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Meeting Report:
Focusing on the Political Administrative Interface

29 October 2018

"Political roles in local government have to be understood by both administrative and the public" *BEITT Bus Factory reflections*

Key Themes:

- ***Political instability and administrative instability***
- ***Chaos and uncertainty are part of the political-administrative interface***
- ***Some cities have tactics to navigate the interface***
- ***The importance of building and maintaining relationships***

Introduction

The worsening status of the political-administrative interface has become a constant feature of discussion in Built Environment Integration Task Team meetings. For municipal institutions to enable spatial transformation, an effectively functioning political administrative interface within the built environment is essential. Integrated delivery requires certain skills and practices in manoeuvring the politics and practice of power in a politicised organisation. How does the political administrative interface shape the municipal institutional environment and how can municipal practitioners and politicians facilitate spatial transformation in these contexts?

The members of the Built Environment Integration Task Team (BEITT) met at the Bus Factory in Newtown which now houses the offices of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA). In its former years, the bus factory was built as the tram repair facility for Johannesburg. It was later converted as a garage for the city's double decker buses which replaced the tram system in the 1960's (gauteng.net, 2018). The JDA is an Agency of the city of Johannesburg, itself set up to assist in stabilizing infrastructure delivery. As with other Task Team meetings, the venue was sought to get people out of boardrooms and into spaces that reflect built environment challenges and opportunities of our cities.

With this vast space to facilitate authentic debates, practitioners and guests were able to deliberate around the nuances, complexities, concerns and challenges of the political administrative interface. 'The Barefoot Facilitator'- Rehana Moosajee facilitated the group through different sessions including considerations around valued local government politicians, an activity around understanding the local arm of government and the impacts of the political-administration interface. The workshop session sought to engage the voices of practitioners, through the following objectives:

1. To allow all present members to share their understanding of how the political dimension of local government operates.
2. To be in discussion with and learn from those who have had first-hand experience of the dynamics of the political administrative interface.
3. To reflect on the implications of the political administrative interface in the built environment practice and how tools could be progressively developed to assist in navigating the environment.

In line with the State of Cities Report 2016 (SOCR), it was re-iterated that corruption, inefficiency and political power brokering relationships had been crippling factors to achieving spatial transformation. The revelation that this is concentrated in local government is critical to the discourse that took place. Therefore, the report advises on the discussions that came out of the workshop meeting and draws on some key nuggets that the engagement addressed.

Check in circle: connecting and relating to the theme

The community of practitioners who attended were in the company of special guest practitioners who had a collective of insights to bring into the space in line with the upcoming political administrative report commissioned by the South African Cities Network (SACN).

Yolisa Kani, Sandy Perry and Crispian Olver, all having been former urban practitioners in the City of Ekurhuleni, City of Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay Metro respectively, contributed to the discussions and activities through the meeting. Their recollections and insights are shared later in the report. Since the space required some reintroductions, each person was requested to consider and share about a local government politician they admired and why. In the context of the current political climate of South Africa -across all spheres of government- this was considered as a great challenge.

However, former and current local government politicians that were referred to included deputy finance minister Mondli Gungubele who was the former mayor or Ekurhuleni, executive mayor of Buffalo City Municipality Xola Pakathi, Nqaba Banga of Nelson Mandela Bay, former mayor of the City of Johannesburg-Mayor Amos Masondo, former city manager for eThekwini -Michael Sutcliffe, former MMC for transport Rehana Moosajee and former MMC for transport and urban development authority in Cape Town- Brett Herron.

These politicians were lauded by the group -among their other attributes- for their visionary leadership and hard work, their ability to positively interface with the administration and making time to support the ability to be strategic, their intricate understanding of power and how it influenced people as well as their dynamism in the face of politics.

Admired politician qualities:

- ***Visionary leadership***
- ***Hard work***
- ***Ability and effort to work with administration***
- ***Strategic thinking and support***
- ***Enabling others to perform by giving power and responsibility***
- ***Manage the power dynamic to promote delivery***
- ***Being accessible***
- ***Promoting people development***

Other attributes that were mentioned included an understanding for the development of people, ease of access and communication through social media platforms (showing a sense of transparency), using the provided public transport infrastructure and engaging with society and the acceptance in knowing where to draw the line in terms of policy and politics.

Some of the participants advised that they were more disappointed than excited about having to think about who their favourite politicians were. One of the members advised that the way in which administrators have succumbed to the business as usual narrative is concerning- “people know what the right thing to do is, but they deviate from it”. While it was a struggle for others to find specific politician that they admired, the shared points concluded that we are an old but young democracy and so different people could be admired over time, but their subsequent actions could also change.

A point was also made that the generation of forthright and honest politicians has become distant memory and administrative institutions need environments where local government politicians take greater responsibility in leading urban development and city governance.

Understanding the political arm of local government

Working within a specific area of an institutions has the potential to isolate one’s knowledge to the rest of the workings and functioning arms of the institution. This is a limiting factor when considering the aspiration

of integration and moving away from being stuck working in silos. In this regard, practitioners had to observe -in teams- their broad understanding of the political dimension of local government and demonstrate their knowledge of the political processes followed in the functioning of municipalities. The brief was to explain

> Explain the political system of local government to a set of Grade 7 mini city councilors…

the political system of local government to a set of Grade 7 'mini-city' councillors.

Within the process, the teams had to consider hierarchies, roles and responsibilities of politicians in local government in addition to the need of various committees. Other aspects to consider included the voting process, powers and functions of municipalities as well as legislative guidelines among other procedures. The materials provided were of tremendous assistance in processing the information provided. The teams addressed the governance aspects, administrative roles that were present and how local government could relate to communities it interfaced with according to some of their personal relations with the political arm of local government.

One of the teams compared the executive mayor of council to a school principal, advising that the role of the executive mayor is to be at the forefront of leadership, but that role is not singlehanded as there are teachers (council) and a school governing body (political party) that needs to be accounted for and deliberated with before any major decisions can be made.

However, what seemed like a strong analogy proved difficult to explain once the complicated roles and responsibilities and arrangements were presented.. Initially, considering the executive mayor as the principal and the mayoral committee as the supporting staff (pictured below) seemed clear, but considering the rest of the role players and their positions began to show the apparent complications that exist in the political administrative interface way in which local government politics is arranged. The point was made that we often overcomplicate things that are at their roots very simple.

The second team presented their work with a process, beginning with an understanding of the three spheres of government and how local government plays its role. It then unpacked and highlighted the role of political parties, the need for voting, canvassing and electioneering and the outcomes of voting and being in council. Within the council space, the team explained the purpose of having a council and the role of ward distinction between the executive and legislature. The approach was to discuss the system in relation to the tangible sets of things that Grade 7 pupils could relate to, water, electricity, roads, parks etc.

What came out of this activity is the importance of being knowledgeable of the role of the political system within local government and how that can be leveraged. Some of the members from each team advised that bringing the presentation together showed how little knowledge they had of the political dimension of

their organisations and the important need to deepen their understandings of the guidelines, procedures and committees that ultimately impact their work.

Overall, the task of explaining the context was a learning experience for all those who were involved and a start in instilling a curiosity in the everyday interactions held within local government institutions between the political and administrative arms. The exercise provided the provocation for how stronger relationships can be developed. One of the challenges noted was the clashing interaction levels at which work is produced where national or provincial government might set a political mandate that needs to be accomplished by local government with little support in terms of capacity and financing at a local level. This has repercussions from an administrative and political interface perspective.

The political administrative interface in cities – beyond the text book

A critical aspect of the discussion and at the core of the BEITT is the stories and lived experiences of the practitioners that are represented in the space. The views and insights shared by the visiting practitioners were echoed by the experiences of the group and showed that there is a disconnect within the spectrum of the political administrative interface that is both highly complicated in its structure and complex in how it functions.

Having unpacked the role of local government through the activity session of the workshop, the group came together again to listen how the former practitioners viewed the space they worked in and how each responded to challenges faced to make headways within their administrative roles. Yolisa Kani, who was a former head of the transport planning and provision department for the Ekurhuleni Metro, Sandy Perry, who was a former Chief of Staff in the office of the Executive Mayor of the Johannesburg Metro and Crispian Olver who headed up a regional 'clean up' task team in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro all had insights to contribute from their different roles.

One of the first points mentioned was the lack of public participation that takes place with regards to service delivery and implementation process of large developments that have direct impacts on citizens.

A specific example made by one of the guests was that of the Sanral e-tolling system and the gantries that had been put in place across the national roads in Gauteng.

From a participation perspective, the lack of engagement with citizens and a lack of transparency from government stakeholders showed a breakdown in communication and how the system would work. The complexity of the system gave rise to road users and commuters finding too many inconsistencies that government could not answer to that the system became close to obsolete.

The political administrative interface and its complex nature was also considered through the development of human settlements. This resonated with many of the participants who noted how the existing dichotomies of government and political parties can further complicate delivery. This was further expanded with how collusions occur in property markets and funding of political parties by property developers in some cities.

A common narrative shared by the participants was that of housing and service delivery being used as a political tool to gain votes without politicians engaging

with the administrators responsible for projects. The points argued by the task team were further expanded on by a discussion on internal processes and rules that needed to be followed but are in fact disregarded.

Another point that was made indicated that structures and systems (policies, plans, strategies) that are supposed to facilitate what happens on the ground are complicated in their own regard. For some of the participants, the administrative space was described as a complicated environment. A tendency noted by the team was the administrators had plans and strategies to follow in order to provide services, however, the bureaucracy and red tape needed to follow through on the implementation of plans often slowed down the processes. It was noted that similar occurrences appear in government structures.

It was explained by one of the guests that those who are entrenched in the technical aspects of development and delivery often forget to build bridges that connect to the social aspects of development that include community engagement, public participation and upskilling of community members where possible. An example was given where in doing site assessment for a transport project the engineers were literally working over people and moving them out the way without engaging them at all.

The disucssion then engaged with the need to understand the polirisation of the political domain as well as public administration and government. A fundamental question from one of the participants about why these 2 worlds are so different brought about a debate around chaos vs control and certainty.

The observation that was made was that the political and public administrative domains create an environment for a constant jostling for power. That in turn creates chaos and uncertainty which brings a sense of loss in control-as depicted in the image above. A sense of chaos is void of control and thus void of certainty in trying to develop the capacity and skills that can support integrated delivery. However, having greater levels of control and certainty was considered to be a desired place to work towards.

Chaos it was felt, made it impossible to get things done. A question posed by one of the task team members was “are we headed towards chaos or increasing uncertainty but where some level of control is possible to still get key projects and programmes implemented?” The debate also had others who considered chaos to be the ‘new norm’, while some members argued that having a sense of uncertainty did not automatically result in chaos.

Considering what happens inside and outside of the system becomes crucial to how the politics and administrative groups gears up towards a shared understanding of the dynamics that exist and how they can be navigated. Trying to define what chaos and uncertainty mean resulted in some participants indicating that we were operating in an uncertain environment rather than a chaotic environment.

A way to navigate this grid of complexities is through defining notions of chaos and certainty in relation to each other as well as coherence and impact within the contexts in which they exist. As it stands, not having a core compass of direction on where we want to go will lead to not meeting the imperative ideal of spatial transformation as it becomes lost in the crux of confusion. This is not to say we should be entrenched in engaging with definitions, rather, there should be sense of clarity in what needs to be achieved and what everyone who is considered a participants’ role is. Where do we all belong and what is our target?

The team also expanded on how other cities were managing their political administrative interfaces. eThekwini municipality shared their engagement tactics through advising that at the base of their political

administrative interface was the need to – and facilitation of – aligning projects and programmes with politicians who could relate to and would benefit from the outcome of the project. In this way, matching interests from the political and administrative perspective would avoid a clashing of perspectives. In the same way, eThekwini also encouraged their administration staff in the built environment to attend political party strategy sessions in order to further align the interface. The outcome of this wold be contributed research papers by the administration to the political party manifesto development. The overall outcome of this would be the opportunity to serve the community. Such lessons like those from eThekwini municipality showed the importance of seeking to serve communities and societies.

Reflections "What's becoming clearer…"

In the final session of the workshop, after much of the debates and conversations had taken place, the team summarized their views of the day's discussions. The reflections are fluidly grouped into what was clear for the participants in terms of the broad consideration of **instability** in the political and administrative interface, the visible need for **system changes**, concerns around **issues of leadership** and the need to **build bridges**. The reflective question posed by our facilitator was- "what is becoming clearer for you in the political and administrative interface?" which required bringing thoughts together that are noted below:

Relationships remain central to the interface

- ***We need to build bridges and new ways of understanding – speak the same language***
- ***Chains of accountability are needed***
- ***Develop mature relationships that look beyond the immediate***
- ***Improving the interface is about improving processes of engagement***
- ***Systems protect their own – irrespective of obvious misgivings***
- ***We need to be equipped to coexist***

…when considering instability

— *Political roles in local government have to be understood by both administrative and the public to be legitimate and in a position to act*

— *Political roles and administrative roles should not tend to mix but learn how to speak 'the same language'*

— *Political instability which feeds through into admin instability*

— *Encroachment, transgression of the guiding rules, directives of set principles; continuous citation of the rules but application is eroded, sharpened expertise in the manipulation of well-established systems, each system protects its players irrespective of obvious misgivings*

…from the perspective of system changes

— *You need to learn to work the new system by understanding the chaos, existing within the chaos so as to realise your priorities*

— *Processes are important so understand and obtain inputs from all stakeholders > map these and strategize*

— *Parties work in hierarchies; governments work in spheres. That makes them an imperfect match*

— *Spheres of government vs levels of hierarchy in political parties…political party hierarchy currently prevails over government structures*

— *Improving the interface is about improving process of planning, of engagement*

— *We need different ways of understanding the challenges we face*

— *Officials need to find ways to secure projects long-term to weather uncertainty*

— *Ring fence SCM allocation processes, base them on objective criteria, not patronage*

- *Chains of accountability in local government, from community to delivery are too long, and are difficult for both politicians and officials to navigate*

...around issues of leadership

- *Both political and admin exist for the benefit of society. It is not the other way around*
- *The political administrative interface…it is a dynamic space with bureaucracy and tensions*
- *It requires mature relationships that can look beyond the immediate*
- *Administrative appointments through recommendations from multi-stakeholder panels should replace deployment as the current practice of deployment is more about aiding and abetting corruption rather than ideology and synergy*

...when considering the need to build bridges

- *We need bridges/new ways of understanding each other's worlds & responding to the lived reality of communities*
- *We need to know our terrain (land vs sea turtle) and be equipped to work and co-exist*
- *We need to invest more on the internal condition of interveners-both admin and political*
- *The interface looks/considers marrying two very complicated organisation each in their own right- How do we then begin to link/marry these two?*
- *There is not enough empathy in the interface – there's a need for bridge opportunities*
- *Relationships are key to make it all work:*
    - *Build bridges*
    - *Inspire trust*

For many, what has become clearer is the need for systematic/systemic changes to take place. From the day's interactions, what was also clear is that we have forgotten about the communities that need to be served and the commitment to society. In some instances, it is important to do the right thing and not see it as a feat or a inconvenience. From a leadership perspective, such elements of putting communities at the forefront define good leadership. Although the system has become a space that protects its own players, it is more important than ever to act with integrity and transparency rather than disregard developmental priorities and deviate from standards and designations due to short term political pressures. the reflections also provided a sense of importance for involving each side of the interface and building bridges in order to co-exist rather than clash.

BEITT political administrative interface study

A study collating and synthesising a number of ex city administrators' and politicians' experiences of the interface in working on built environment programmes and projects was commissioned by the BEITT. The study highlights the myriad of ways the political administrative interface works in practice across and within municipalities. The importance of building and maintaining relationships in the day to day manoeuvring within the political administrative interface is highlighted as critically important. It speaks to what has emerged from the meeting in terms of fortifying relationships and building bridges. However, what also emerged from the study is the fragility of a system that relies on personalities. In this regard strong city developmental focused leadership in the mayor and city manager has proved important in ensuring stability. The budgeting process has also been highlighted in the study as an area where the breakdown in the function of politics at ward level and politics at council level as well as administrative plans and projects is contentious. It resonates discussion around the ability to influence budgeting and SCM process that took place in this BEITT meeting. What the study also highlights is that these issues are not necessarily linked to any particular political party holding office. As significant challenges arise in municipalities where a single party majority remained or where coalitions have ensued.

Concluding Remarks

The task team workshop session wrapped up at midday in anticipation for the State of Cities Finances Report at the Turbine Hall in Newtown. Before closing off the session, an observation and key questions that was posed to the participants by one of the task team members was "**it's all well and good that we have all this research, but, have we thought of where we're going with this- what are we going to do with all this information**". It was agreed that BEITT needs a strategy to disseminate the work done and start considering how to land all the collected information.

The final discussions considered the value in unpacking the complex nature and complicated processes of the political administrative interface in the built environment shows.

A recommendation made was for practitioners' need to be braver in making local government and their municipalities stronger. "It is about being more than an observer, rather, it is about what outcomes you want and leveraging the relationships that have been developed" -as noted in the main BEITT political administrative interface report- to reach the ideals of spatial transformation. There needs to be a maturity about how we consider power and politics in space.

The highlighted points are to encourage practitioners to take what they have learnt from the meeting and apply it into their everyday considerations and tasks, not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of the communities we serve, the interactions we have with other practitioners across the board and most importantly to support the ideals of spatial transformation in the built environment.

Key actions for built environment city practitioners emerging from this meeting

1.Get out into the community, building relationships and community centric evidence- Focus on the community and what it needs

2. Build expected disruption into your way of working- be prepared to respond to change rather than be totally disrupted by it

3.Build opportunities for dialogue between yourselves and politicians, understand their priorities and know your priorities

4. Understand your role and responsibility beyond the title and the hierarchy

5.Do more thought leadership work, influence the political priorities through presenting administrative experience, capability and evidence

6.Bring transparency into decision making

7.Be brave to promote personal and institutional integrity even when the environment doesn't encourage it

Event quality feedback

What was the high point of the Reference Group?

- Listening to the team members articulate these issues - more so the state of chaos and how we are to begin to adapt within those spaces.
- Diversity of thinking, ideas and potential for starting a much need conversation in the public service.
- Discussions.
- The exchanges following the exercise of explaining politics at the local government level to kids.
- Reflecting on what is becoming clear for us about the political admin interact and ending conversations.
- Hearing other experiences, sharing ideas about solutions.
- The insightful discussions.
- Political administrative interface.
- Check in - it is a great way in to discuss about these issues.

Do you have any general comments for the organisers on how to improve future events?

- No. 1, enjoy these sessions.
- Do a pre and post evaluation.
- Expand the group to include the value chain of the BEITT.
- Setting a goal for the end of the session at the beginning.
- I loved the idea of the venue - but it was too noisy ad distracting.
- Quieter venue.
- Align agenda with outcomes.
- Liked the idea of the venue and approach but the chosen venue was a destruction in terms of noise and heat.
- A slightly quieter environment.

Attendance

No	Surname	Name	City Or Department	Designation
1	Bakumeni	Siyabonga	Buffalo City	Assistant Director
2	Bernadac	Carl	AFD	Deputy Director
3	Bickford	Geoffrey	South African Cities Network	Programme Manager
4	Cwayi	Siphumeze	City of Tshwane	
5	Foster	Kevin	Independent	
6	Hebenstreit	Juliette	AFD	
7	Kani	Yolisa	Uber	Head
8	Mlaza- Lloyd	Thandeka	City of Joburg	Assistant Director
9	Mncwango	Nhlanhla	National Treasury	Coordinator
10	Moosajee	Rehana	The Barefoot Facilitator	Consultant
11	Mthimkulu	Noluthando	South African Cities Network	Intern
12	Olver	Crispian	Independent	Programme Manager
13	Perry	Sandy	Independent	
14	Peters	Adrian	Ethekwini Municipality	CSO
15	Timm	Jeremy	National Treasury	

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Images by Noluthando Mthimkulu (SACN).