



COMPACT National Research Conference 2025

1-2 December 2025 | Southern Sun O.R. Tambo, Kempton Park

Reimagining Developmental
Local Government:
New Approaches to Legacy Challenges

ABSTRACTS

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SESSION 1: TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Sibongile Jonas & Mazibuko Jara

Title: Reclaiming Developmental Local Government through Democratic Decommodification and Fiscal Justice from Below

Affiliation: Zabalaza Pathways Institute

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

South Africa's local government system is caught in a structural contradiction: it is constitutionally developmental, yet functionally neoliberal. Decades of austerity budgeting, cost recovery, and market-led service delivery have entrenched inequality, weakened participatory governance, and hollowed out municipal legitimacy. Drawing from selected case studies of popular struggles in response to the municipal crisis, the Fix Our Municipalities Initiative (FOMI), the People's Local Government White Paper process, the Zabalaza Pathways Institute's action research with communities across six provinces, this paper argues for a new paradigm of democratic decommodification and fiscal justice from below.

The argument unfolds in three dimensions. First, it critiques the neoliberal financing model that ties local government viability to regressive revenue collection and outsourcing, calling instead for a redistributive Municipal Equalisation Fund and direct fiscal transfers that recognise municipalities as sites of social citizenship, not cost-recovery utilities. Second, it advances democratic innovations—including devolved participatory budgeting (as pioneered in Kerala and Porto Alegre), community-led social audits (following the International Budget Partnership model), and the right to recall non-performing councillors—as mechanisms to deepen accountability and citizen control over local development priorities. Third, it explores practical pathways for decommodifying essential services through public-public partnerships, the provision of public goods, local cooperatives, and solidarity economies that reinvigorate municipal capacity.

The paper concludes that revitalising developmental local government requires not technocratic tinkering, but a democratic reconstruction of fiscal power and social control—anchored in people-driven planning, participatory budgeting, and the constitutional imperative of a “just, accountable and developmental” state.

SESSION 1: TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Tinotenda M Muringani

Title: Community Action to Advance the Right to Water: An Analysis of Invited and Invented Participation in South Africa

Affiliation: Equality Collective

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

Access to water is a constitutional right of fundamental importance. The South African Constitution and the Water Services Act No. 108 of 1997 both make clear that water services are a municipal responsibility. Indeed, the Constitutional Court in *Joseph v City of Johannesburg* [2009] ZACC 3 held that basic service delivery – including water and sanitation – is a cardinal function of local government. Unfortunately, the right of access to sufficient water continues to be undermined by dysfunctional municipalities and a lack of effective accountability mechanisms. This paper considers how communities can take action to improve access to water, through the lens of ‘invited’ versus ‘invented’ spaces, where invited spaces are arenas for public participation created by the government, while invented spaces are arenas for public participation created by communities themselves. The legal framework on water service delivery provides a clear mandate for invited spaces. In reality, however, invited spaces are not always created by municipalities or do not work effectively. In such cases, communities can and do turn to invented spaces, sometimes with notable success.

Drawing on four case studies, we build on the existing literature on invited and invented spaces, offering an analysis of the relationship between invited and invented spaces; the benefits and challenges of relying on an invented space when invited spaces fail; the different types of strategies deployed by communities in both invited and invented spaces; and the factors that contribute to the success of a particular strategy in advancing the right to water. The case studies are drawn from different types of communities – rural communities, informal settlements, peri-urban communities and townships – and thus provide an opportunity to reflect on how context affects the success of a given strategy. We conclude by offering some recommendations as to how communities can use invited and invented spaces to advance the right to water going forward.

SESSION 1: TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Mark Heywood

Title: Online and Offline, Confrontation and Collaboration: how fixlocal is Building on Community Campaigns for fixing local service delivery issues

Affiliation: FixLocal/ Nelson Mandela School of Governance, UCT

Mode: Digital content, showcase

Submission Type: Provocation

PROVOCATION:

www.fixlocal.org.za is an innovative new online tool that aims to enhance informed citizen action and campaigns to fix local service delivery issues. It evolved out of real life on the ground activism taking place in hundreds of communities and used it to build an online and digital repository of stories, best practices, and 'how to's. Ignorance of systems of government, and the powers assigned by law to citizens, is one of the biggest killers of democratic participation.

Recognising that, its features include helping citizens to report problems through official channels; guidelines on how to campaign peacefully and legally if they don't get fixed!; basic primers on aspects of local government. It also helps users to identify their councillor and find their contact details.

It was launched in May 2025, after an unusual partnership formed of tech experts, communication specialists, journalists and activists to imagine and then develop the tool. But FixLocal isn't about the people who developed it; it's about the people who use it! It aims to strengthen accountability and transparency through collaboration between citizens, elected councillors and public servants. It has built partnerships with major media organisations, including the SA National Editors Forum and PrimeMedia.

Fixlocal is a work in progress, evolving its digital capability to meet needs, expanding its reach to cover more communities, scouring for stories about local government and gathering information to empower activists. Effective local government needs informed and active citizens; active citizens, campaigning for socio-economic rights like food, water and a healthy environment, need effective local government. Fixlocal is the bridge!

This provocation will present the tool and demonstrate its features, but also debate why robust local activism is so essential to good governance. Activism is a social determinant of service delivery! It will seek ideas about how to develop fixlocal and how to ensure that it is widely known about and used in the crucial months leading up to the next local government elections.

SESSION 1: TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Sarah Findlay

Title: From Ballots to Belief: Reimagining Local Accountability Between and Beyond Elections

Affiliation: Open Cities Lab

Presentation Type: Provocation

Mode: This provocation will take the form of a short digital showcase and structured discussion. We'll demonstrate how MyCandidate and MyRepresentative work, trace how data flows from official sources to citizens, and invite practitioners and policymakers to discuss how such tools could be adopted, adapted, and sustained by municipalities. The discussion will ask: Is there appetite for local government to take up this mandate? How might local governments integrate citizen-driven platforms without losing legitimacy or control? What safeguards or partnerships are needed to make them sustainable and inclusive?

PROVOCATION:

Democracy in South Africa is undermined by an information gap between elected officials and the people they serve. Citizens struggle to make informed choices at the ballot box and lack the tools to monitor councillors' delivery against promises post-election. While data on candidates and councillors is technically "open," it is rarely usable; either buried in PDFs, fragmented across platforms or released too late before election day to inform decisions. This means that there is no public interface that gives residents a clear, evidence-based picture of who governs them or how well. And if developmental local government begins with informed citizen choice, what does it mean that our most fundamental act of accountability - the vote - is still an act of guesswork?

Open Cities Lab's MyCandidate and MyRepresentative platforms were created to close this gap: MyCandidate equips voters with accessible information on electoral candidates ahead of elections while MyRepresentative carries the relationship forward, transforming fragmented municipal data into a shared public resource that tracks councillor performance and connects residents directly to their representatives. Together, these tools form an accountability loop that turns participation from a once-off act into an ongoing relationship. They show how simple, well-designed digital platforms can reconnect citizens and government, and how civic information can function as essential democratic infrastructure.

This provocation asks a simple but unsettling question: what would happen if we treated access to representative information as a public service? What could it look like if "knowing your councillor" became as ordinary as knowing your street address? Could municipalities maintain open, citizen-facing records of representation and performance? Could digital public goods like these be recognised in the forthcoming White Paper on Local Government as part of the social contract itself?

SESSION 3: GENDER & YOUTH INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Ndabezitha Tenza

Title: Gender Inclusive, a Conduit to Political Communication and Service Delivery
Affiliation: Wits University

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how gender influences the effectiveness of political communication, with a specific focus on South African local municipalities. Drawing on global and regional literature, it explores how gender dynamics shape participation, tone, visibility, and trust within political spaces. The analysis reveals that women and men engage differently in political discourse—women often adopting relational and collaborative communication styles, while men dominate formal and institutional channels. These differences reflect broader social and cultural inequalities but also highlight the transformative potential of inclusive communication practices. The findings show that hybrid strategies combining traditional and digital tools strengthen participation and improve service delivery outcomes. Community-based forums, social media engagement, and participatory dialogues emerge as effective approaches for building transparency and trust. The study also underscores the need for institutional reforms that embed gender sensitivity into communication planning, training, and evaluation. Ultimately, gender-inclusive political communication is presented not as an optional reform but as a democratic imperative. When communication strategies reflect diverse voices and lived experiences, governance becomes more responsive, equitable, and representative.

SESSION 3: GENDER & YOUTH INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Rendani Manugu

Title: Civic Education for Meaningful Participation

Affiliation: Engage South Africa, NPC
Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

The enduring effects of apartheid-era inequalities continue to shape South Africa, with local governments nationwide still facing challenges in delivering adequate services to their constituents. In reimagining developmental local government, Engage South Africa advocates for the deliberate inclusion of gender and youth in decision-making processes, positing that robust civic education programmes are key to this transformation.

Women and youth are recognised as vulnerable populations within South Africa. Political actors frequently leverage their platforms to gain support, sometimes pitching these groups against one another in efforts to garner attention from policymakers. Ideally, these shifts should promote the advancement of both women and youth, yet, in practice, prioritisation tends to oscillate between the two rather than advancing them concurrently. While women demonstrate higher participation in civic duties such as voting, they remain underrepresented in policymaking leadership roles. Conversely, youth—despite being less civically engaged overall—are seeing increased representation (EISA, 2024).

With the 2026 local government elections approaching, enhancing youth voter turnout among those aged 20–39 is a critical priority, especially given recent declines in this demographic’s participation (IEC, 2025). As highlighted in the recommendations of the COMPACT Consolidated Technical Findings Report (November 2024), improved strategies are required to engage youth in municipal affairs, expand civic education, and foster meaningful public engagement rather than mere compliance.

Engage South Africa is committed to equipping high school-aged youth with comprehensive civic education, thereby empowering them to actively contribute to problem-solving within their communities. This commitment is evidenced by three programme alumni, aged 17 to 18, who currently serve in local government positions—a testament to the opportunities that effective civic education can create for formal participation in governance.

SESSION 3: GENDER & YOUTH INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Boitumelo Matlala

Title: Surfacing and questioning the contribution of mediation to inclusive citizen participation

Affiliation: Wits University & HSRC

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

Despite the promise of inclusion that liberal democracy holds, its institutions have not facilitated inclusive public participation. Instead, representative democracy has resulted in the limited representation of some segments of society in formal institutions. In the face of this exclusion of other sections of society, intermediaries have created and assumed spaces to connect or improve the relationship between local community groups and governments. Mediation has emerged as a prominent avenue that provides access to public decision-making institutions that otherwise would be inaccessible. For others, it is the first step in building a relationship between the local state and local communities, a bridge between the two actors. For others, it is understood as more substantive - as a form of inclusion. Although research has found that mediation is becoming increasingly important for successful cases of public participation in the Global South, a critical examination of it in a South African case study interrogates its contribution to inclusive and deepened participation.

This paper draws on research that focused on the Development Action Group's role in the affordable housing-led redevelopment of Woodstock-Salt River. First, it surfaces mediatory practices, outlining the processes, practices, and tensions through which NGOs, state actors, and local communities engage in participation. Second, the paper explores the outcomes of mediation in promoting inclusive and substantive participation. Since mediation is still an evolving concept - recast to describe representational practices that include marginalised groups in formal decision-making - the focus has remained mainly on the nature of the practice rather than on its broader impacts. This perspective tends to overlook the effects of mediation on local community groups and the state, as well as its implications for inclusive citizen participation.

SESSION 4: CASE STUDIES OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICE IN CITIES & TOWNS

Tholakele Nyathi

Title: Fostering Innovative Local Government Through Public Procurement Planning Affiliation: UP/UNISA

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

Public procurement remains one of the most critical and problematic areas in South African local governance. Therefore, this study critically examined the dynamics of public procurement planning within the Housing Department of the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality (COJMM), focusing specifically on Orange Farm Extension 10, Tjovitjo Informal Settlement. Procurement planning is constitutionally mandated under Section 217(1) of the South African Constitution and is central to achieving efficiency, fairness, and transparency in local governance. Yet persistent housing delivery delays and misalignment with community priorities highlight deep systemic weaknesses in planning and implementation.

Anchored in Principle-Agent, Public Choice, Contract, and New Public Management theories, the study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how procurement planning influences accountability, service delivery, and citizen participation within the local government context. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observation, drawing on the lived experiences of municipal officials, community leaders, and NGOs.

Findings reveal that poor planning capacity, regulatory non-compliance, limited coordination, and minimal community engagement significantly undermine housing delivery outcomes. The research identified weak knowledge of procurement frameworks and minimal citizen participation as factors that erode public trust and transparency.

In response, the study proposed a dual reform strategy that strengthens internal systems through capacity-building, interdepartmental coordination, compliance, participatory planning and transparency mechanisms. A notable innovation emerging from the study is the "Kutloano Community App," a digital micro-procurement platform designed to facilitate real-time community input into service delivery, serve as a monitoring tool through data integration, align local service delivery, and empower township economies through inclusive procurement practices.

Ultimately, the research argues that embedding participatory and digital innovation within procurement planning can transform municipal compliance frameworks into strategic instruments for sustainable housing delivery and accountable governance in South Africa.

SESSION 4: CASE STUDIES OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICE IN CITIES & TOWNS

Simon Sizwe Mayson

Title: Enhancing Local Governance through Place-Based Intermediary Infrastructures

Affiliation: The CoLab

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

Three decades into South Africa's democratic local government, the developmental vision of participatory, inclusive governance remains constrained by fragmentation, mistrust, and limited local capability. The paper builds on the understanding that municipalities are only one component of developmental local governance, and furthers it by demonstrating the value of intermediary infrastructures. We argue that renewal lies in strengthening place-based intermediary infrastructures that connect communities, enterprises, and government. We draw primarily on doctoral action research in Johannesburg's inner city and on SALGA's emerging cluster development programme.

The Makers Valley Partnership exemplifies how intermediaries convene diverse actors and co-create place-based solutions, rebuild trust, and support more diverse wellbeing economies. Acting as 'backbones', intermediaries like MVP enhance collaboration towards municipal aims without the constraints of bureaucratic or political capture. Comparable models by Ranyaka and the DG Murray Trust align social and economic efforts around shared outcomes, with the municipality as an essential partner. Across cases, common enabling conditions include trust, convening power, institutional autonomy, and adaptive learning.

Building on SALGA's programme, we advance the case for local-scale clustering: bringing proven cluster methods into citizen-led, developmental work through micro-clusters (or "local economic partnerships") that are resourced to act, not just deliberate. As demonstrated in international cases, intermediary organisations are essential here to support partnering and visioning and seed and incubate local structures. We surface the current funding and policy vacuum for local intermediaries that can support clustering, and propose pragmatic blends of municipal seed (e.g., grants-in-aid), private and civic co-funding, and earned revenue via social-enterprise models.

These learnings inform the establishment of The CoLab, a non-profit supporting place-based development across municipalities, with early work on SMME growth hubs in Mpumalanga's just transition. We conclude with implementation proposals for local government policy, including operationalising the revised White Paper, so that intermediaries are recognised and resourced as core partners in developmental local governance.

SESSION 4: CASE STUDIES OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICE IN CITIES & TOWNS

Kenneth Wynne and Daniël Eloff

Title: Cape Town's Ease of Doing Business Index as a Tool for Developmental Local Government

Affiliation: City of Cape Town

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

This paper presents the City of Cape Town's Ease of Doing Business (EoDB) Index as a pioneering municipal innovation that responds directly to Section 152(1)(c) of the South African Constitution's obligation to "promote social and economic development." Introduced in 2023 and refined in 2024, the EoDB Index measures the procedures, time, and cost associated with ten key municipal services that directly impact business activity ranging from land use and building plan approvals to electricity connections, business licensing, and informal trading permits.

Unlike traditional performance audits, the EoDB Index offers a dynamic, data-driven framework for internal service reform, inter-departmental coordination, and public accountability. Importantly, it incorporates direct feedback from the business community, recognising that the City cannot assess its own performance in isolation.

It is the first of its kind in South Africa, aligning with international benchmarks while responding to the lived realities of local businesses. Crucially, the Index is not merely diagnostic, it drives tangible improvements. Within a year, median turnaround times for electricity connections dropped from 91 to 27 days, business license approvals reduced by over 60% and informal trading permit issuance improved by nearly 50%. These gains directly support investment readiness, job creation, and the inclusion of small and informal enterprises in the formal economy.

The paper situates the Index within the broader conversation on reimagining developmental local government. It argues that transparent, real-time service performance tracking paired with reform-minded leadership can bridge the gap between constitutional mandate and municipal delivery. It further discusses challenges, including the financial implications of municipal procedures, capacity constraints and digitisation transitions, and offers lessons for replication in other municipalities.

By foregrounding evidence, accountability, and responsiveness, Cape Town's EoDB Index illustrates how municipalities can operationalise developmental mandates through innovation, making government easier to navigate, and development easier to achieve.

SESSION 5: PERFORMANCE MONITORING IN MUNICIPALITIES

Baloyi Michael Maromo and Tasneem Majam

Title: Examining the Effectiveness of Performance Management Systems Implementation in South African Municipalities

Affiliation: University of Johannesburg

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

The primary aim of this study was to establish whether the Performance Management Systems (PMS) in public institutions, is being implemented effectively, with specific reference to the Polokwane Local Municipality (PLM). This is pertinent because municipalities have become the focal points of service delivery and they tend to focus mainly on complying with the legislative frameworks of having a Performance Management and Systems (PMS) rather than implementing and the Performance Management and Systems (PMS) to the set municipal goals and objectives. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGta) introduced the Performance Management framework to municipalities with the aim of empowering the communities to demand better services and to hold municipalities accountable.

This study provides an in-depth theoretical review on PMS and its effective implementation. It is evident that one of the biggest challenges that are being faced by most municipalities in South Africa, is the effective implementation of PMS across all levels of management. The research study made use of qualitative research methodology. The objective of achieving effective implementation was pursued through existing literature and concepts of performance management systems and linking this with regulations guiding the process of performance management within the PLM. The data were collected through interviews, which collected data from respondents in the PLM from different levels of management. Furthermore, findings in this study indicate that Performance Management and Systems (PMS) in the Polokwane Local Municipality (PLM), has not been effectively implemented.

This study also identified that the system is currently flawed because, amongst other things, there is minimal employee involvement in the planning of performance management, including a lack of training opportunities to address identified weaknesses and cascading PMS across all levels, similarly majority of employees do not know their performance targets as reflected in the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP).

SESSION 5: PERFORMANCE MONITORING IN MUNICIPALITIES

Ntombekaya Baart

Title: Leading Performance Monitoring: Assessing Mayoral Committee Oversight Capability for Cultivating a Performance Culture – A Case Study in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality

Affiliation: SAPAAM

Presentation Type: Conference Paper

ABSTRACT:

The effective execution of performance monitoring and fostering a performance culture within South African municipalities depends significantly on the oversight capability of political leadership, particularly the Mayoral Committee. Drawing on Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality as a case study, this research interrogates the extent to which the Mayoral Committee's oversight capability acts as a catalyst for organizational accountability, transformative culture change, and sustainable public value creation.

The study addresses Sub-theme 2: Performance Monitoring in Municipalities, focusing explicitly on the Mayoral Committee's constitutional responsibility for managing the development of performance management systems, providing strategic direction, and monitoring municipal performance against key performance indicators. Despite comprehensive legislative frameworks, empirical evidence of how these political office bearers exercise this mandate—and whether they possess requisite oversight capability—remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining: (1) the oversight capability of Mayoral Committee members for effective performance monitoring; (2) their role in enforcing management accountability through performance monitoring mechanisms; and (3) how leadership and change management approaches influence cultivating a performance culture.

Employing a qualitative case study design grounded in transformational leadership theory and new public governance principles, this research will conduct semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of Mayoral Committee members and municipal executives, complemented by document analysis of performance reports, Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plans, and Auditor-General reports. These methods aim to triangulate insights regarding the Committee's ability to scrutinize performance data, enforce accountability, and drive cultural shifts toward improved service delivery.

Expected contributions include empirical insights into political oversight capability gaps, practical recommendations for enhancing councillor capability through targeted interventions, and a proposed integrated framework for strengthening the Mayoral Committee's catalytic role in embedding performance accountability.

SESSION 5: PERFORMANCE MONITORING IN MUNICIPALITIES

Joanne Parker

Title: The Missing Infrastructure – Rebuilding Local Government Through Data and Digital Systems

Affiliation: Open Cities Lab

Submission Type: Provocation

ABSTRACT:

The upcoming revision of South Africa's White Paper on Local Government rightly calls for stronger accountability, collaboration, and climate governance. Yet these ambitions will remain out of reach unless data and digital systems are recognised not as side projects, but as the enabling infrastructure of local governance through which financing, planning, and service delivery actually happen.

Local government has already gone digital but in fragmented, uneven ways that mirror the dysfunctions of the broader system. Siloed platforms, vendor lock-ins, and short-term pilot projects have created "digital islands" with limited value or institutional ownership. Digital systems are often mistaken for technical artefacts and are simply the domain of IT departments or external consultants. In reality, they are civic systems. When a billing platform collapses, it's not a technical glitch but a service delivery failure. When departments can't share data, it's not inefficiency. It's a governance failure.

The question, then, is not whether municipalities should digitise, but rather how we build digital systems as public infrastructure that puts effective service design and residents at the centre. Municipalities need to treat their digital and data environments as seriously as they treat roads, pipes, and electricity grids. They need maintenance plans, clear ownership, and strong governance.

Our provocation argues that digital reform is governance reform. The White Paper update is a chance to embed this thinking and to move from one-off projects and fragmented systems to a shared infrastructure that enables a connected, accountable state.



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