to curb corruption. People should be the ones in power, holding political figures accountable; however, as things stand, elections are the only occasion when politicians surrender their power to the people.

Organisations can participate in many consultation and decision-making processes at local level: for example ward committees, budget consultations, ward meetings, Integrated Development Planning Forums, and the like. In order for local governments to become more climate-resilient, municipalities need knowledge of climate change and its associated risks, impacts and vulnerabilities, as well as the appropriate adaptation and response actions. People are the guardians of the soil and should therefore be conscientized to communicate via their votes, bearing in mind the sage words of Justice Dikgang Moseneke regarding elected representatives: "The archetype of democracy is insecurity of tenure."[10]

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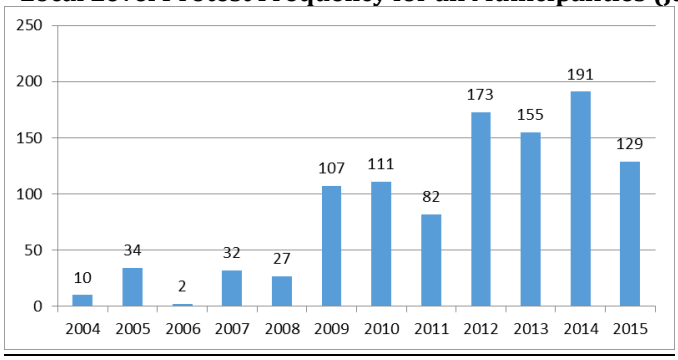
[2] Section 4(2)(d) Act 32 of 2000.

[3] http://www.etu.org.za/toolbox/docs/localgov/munservice.html.

[4] **Local Level Protest Frequency for all Municipalities (January 2004 to September 2015)**




SALGA - Community Protest: Local Government Perceptions http://www.salga.org.za/Documents/Documents%20and%20Publications/Publications/Community%20Protest%202016%20WITHOUT%20BLEED.pdf.

[5] http://www.southafrica.info/about/social/census-

[6] Bobbins, K. *Acid Mine Drainage and its Governance in the Gauteng City-Region*. Johannesburg: Gauteng City-Region Observatory. 2015. Pp 17-19.

[7] Environmental Monitoring Group: Quiz Your Councillor - http://www.emg.org.za/news/199-ask-your-councillor.

[8] National Adaptation Strategy - https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/nas2016.pdf.

[9] Environmental Monitoring Group: Quiz Your Councillor.

[10] Book launch of My Own Liberator at UCT Graduate School of Business - 06 December 2016.