

## **The power of peer reviews in building a learning network for local government in South Africa**

*Zenobia Africa and Martin Nicol*

### **Introduction**

Peer reviews get people in local government to talk to one another about the burning issues they face in their work. In South Africa in the last year, this has included literally flaming car tyres in the streets as well as untreated sewerage and power cuts due to cable thefts. In 2004, 136 of the nation's 284 municipalities were enrolled in Project Consolidate, a programme announced by the President to assist struggling local authorities to improve their operational capacity. There is a great deal to discuss in local government and there are many lessons to share – some of which are very positive.

An innovative Peer Review programme, run since 2003 under the auspices of the national government department responsible for local government, has proved a helpful and productive way of exchanging knowledge, much of it based on hard experience. Participating municipalities select themselves for inclusion by joining a local or district Learning Network.

Although the concepts of peer review and knowledge networks have long been used in scientific communities, it has only recently come to be used at the local government level in South Africa. For it to be successful, this paper will argue that a number of pre-conditions are necessary. Firstly, peer reviews need to be well-resourced and closely supported. The value of a peer review depends on expert organization that starts well before the actual event. Secondly, political and administrative champions to drive the networks are pivotal to its success. Thirdly, there needs to be a virtuous cycle in which the contextual learning and active participation afforded to network members by the peer review process is able, in turn, to exert a direct energising and animating effect on the members as well as the network itself. Fourthly, the process must allow peer pressure to develop as a real force. The accountability inherent in a process of this nature positively impacts on the way the network is experienced by members.

### **History and background**

With the enactment of Apartheid laws in 1948, racial discrimination in South Africa was institutionalized. The policy of Apartheid, based on the separation of races, structured the political, economic and social life of the nation. Race laws touched every aspect of social life, including a prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites, and the sanctioning of 'white-only' jobs. The education system of the

country was engineered to provide 'gutter education' to blacks and proper professional and skills training only to whites.

The South African political landscape pre-1994 was characterized by exclusionary politics on a number of levels. The most obvious was franchise. Blacks were not allowed to vote in municipal elections in any of the 'white' cities. Ordinary citizens were excluded from many forms of civic life and had no opportunities for any meaningful participation. The environment was characterised by unrest and instability across the land. Systems, processes and procedures were deliberately developed to ensure that the disenfranchised remained powerless in every way.

When Apartheid was dismantled after 1990, immediate change was brought on to try and integrate all aspects of South African life. However, the impact of exclusionary politics is still being felt in South African society today and presents a major challenge to integration. People who had never had broad educational opportunities found themselves elected as councillors and appointed as mayoral committee members. The learning curve has been long and steep.

### **A 'new way of doing things'**

1994 heralded in a 'new way of doing things.' For a start, everyone could vote for their government. New municipal boundaries were drawn that included every part of the country and broke the old Apartheid divisions. At the local government level, specifically, many opportunities were created for participatory civil life. Municipalities held meetings and forums to listen to people and hear their needs and aspirations. Alongside the entrenchment of democracy, there has been the increasing stabilization of South Africa: socially, politically and economically. The politically focused upheaval and conflict which characterised the dying years of Apartheid has been firmly relegated to the past. But the country is still driven by deep inequalities which often manifest themselves in local tensions.

Although democracy was definitely the preferred political system, it also presented the government with twin challenges: institutional transformation and the introduction of new policies in line with the democratic Constitution, and; dealing with the legacy of Apartheid in South Africa while integrating the country in a rapidly changing global environment. From 1994, the State has set out to dismantle Apartheid social relations and create a democratic society based on equity, non-racialism and non-sexism. New policies and programmes have been put in place to dramatically improve the quality of life of all citizens.

Converting democratic ideals into practice required, among other things, initiating a radical overhaul of the machinery of government at every level, towards service delivery, openness, and a culture of human rights. It has required an integrated approach to planning and implementation to ensure that the many different aspects of transformation and socio-economic strengthening cohere with maximum impact. Local government itself underwent a major transformation at the institutional as well as process levels. The greatest impact of the transformation process was the

introduction of new enabling legislation which gives appropriate officials the authority to implement or enforce the law and offers citizens many occasions to participate in civic life. The last five years have seen a total, and often wrenching, readjustment of institutional forms, as a whole set of new laws and regulations governing municipalities has been implemented.

The highly prescriptive laws and regulations on finance, procurement, property rates and internal governance would threaten the stability of any corporation, let alone uncertain and vulnerable municipalities. In addition, municipalities have to honour all the normal business requirements on employment equity, labour standards, skills and education, and black economic empowerment. The last act required by the Constitution that relates to intergovernmental relations, came into place only in 2005. The legislative landscape of local government has changed in important ways every year. The new suite of legislation requires municipalities to develop innovative approaches to dealing with issues. Together with the new and very complex, legal structure, added responsibilities imposed by the Constitution and the Municipal Demarcation Board, municipalities now cover every inch of South Africa.

Since 2001, participatory democracy and interactive governance have been strengthened through the practice of *Imbizo*, in which members of the executive, in all three spheres of government, including the Presidency, regularly engage directly with the public around implementation of programmes of reconstruction and development.

### **Developmental local government**

In addition, the concept of 'developmental local government' was flagged as the desired form of local government. Developmental local government means a local government committed to:

*Work with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives. (White Paper on Local Government 1996)*

It includes a number of inter-related characteristics:

- Maximizing social development and economic growth;
- Integrating and co-ordinating;
- Democratizing development; and
- Leading and learning.

For municipalities to become developmental in nature, they have to change the way they work. This requires municipalities to co-ordinate all development activities within their areas of jurisdiction.

Developmental local government thus seeks not only to democratize local government by introducing the notion of elected representatives, but also to transform local governance, with a new focus on improving the standard of living and quality of life of previously disadvantaged sectors of the community. In

addition, developmental local government requires that citizens should actively participate in development initiatives in their areas. This is a hugely ambitious agenda. In each locality, national principles have to be moulded to match very different local conditions and capacities.

In taking the call for development to heart, the learning networks have been set up precisely in ways that encourage maximum participation and promote new ways of doing things at the local government level. Peer reviews specifically have shown themselves to be a most useful way of getting networks of knowledge and experience to promote learning in local government.

## **Knowledge sharing at local government level**

As the new laws for local government became widely implemented from 2000, a number of programmes were put in place to enhance knowledge sharing between municipal institutions. The Horizontal Learning Programme (Hologram) was the first to encourage learning and sharing among municipalities in South Africa. Hologram was a donor-funded and service provider managed project with a well-connected strategic political leadership which guided the programme.

The Hologram programme included 3 main work streams:

- Municipal research support;
- Information-dissemination and
- Municipal learning support.

The municipal research support stream involved a Local Government Research Fund which commissioned relevant, topical research over a two-year period. The information-dissemination stream focused primarily on commissioning and distributing newsletters on issues relevant to local government, as well as conducting seminars in centres around the country. The newsletters were complemented by audio tapes and CDs on topical issues facing local government. Practitioners across the country were invited to share their experience and submit material. Hologram materials were circulated in as many public fora as possible.

In 2003, the District Learning Network (DLN) and Local Learning Network (LLN) were established with a district municipality comprising from 3 to 8 local municipalities sometimes managing a range of services on behalf of the locals. The networks consist of 16 district and 10 local municipalities respectively and are championed by political figureheads with the support of the South African Local Government Association (Salga) and the Department of Provincial and Local Government (dplg). Each network has a work plan which is tailored to the current needs and preferred activities of its members. Network members participate voluntarily and contribute through their municipal budgets to enable the network to be self-funded. Funds from Salga and dplg are used to pay external service providers, as and when necessary. Both networks have adopted Peer Reviews as their flagship programmes.

## The Peer Review Programme

*The only kind of learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered or self-appropriated learning - truth that has been assimilated in experience. (Carl Rogers)*

Rogers' quote summarizes the basic premise of the South African Local Government Peer Review Programme.

Peer reviews are hands-on events. Typically the review involves a five-day evaluation exercise, with members of the review team visiting the municipality, meeting staff, councillors and stakeholders and getting a feel for how the organization functions. The hands-on approach which is the mainstay of the review methodology compels the team to immerse itself in all the activities of the municipality. This facilitates two way learning. Led by the mayor of a network member, the review team convenes regularly to discuss what they are finding. It is a structured, but not regimented process. As the Minister of Local and Provincial Government, Fholisani Mufamadi says:

*This is not an inspection but a supportive approach undertaken by friends, albeit critical friends and its intention is to help a municipality identify its current strengths as well as its weaknesses.*

Yet peer pressure has emerged as a strong and surprising feature of peer reviews conducted at the local government level in South Africa. After a mayor, or a city manager or councillors, have been part of a peer review team, they want to make sure that their colleagues come up to scratch when it is their turn to be hosts. After a review report has been issued, mayors will quote favourable findings:

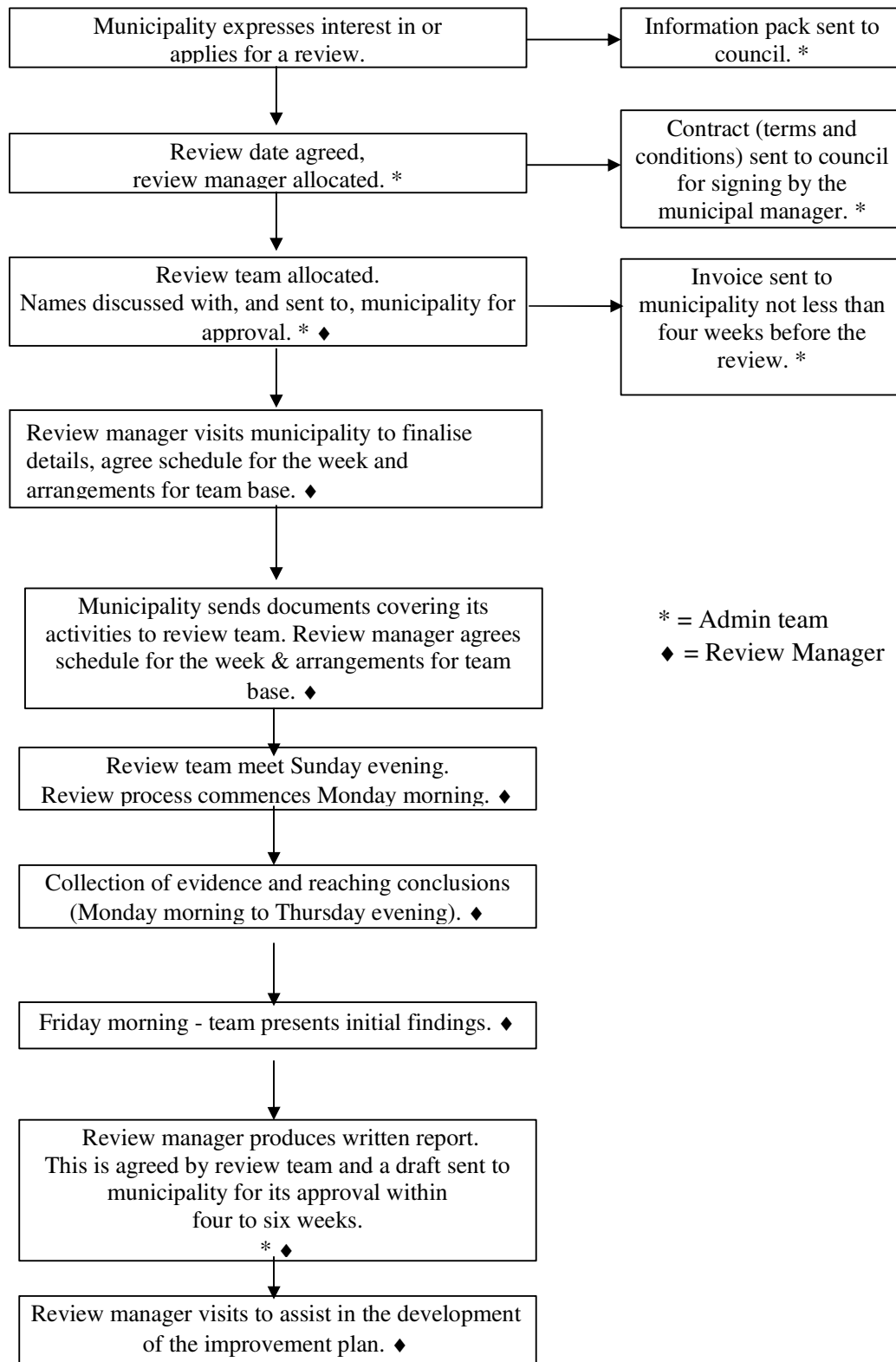
*During the peer review, it came up that Ugu has a very good relationship between the administration and the politicians. This is an area in which there are often problems elsewhere. (Mayor S Cele, Ugu District Municipality).*

### Peer review process

Over the past 3 years, ODA, a private-sector service provider, has lead the administrative team by organizing the logistics for the peer reviews and, as Review Manager, preparing the documentation and programme for the review teams. ODA also plays an active role during the peer review process as a facilitator to assist the Mayor or City Manager who leads the peer review.

Figure 1 outlines the process to be followed during the pre-, actual and post-review process, also highlighting the relative responsibility to be taken by the appropriate parties.

**Figure 1: The peer review process**



**Figure 2: Composition of the review team**

<u>Who is in the Review Team?</u>	
For example: the peer review for Amathole District Municipality was made up as follows:	
Councillor Mvoko	Mayor of Cacadu DM (SA now has an executive mayoral system where the mayor is a politician, but in full time work for his/her council)
Councillor Neville Felix	Mayoral committee member (The mayor has an advisory committee called a Mayco), Sedibeng DM
Councillor Shimi Phate	Chief Whip, West Rand DM
Councillor Mike Mabuse	Mayoral Committee member, Ehlanzeni DM
Mr Joe Mohlakoana	Municipal Manager of West Rand DM (the municipal manager is the senior civil servant in each local government)
Mr P Gwacela	Municipal Manager of Umgungundlovu DM
Ms Nontobeka Mahlalela	Deputy Director, Ehlanzeni DM
Mr Vic Folose	Strategic director, Sedibeng DM
Ms Nisreen Mosam	Chief financial officer, Waterberg DM
Mr Charles Thloahle	Administrative support, South African Local Government Association
Ms Bongiwe Mculcu	Programme head, department of provincial and local government
Ms Vuyiswa Sidzumo	Observer, dplg
Ms Zenobia Africa	Review manager, ODA
Mr Themba Mfene	Review support, ODA

The actual peer review involves an intensive week long process during which a Review Team, representing municipalities throughout the country, engages the host municipality and its stakeholders on a range of listed issues. Interviews are supported by document analysis. The week's work culminates in a presentation to the host municipality attended also by some of the stakeholders who were interviewed. A comprehensive written report is submitted to the host municipality by the Review Manager within three weeks of the review.

### **The benchmark**

The peer review is underscored by a customized benchmark for local authorities in South Africa. This benchmark provides the framework through which all activities on the peer review are viewed. The intention of the benchmark is to be able to provide a comprehensive picture of a municipality at any given point in time. This particular benchmark has been developed to capture the concepts underpinning developmental local government (as discussed earlier). It provides a measure of structure to areas which require probing. Given the often controversial nature of the beast that is local government, the benchmark has undergone a number of iterations

to reflect the current situation as accurately as possible. Network members have participated in a small task team in the customization of the benchmark.

### **Box 1: Components of the benchmark**

<p><b>Sustainable development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding the current reality</li> <li>Vision, strategy and the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) of the municipality</li> <li>Ensuring basic services and infrastructure for all</li> <li>Maximizing social development and community empowerment</li> <li>Stimulating economic development</li> <li>Focussing on vulnerable groups</li> </ul> <p><b>Leading and learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership</li> <li>Change management</li> <li>Motivation</li> <li>Innovation and creativity</li> <li>Partnerships and alliance building</li> <li>Stakeholder focus</li> <li>Communications, consultation and participation</li> </ul> <p><b>Governance and democracy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good governance</li> <li>Deepening democracy</li> </ul> <p><b>Intergovernmental relations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship with local municipalities</li> <li>Relations with other District Municipalities</li> <li>Relationships with national government</li> <li>Relationships with provincial government</li> <li>Internal relationships</li> </ul> <p><b>Performance management and resource management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systems and processes</li> <li>People management: restructuring and HR</li> <li>Operations and project management</li> <li>Monitoring and Evaluation</li> </ul> <p><b>Financial management and control</b></p>
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The peer review process is only as good as the people who champion and manage it. The current programme is administratively managed by the South African Local Government Association in cooperation with external service providers. On the political front, the programme is overseen by a steering committee elected from the



network members. This elected structure plays an important role in ensuring accountability of network members to the programme.

The political champions play an important role in lending credibility to the process and encouraging their peers to participate in the programme through an element of peer pressure.

The administrative champion/secretariat plays a vital role in ensuring that the programme is resourced on a variety of levels, that consistent levels of professionalism are maintained and that the programme objectives are obtained according to the highest standards. This has certainly shown itself to be an important issue for the South African peer review programme. During handover periods where inadequate provision had been made for the management of the programme, it is possible that standards may not have been maintained and network members were not entirely satisfied with the levels of service they had received.

The peer review process brings a wide range of issues to the surface, many of them positive but, in some cases, also some serious challenges, such as corruption. At this point in the process, it is important to tread carefully before broad conclusions are drawn. Having senior politicians as part of the team often assists in a politically sensitive situation as space is created for debate about various democratic issues. When seasoned politicians are challenged by their new comrades, this always makes for very stimulating debate.

## **Peer review and knowledge exchange**

The peer review process is deliberately designed to afford participants opportunities to exchange knowledge throughout the week. These opportunities are both formal and informal, during and post the review. Review members typically work in groups of 2-3 throughout the day so various levels of exchange have already taken place.

In comparison to peer assists, a peer review is a comprehensive process which provides a general impression and assessment of an institution. A peer assist is a meeting that brings together a group of peers to get feedback on a problem, project, or activity. The meeting seeks to learn from participants' knowledge and experience with topics related to the problem, project or activity. A peer assist can happen before an activity to help with the planning process, or during an activity to help steer the direction.

During the week of the peer review, dedicated time is set aside each evening to reflect on the day's activities within a facilitated session led by the review manager. Apart from opportunities for reflection and debriefing, it also allows team members to discuss and explore activities in which other team members are engaged. As a result of this, many forms of knowledge exchange take place in the post review process. This includes peer-to-peer exchanges, coaching and mentoring, study tours, etc. between municipalities. A number of previously dormant twinning arrangements

have become re-activated as a result of the peer review process as network members start understanding the vast scope for learning and sharing.

Regular plenary sessions are held in the network with at least half of the time allocated devoted to the peer review programme. Special plenary sessions are convened following the completion of a number of peer reviews. These plenary sessions are normally hosted by one of the network members in his/her district. This provides a space for reflection, deliberation and rumination on the process and its outcomes. It also highlights particular areas which require specific focus. Network members are invited to share their experience of the peer review, as well as highlight issues that are common to all members so that appropriate action e.g. further research can be taken. These plenary sessions are vital to the programme as it is one way of ensuring that programme objectives are aligned to programme results.

Peer review reports, once finalized and accepted by the reviewed municipality, become public property. They are distributed to network members at these plenary sessions and are also uploaded onto a public website.

The power of the peer review process is that a relatively simple concept that could be replicated cheaply in many similar institutions has the ability to surface substantive content issues beneficial to the municipality being reviewed as well as provide participants in the process with a rewarding practical experience of local government.

At the end of each peer review process the host municipality produces an Improvement Plan to address the issues which have been surfaced by the review. These are detailed and specific. The following three examples are useful.

### **1. Siyanda Bridge**

Siyanda District Municipality is located in the Northern Cape Province. The town of Upington provides excellent infrastructure to the lower Orange River Region. Intensive crop irrigation is practiced along the riverbanks, with table grapes, raisins, lucerne and cotton as the main products. The community of Riemvasmaak was the first Presidential Land Reform project in the post-Apartheid South Africa. It is a small, poor community which mainly survives by working on the grape farms on either side of the river.

One of the conclusions of the Siyanda peer review was as follows:

*In Riemvasmaak, the building of a bridge across the Orange River and the improvement of the roads will greatly assist the development of the economy. A suggestion was made that Siyanda District Municipality initiate this project which could include a wide variety of national government departments and stakeholders.*

A year later, the District Municipality had managed to secure funding of R27 million from national and provincial government for the construction of the bridge for the Riemvasmaak and farming communities. The construction of the bridge is currently

in process and will have a number of economic spin-offs as it will generate many economic activities in the area and provide easy access to the markets.

## **2. Sedibeng/Amathole Twinning arrangement**

Sedibeng and Amathole District Municipalities are similar sized municipalities situated in the Gauteng and Eastern Cape Provinces respectively. They both face similar challenges such as very populous areas, declining tax base and numerous backlogs. In an effort to enhance learning and collaboration on projects aimed at enhancing the performance of district municipalities, these two districts entered into a twinning agreement. The agreement has enabled a number of peer-to-peer exchanges to take place, site visits to mutually relevant projects, and peer assists on challenges in the municipalities.

The peer review programme has reinforced this twinning agreement by making officials and politicians available to participate in peer reviews in each of the municipalities. Learning from these reviews has enabled the municipalities to start implementing best practices with regard to service delivery systems which are currently operational in each other's institutions.

## **3. Waterberg Intergovernmental Alignment: building social capital**

Waterberg District Municipality is located in the Limpopo Province. The Waterberg peer review identified a number of challenges with regard to intergovernmental cooperation and alignment in the area. Local municipalities in the district expressed concern that the District Municipality was operating in a 'big brother' fashion which was alienating relationships between the two. The governance arrangements were problematic and did not foster good intergovernmental relations.

As a result of the peer review process, the district municipality has pro-actively put mechanisms in place to enhance governance in the area. Intergovernmental Forums, namely, the District Mayors' Forum, District Municipal Managers' Forum, District Speakers' and Traditional Leaders' Forums were established and are involved in public participation activities. The promulgation of the national Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act has also strengthened the imperative to ensure the continued functioning of these various fora. It may sound like an endless round of meetings but the reality is that better communication and functioning networks actually allow things to happen.

## **Conclusions**

### **Peer reviews are inclusive: they are good for building democracy**

If you are serious about democracy, you have to accept the people elected as public representatives as they are. In South Africa, many were denied formal educational opportunities under Apartheid. Their skills in reading long documents and drafting reports are still limited. The Peer Review, with its emphasis on team assessment, on a mix of oral and written sources, on conversations as well as scorecards, makes learning accessible to more people.

### **Peer reviews reveal the actual issues often not covered in documents**

Municipal officials are used to writing documents and preparing reports. Indeed that is a back-breaking part of many jobs, where accountability is linked to documents and compliance with laws and regulations may be achieved by nothing else. The peer review team looks beyond the documents to the issues raised by live stakeholders and live officials within the municipality.

### **Peer reviews spread insights, learning and experience: much of which is normally hidden**

Despite all the rhetoric, people do not talk to one another. Even within organizations, the housing people never talk to the transport people and the fire people do not talk to the fire department. Between our spheres of government there are now laws to force people to talk. Peer reviews provide the framework for a structured conversation that involves people who should talk to one another more. They make intergovernmental relations a matter of interest, not compliance.

Peer reviews provide a really useful tool for local authorities to exchange information on things that matter: service delivery; sorting out the tensions between politicians and officials; organizational restructuring for better effectiveness and, of course, how you deal with those burning tires in the streets.

### **Web resources**

You can see the latest Benchmark in full at [www.ksp.org.za](http://www.ksp.org.za)

You can read a peer review report at [http://www.ksp.org.za/dlngen\\_siyanda.htm](http://www.ksp.org.za/dlngen_siyanda.htm) (remembering that the report is just a reflection of the learning, not the purpose of the process).

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## **Abstract**

Ten municipalities in South Africa have benefited from hosting peer reviews that assess the developmental thrust of the new, post-Apartheid local government system.

The paper illustrates the value which sector-specific learning networks bring to local, district and metropolitan municipalities as they confront development and equity challenges. These networks are premised on sharing and learning between members. Each network has a clear work programme with adequate resources and multiple opportunities to share learning. Institutional support at both the political and administrative level is important for the networks to function efficiently. High participation levels by senior politicians and officials is key to their success. Peer review methodology is used as a central activity for collective buy-in. It structures the work programme of the network and provides hands-on experience for members. Operating under a new, inclusive political system, covering areas previously excluded from local control and involving people new to traditions of self-government and good governance, South Africa's municipalities face huge responsibilities. Learning networks are a powerful tool to make sense of hard experiences and to strengthen democratic structures. They also highlight many problems of capacity, corruption and trust and provide a forum in which they can be confronted.

## **About the authors**

*Zenobia Africa* is a member of the management team and responsible for knowledge capital at ODA in Cape Town, South Africa. ODA is a majority black owned strategic change management consultancy specialising in complex, large-scale institutional and social change processes. *Zenobia* has coordinated peer reviews for the Local and District Learning Networks and has worked on projects with local governments across the country.

*Zenobia Africa, ODA (Pty) Ltd. Unit F3, 1st Floor, 155 Loop Street, Cape Town 8001. Tel: +27 21 422 2970 Fax: +27 21 422 2934 E-mail: [zenobia@oda.co.za](mailto:zenobia@oda.co.za)*

*Martin Nicol* is an economist who has worked for the South African trade union movement and for the national Department of Trade and Industry. He is a senior consultant at ODA in Cape Town, South Africa.

*Martin Nicol, ODA (Pty) Ltd. Unit F3, 1st Floor, 155 Loop Street, Cape Town 8001. Tel: +27 21 422 2970 Fax: +27 21 422 2934 E-mail: [martin@oda.co.za](mailto:martin@oda.co.za)*