

The 3 reasons municipalities fail and why the District Model won't solve the problem

By Cilliers Brink MP – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs

Since the end of last year Government has often spoken of the District Development Model but said very little about what it would actually entail.

It was meant to improve cooperation and coordination between different spheres of government - a necessary albeit insufficient response to the collapse of so many of our country's municipalities.

We were told that the Model would be piloted in the OR Tambo and Waterberg Districts as well as the Ethekewini Metro - presumably to test whether the Model actually improved municipal governance and services.

But two weeks ago, a document emerged on the letterhead of the Department of Co-operative Governance that proposed a far more ambitious and ominous goal for the District Model.

Under the heading *South Africa Economic Recovery Plan for Municipalities in Response to Covid-19* and marked "*top secret*" the document proposes a macro re-organisation of the state.

Literally invoking the adage "*Never let a good crisis go to waste*" in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic the document proposes that the District Model be repurposed to establish permanent command councils with executive power.

Such a plan would of course encroach on the constitutional competencies of elected and accountable provincial governments and municipal councils.

But, if the top secret document is to be believed, centralised decision making, policy making, and policy planning would be the panacea to post-Covid economic recovery.

I have asked the President to authenticate the document, or to clarify whether any of its substantive proposals reflect Government policy. While it would have been easy enough for the government to disavow the document in public, I will await the President's reply.

In the meantime, the District Model has jumped straight from pilot phase to implementation phase without regard to whether it actually improves municipal governance and service delivery.

Not one report has served before this House or in the portfolio committee outlining the lessons learnt in four municipalities where the Model has been piloted since October last year, but overnight it has become the flagship local government policy of this government.

Included in the budget of the Department of Co-operative Governance are plans to establish District Hubs across the country and develop so-called One Plans and Economic Recovery Plans for all 44 districts and eight metros.

But how has the Model fared in the municipalities where it has been piloted, like the OR Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape?

Last week the Eastern Cape provincial government proudly told the portfolio committee that in the OR Tambo Municipality the District Model has been “*validated*” and “*institutionalised*”.

Given that some of the worst examples of the abuse of Covid relief funds have occurred in the OR Tambo Municipality, South Africans should either be very disappointed or very worried about this version of the District Model being rolled out across the country.

Better cooperation and coordination between different spheres of government has long been a priority in the DA-led Western Cape government. But for the DA it has never been about central command and control. Nor do we pretend that it is a sufficient response to the collapse of so many municipalities in the rest of the country

The municipalities that do not work, that fail to deliver sustainable services to communities, and that are cited over and over in audit reports have three fundamental problems in common - besides the fact that they are mostly ANC-controlled.

The first problem is that for decade these municipalities have appointed and promoted people based on their political loyalty, instead of competence and expertise. Race-based employment equity plans have further narrowed the pool of expertise available to especially rural municipalities.

And so, the professional ethic in many municipalities has been ground to dust. Many good people no longer want to work in the local government sector, repelled by what they see as a toxic and politicised work environment.

But instead of hearing the Minister reject cadre deployment in no uncertain terms, last month she was reported as saying that municipalities only have to appoint the “*right cadres for the job*”.

The second problem is that despite municipalities relying on outside contractors for the delivery of so many services, municipal supply chains have been broken - not only by corruption and mismanagement, but by ill-conceived preferential procurement laws.

Like the ANC’s cadre policy and restrictive employment practices narrow the pool of available expertise for the recruitment of personnel, so tenderpreneurship and restrictive procurement practices narrow the pool of available expertise in the appointment of service providers.

The third problem is that when provinces and municipalities begin to collapse under the weight of cadre deployment, tenderpreneurship, and bad laws, the national government is slow and reluctant to use its powers of intervention in the Constitution - as in the case of Makana Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. Or those powers are misused - as in the case of Tshwane in Gauteng.

Whether for political expedience, or lack of capacity, the Department of Cooperative Governance has not acted in a proactive way to stop the country’s top 20 worst municipalities from collapsing. The failure of government to broker a plan to prevent Eskom from switching off the power supply to defaulting municipalities is the most current example.

To solve these three institutional problems in local government we don't need District Hubs, Command Councils, or a new constitutional model: we need the bold decision to abandon any plan that prevent municipalities from delivering the best possible services to communities.

South Africa no longer has the time and the money for fanciful ideological projects.