MY MUNICIPALITY
COMpact
PARTICIPATE
PLAN
ACCOUNT

Strengthening the Functionality of Ward Committees in South Africa

AUTHORS

Jabu Hlatshwayo and Kate Tissington
Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI)

CONTENTS

SUGGESTED CITATION

PARI
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

SALGA
SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
Inspiring service delivery

INTEGRITY
ACTION

Executive Summary

This policy brief draws on findings and recommendations from action research conducted across 12 municipalities, as part of the COMPACT programme. A key theme that emerges from the research is how to strengthen the functionality of ward committees in South Africa. While ward committees are increasingly seen as ineffective structures, and there has been declining trust in them over the past decades, they are still regarded as important structures for community participation in municipalities. Challenges are faced around: poor support and resourcing for ward committees; political contestation in ward committees; lack of training and capacity-building for ward committees; lack of feedback on ward committee reports; and poor handover between outgoing and incoming ward committees.

However, ward committees have the potential to be vibrant structures and spaces for fostering effective public participation in local governance in South African municipalities. To realise their full potential, it is crucial to address the challenges they currently face. The policy brief sets out concrete recommendations that can assist in strengthening the functionality of ward committees and contribute to more people-centred participatory democracy.

1. Introduction

Ward committees are legislated neighbour-hood-level structures intended to act as the link between communities and municipalities. Ward committees are meant to ensure that community voices and concerns are heard in decision-making processes, and to promote transparency, account-ability and inclusiveness in local government. Unfortunately, ward committees are increasingly seen as ineffective structures for community participation in municipalities and there has been declining trust in them over the past decades. Research done as part of the current White Paper on Local Government review process has outlined this. However, there is still a sense that ward committees are important and that there needs to be more support for them. The fact that they are not "taken seriously" speaks to the broader issue of how municipalities are avoiding the important and diffi-cult work of participatory democracy, preferring a top-down, opaque mode of governance.

COMPACT's action research shows that there are indeed challenges with ward committees in many municipalities, but there is also good practice available and solutions which require political will to implement. Replacing the ward committee system entirely might seem necessary, given the challenges, however this would likely be counter-productive to the goal of embedding participatory democracy in municipalities. Ward committees need a transformation, and this policy brief sets out some issues and practical recommendations to consider when undertaking this exercise. This policy brief focuses specifically on ward commit-tees, however COMPACT has also produced related policy briefs on community participation in the IDP process, and on communication in municipalities.

2. Background and Context

Ward committees are designed to be non-political, advisory structures comprising residents elected by their community to represent geographical and/ or sector needs and interests, and support ward councillors. The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act outlines the procedures for elect-ing ward committee members, emphasising the need for equitable representation of women and diverse interests within the ward. Municipalities must establish rules for these elections, including the conditions under which members must vacate office and the frequency of meetings. Each ward committee includes the ward councillor, who acts as the chairperson, and up to nine other members. In terms of roles and responsibilities, ward commit-tees make representations and recommendations on issues affecting their wards, facilitate communi-cation between the municipality and the community through the ward councillor, hold the ward councillor accountable for fulfilling their duties, and engage the community through regular meetings and other forms of engagement. The speaker of a municipality is responsible for ensuring the functionality of ward committees and public participation processes.

Despite their critical role in facilitating public participation in local governance, many ward committees across and within municipalities are not fully functional and face issues such as lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, inadequate support and resourcing, political interference, and lack of training and capacity-building.[1] These challenges undermine the ability of ward commit-tees to effectively represent the needs of their communities and support the ward councillor, leading to a lack of trust and engagement from the public.[2] Strengthening ward committees can promote inclusive and participatory governance, leading to better community participation and service delivery.[3]

1   Khuzwayo K (2009) "The Role of Ward Committees in Facilitating Community Participation in Municipal Planning". Research is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Town and Regional Planning, in School of Architecture, Planning and Housing, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa: https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/00b71983-66dc-410f-8fe1-2af100d570df/content

2   Silima T and Auriacombe C J (2013) "The Role of Ward Committees in Citizen Participation and the Socio-Economic Development of Communities" Administratio Publica 21(3): https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/ejc-adminpub-v21-n3-a4

3   COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa: A Consolidated Technical Findings Report on Action Research at 12 Local Municipalities: https://pari.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/COMPACT-Consolidated-Technical-Findings-Report-FINAL-November-2024.pdf

This policy brief is based on action research conducted between 2022 and 2024 as part of the COMPACT programme.[4] The first phase included interviews and focus groups with over 370 participants from 12 partner municipalities, including mayors, speakers, municipal managers, senior managers, municipal officials, ward councillors, and ward committee members. The second phase involved citizen engagement workshops with over 260 community leaders, ward committee members, and representatives from civil society and community-based organisations across the 12 partner municipalities. COMPACT also conducted observations of Integrated Development Plan (IDP) meetings in several municipalities. In November 2024 a consolidated technical findings report was published, with research findings presented across six thematic areas: IDP public participation process, ward committees, communication, operational planning, performance management, and the political-administrative interface. Lessons learned from the ongoing development and piloting of tools as part of the COMPACT Toolbox are also provided.

3. Research Findings

The COMPACT action research made several findings in relation to the functionality of ward committees in South Africa.[5] These include around: poor institutional support and resourcing for ward committees; political contestation in ward committees; lack of training and capacity-building for ward committees; lack of feedback on ward committee reports; and poor handover between outgoing and incoming ward committees. These are summarised below.

3.1. Poor Support and Resourcing for Ward Committees

Ward committee members often lack the necessary resources and support to perform their roles and responsibilities effectively. The absence of sufficient financial and material support from municipalities, including inadequate stipends and 'tools of the trade', limits the operational capacity and effectiveness of ward committees. The lack of access to basic stationery, means of identification (e.g. t-shirts and badges), meeting spaces, and technology hampers their ability to engage with their communities, and hinders the planning and implementation of community initiatives. Ward committee members are not entitled to remuneration, although out-of-pocket expenses are generally covered by the municipality's budget. Ward committee members frequently incur considerable expenditure for transportation, communication, and event organisation. The stipend currently provided by most municipalities (between R500 and R1 500 a month) has not increased over the years and is not sufficient to cover these activities. Many ward committee members are not working and rely on the stipend for survival. This is a reality given the socio-economic context in South Africa. This resource gap can lead to burnout and disengagement among ward committee members, further diminishing their effectiveness as links between the municipality and community. In many municipalities ward committee members are not being paid consistently each month, and are made to feel like an afterthought, rather than an integral part of the municipality.

5 COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa, pp. 85-107.

3.2. Political Contestation in Ward Committees

Political actors sometimes use ward committees as platforms to advance their agendas, rather than focusing on genuine community needs. Ward committees are frequently politicised, which significantly compromises their role as non-partisan advisory bodies. This can result in the marginalisation or exclusion of certain groups and voices, and the prioritisation of issues that align with political interests rather than the broader interests of the community. Such biased practices erode trust in ward committees and diminish their legitimacy as representative bodies. The focus on political gains over community welfare can lead to a lack of transparency and accountability, further weakening a ward committees' role in fostering inclusive and effective local governance. The political culture in many municipalities allows this to occur.

3.3. Lack of Training and Capacity-Building for Ward Committees

There is a significant need for ongoing training and capacity-building to enable ward committee members to fulfil their roles and responsibilities effectively. Without proper training, members are ill-equipped to handle the complexities of municipal governance and public participation. Community members, ward committee members and municipal officials emphasised the need for ongoing training and capacity-building for ward committee members, also emphasising that the same is required for ward councillors. There is a lack of comprehensive induction training for ward committees in many municipalities, which means that there is the possibility that throughout their term they may be unclear about their roles and responsibilities.

3.4. Lack of Feedback on Ward Committee Reports

In most municipalities ward committee members are required to report to the ward councillor, who then submits a report to the Office of the Speaker. Unfortunately, there is often limited responsiveness from municipalities in terms of the reports submitted, which leads to reporting fatigue. Monthly reports from ward committees are seldom considered and feedback is not provided, which is frustrating and demotivating for ward committee members and community members.

3.5. Poor Handover Between Outgoing and Incoming Ward Committees

One issue that emerged strongly in our engagements with ward committees was the absence of a structured handover process between outgoing and newly elected ward committees. In several instances, the outgoing ward committees complete their term without transferring reports, community profiles, outstanding issues, or work that is still in progress. This results in incoming ward committees beginning their term without institutional memory or clarity on what has been done, what is outstanding, what commitments have been made to communities. The absence of proper handover undermines progress (continuity), hinders implementation, results in a duplication of efforts, and contributes to frustration among communities who expect follow through on the issues they raised in the past. Introducing a formalised and standardised handover process would significantly strengthen the transition process and ensure continuity in ward-level governance.

4. Recommendations for Strengthening the Functionality of Ward Committees

The COMPACT research made several recommendations to improve the functionality of ward committees and ensure that they serve as a two-way channel between communities and municipalities.[6] These recommendations are related to the following issues: improved resourcing and support for ward committees; establishing clear roles and responsibilities for ward committees; focus on training and capacity-building; actioning and feedback on ward committee reports; regular ward committee and public ward meetings; and ward committee involvement in performance and project monitoring.

4.1. Improved Resourcing and Support for Ward Committees

There should be a provision of adequate stipends, tools, and resources to ward committee members to enable them to perform their duties effectively. Tools of trade include ensuring that members have access to necessary materials such as stationary, communication tools, and a form of identification. Adequate compensation can also help retain committed and motivated committee members. Municipalities should consider revising policies to include fair remuneration for ward committee members. This could involve setting a standard stipend that reflects the average time commitment and responsibilities of committee members. Additionally, municipalities could explore performance-based incentives to reward members who exceed expectations and contribute significantly to community development. Ward committees should be allocated a ward budget to implement 'quick win' projects in the ward, and the use of this should be based on decisions made by the ward committee (not just at the discretion of the ward councillor).

4.2. Establishing Clear Roles and Responsibilities for Ward Committees

There needs to be a clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of ward committees and the necessary support provided by the Office of the Speaker to enhance their public participation function. This involves establishing clear guidelines and expectations for ward committee members, ensuring they understand their responsibilities and the scope of their work. Ward committee members

"need to know what their job is". Comprehensive role descriptions can help clarify duties and foster accountability, and municipalities should develop a ward committee policy that clearly set these out. This can assist with the challenge of political contestation in ward committees. COMPACT has developed a Community Participation Index which has six dimensions, including one on ward committee functionality. The indicators relate to the following issues: establishment and functionality of ward committees; representation; induction training; roles and responsibilities; identification; ward committee meetings; public ward meetings; role of the chairperson; reporting; and training and capacity-building. The indicators are framed as normative statements based on legislative and policy requirements, and comprehensive descriptions are provided. A checklist based on these indicators is provided at the end of this policy brief.

4.3. Focus on Training and Capacity-Building for Ward Committees

Continuous education and skills development are essential to empower ward committee members and enhance their ability to contribute meaningfully to local governance. Ward committee members need to understand their role and responsibilities and be provided with knowledge that assists them in fulfilling these. Providing certificates for training completed is a simple action that municipalities could undertake that would boost morale of ward committee members. Ward committee members have emphasised the need for practical training that covers areas such as communication, conflict resolution, community engagement, and local government processes. Comprehensive induction training is required at the beginning of the term, followed by refresher training sessions over the subsequent years. It is important that any new ward committee member that is elected be provided with some form of induction training. COMPACT has developed a pamphlet on ward committees (translated into several languages) which covers how ward committees work, how to support ward committees, what to do if a ward committee is not performing, and includes a checklist for a functional ward committee. The pamphlet on municipal councillors also sets out ways that councillors can work better with communities and ward committees. SALGA and COGTA have developed useful guides and videos for ward committees, and there should be a focus on updating these resources and making them more accessible to ward committees and ward councillors.

---

6   COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa, pp. 141-142.

4.4. Actioning and Feedback on Ward Committee Reports

There needs to be an effort made to ensure that ward committee reports are actioned within municipalities and maintain constant communication and feedback loops. This requires a systematic approach to reviewing and responding to reports, ensuring that issues raised by committees are addressed promptly. Implementing a tracking system for report follow-ups can enhance transparency and accountability. To achieve this municipalities should establish a standardised process for handling ward committee reports. This process should include clear timelines for reviewing and responding to reports, as well as designated personnel responsible for managing these tasks. By assigning specific roles and responsibilities, municipalities can ensure that reports are not overlooked and that appropriate actions are taken in a timely manner. One suggestion is that ward committee reports should be a standard item on the agenda of committee and council meetings. This should be in the performance contract of the municipal manager.

4.5. Regular Ward Committee and Public Ward Meetings

In many municipalities it is difficult to get ward councillors to commit to monthly meetings with ward committees and quarterly community meetings. In most municipalities the Office of the Speaker is responsible for dealing with missed meetings, and the responsibility lies there to ensure that regular meetings are being held with ward committees and communities. Oversight and consequence management in terms of this issue needs to be strengthened in municipalities. Regular public and ward committee meetings can foster engagement and accountability, and the scheduling of consistent meetings ensures that community members have regular opportunities to voice their concerns and stay informed about municipal activities. Publicising meeting schedules and agendas in advance can encourage greater participation and transparency, which is what community members desire from their municipalities. Publishing action minutes of meetings is important, and should be required from ward councillors, with support provided to ward secretaries.

4.6. Ward Committee Involvement in Performance and Project Monitoring

There is an opportunity for ward committees to play a valuable role on performance and project monitoring in municipalities. The COMPACT programme has developed a citizen-based monitoring (CBM) approach where ward committee members oversee the implementation of local government-funded infrastructure projects. They use a simple tech tool or a paper-based questionnaire to record monitoring data and collaborate with stakeholders to ensure effective project execution. This strategy offers communities, including ward committees, a new way to engage in government planning and service delivery, thereby enhancing public participation and local government accountability.[7] Effective ward committees require strong community engagement and trust. Building trust involves transparent communication, accountability, and responsiveness to community needs. Ward committees must actively seek input from residents and ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. Engaging with diverse community groups and addressing their concerns can foster a sense of ownership and collaboration. Trust is further reinforced when committees demonstrate tangible outcomes and improvements based on community feedback.

5. Conclusion

Ward committees have the potential to be vibrant structures and spaces for fostering public participation in local governance in South African municipalities. However, to realise their full potential, it is crucial to address the challenges they currently face. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this policy brief, municipalities can enhance the functionality and effectiveness of ward committees, leading to more inclusive and responsive participatory governance that truly puts people first.

---

7   For more information on citizen-based monitoring (CBM), see: https://pari.org.za/compact/

References

COGTA (2022) Video on Municipal Ward Committees (2022): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGXOFjBg0zw

COMPACT (2026) Citizen Based Monitoring (CBM): Case Study. January 2026.

COMPACT (2025) COMPACT Community Participation Index: Case Study. November 2025.

COMPACT (2025) Local Government Collaboration Model and Implementation Process: Facilitation Guide. September 2025.

COMPACT (2026) COMPACT Local Government Collaboration Model: Case Study. January 2026.

COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa: A Consolidated Technical Findings Report on Action Research at 12 Local Municipalities: https://pari.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/COMPACT-Consolidated-Technical-Findings-Report-FINAL-November-2024.pdf

COMPACT (2026) Municipal Councillors. Local Government Pamphlet Series.

COMPACT (2026) Ward Committees. Local Government Pamphlet Series.

DPLG (2005) Having your Say: A Handbook for Ward Committees: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/dplgwardhandbook0.pdf

Khuzwayo K (2009) "The Role of Ward Committees in Facilitating Community Participation in Municipal Planning". Research is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Town and Regional Planning, in School of Architecture, Planning and Housing, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa: https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/00b71983-66dc-410f-8fe1-2af100d570df/content

SALGA (2016) Ward Committee Establishment and Election Guiding Framework (2016): https://salga.org.za/nc/docs/Ward_Committee_Establishment_and_Election_Guiding_Framework_2016.pdf

SALGA (2023) Ward Committee Members Code of Conduct: https://www.salga.org.za/Documents/Municipalities/Guidelines for Municipalities/Code-Of-Conduct-For-Ward-Committee-Members.pdf

SALGA (Date Unknown) Effective Ward Governance System Guide: https://www.salga.org.za/Documents/Knowledge-products-per-theme/Governance n Intergovernmental Relations/Effective Ward Governance System.pdf

Silima T and Auriacombe C J (2013) "The Role of Ward Committees in Citizen Participation and the Socio-Economic Development of Communities" Administratio Publica 21(3): https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/ejc-adminpub-v21-n3-a4

Acknowledgements

Checklist for Functional Ward Committees

		Yes or no
Establishment:	Ward committees have been established in all wards.	
Representation:	Ward committees are representative in terms of the diversity of each ward (geographical and sector).	
Induction training:	The municipality provides useful induction training for new ward committee members.	
Roles and responsibilities:	Ward committees are active structures that support community-based planning and consider the needs and interests of the community. Ward plans are developed in consultation with the community and key stakeholders.	
Stipend:	Ward committee members are paid their stipend in full and on time each month.	
Resourcing and support:	Ward committee members are provided with the necessary resources and support to undertake their work in communities, including means of identification (for visibility in communities).	
Ward meetings:	Monthly ward meetings with the ward councillor and ward committee members are held.	
Public ward meetings:	Public meetings are held in wards on a regular basis (at least once a quarter), as well as street and block meetings where appropriate.	
Role of chairperson:	There is a good working relationship between the ward councillor and ward committee members.	
Reporting:	Monthly ward committee reports are properly processed through the speaker's office and placed on committee and council agendas for discussion and actioning.	
Training and capacity-building:	The municipality provides ongoing training and capacity-building for ward committee members during their term of office (refresher training).	