

Between polls and promises, comes the reality

IT'S WHERE we queue when our rates are in arrears. Where we go to complain about blackouts, or when the brimming pothole in the road outside threatens to overflow. To contest, and grudgingly pay traffic fines, apply for a new wheelie bin and seek refuge when our homes are flooded by the Cape winter rains.

It's the local municipal office, and despite the many achievements by this sphere of government around the country, a visit can often be a frustrating and undignified experience.

For some, like the hundreds of protesting residents of Rietfontein and Ficksburg who have been recent targets of police rubber bullets, engagement with local government through standard bureaucratic channels has apparently proved fruitless.

South Africa's 283 municipalities are constitutionally mandated to provide basic services and infrastructure to the communities within their boundaries, as well as to promote local economic and social development and ensure a safe and healthy area environment. The perhaps less tangible, but equally critical tasks of this sphere are, according to Section 152 of the Constitution, to "provide democratic and accountable government for local communities" and to encourage active citizen participation at local level. However, many will agree that local government's delivery track record is often reviewed with grim distaste, and never more so than in the lead-up to elections, as councillors vie to retain their positions and political parties bicker over policy and performance.

For better or for worse, citizens appear to take only limited interest in the heightened horse-trading that happens around local election time. Fewer than half of all registered voters (48%) turned out at local government elections in both 2000 and 2006, compared to

Analysis

KATE LEFKO-EVERETT

a far higher 77% in national elections in 2009 and 2004.

It is not difficult to understand why, when so many have not experienced the delivery that this constitutional mandate prescribes. In 2004, 60% of

households in 155 municipalities did not have access to water in their homes or on their properties. 60% of households in 203 municipalities did not have access to flush toilets. In a further 122 municipalities, 60% had no electricity.

Fast forward to 2010, when Deputy Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) Yunus Carrim acknowledged that still, only about half of all South Africans (54%) nationwide have access to all four basic services delivered by local government: water, sanitation, electricity and refuse removal.

Further, access differs dramatically according to province. A clear majority of residents of the Western Cape (88%), Gauteng (79%) and the Northern Cape (71%) live with access to these four basic services. This, however, is not the case in other provinces, with access levels at only 38% in the North West, 33% in the Eastern Cape and an unbelievable 15% in Limpopo.

Though perhaps intuitive to most of us, research also confirms that a majority of South Africans view these services – and the social, economic and psychological benefits they bring – as minimum, essential features of a decent and dignified life in this country. The 2006 Social Attitudes Survey conducted by the HSRC found that nine in ten respondents view mains electricity in a home as "essential", and 85% described street lighting in the same way. More than three-fourths also described having a flush toilet at home and living in a neighbourhood without rubbish in the streets as "essential". A slightly lower 62% viewed having a bath or shower at home as among the minimum living standards that South Africans should not

do without. Dissatisfaction with local government is also evident in the findings of the SA Reconciliation Barometer survey, conducted annually by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. When asked about confidence in local government, survey respondents perennially report far lower approval levels than in respect of provincial or national institutions. In 2010, more than half of all South Africans (55%) indicated that they have little or no confidence in local government.

Deputy Minister Carrim has commented: "Clearly we have to accelerate service delivery. We have no choice. For as much as we have made significant progress since 1994, we have simply not done enough." The consequence of this, he suggests, is that "the people, who are the ultimate judges, have announced their verdict repeatedly through the constant service delivery protests and in other ways".

Carrim has correctly cautioned that not all issues that have inspired recent spates of protest action fall within the ambit of the local sphere, including housing, job creation, education and safety and security.

However, in a pervasively protesting society, the contribution of service delivery failures to the untransformed and undignified daily lived experiences of many South Africans should not be underestimated. Municipal IQ finds that action specifically directed against local government account for two-thirds of all protests in South Africa since 2004, and these have affected 40% of all local and metro municipalities. Research released last year by the Community Law Centre has also found that, in addition to a rise in numbers, such protests have become increasingly violent.

Government's planned response is indeed an ambitious one. Vision 2014 imagines universal access to affordable basic services, the formalisation of all informal settlements, reduced infrastructure backlogs, and clean cities with effective waste management systems in place, all in the next three years.

The CoGTA department has also adopted a



NO MIDDLE GROUND: Clashes over service delivery will continue unless the government is able to make good its promises. Picture: GALLO IMAGES

Local Government Turnaround Strategy that emphasises the need to improve the quality of leadership in this sphere, as well as improve on accountability, transparency and performance. Led by the clarion call that "Local Government is Everyone's Business", the strategy aims to "restore the confidence of the majority of our people in municipalities, as the primary delivery machine of the developmental state at the local level".

However, with elections rapidly approaching, it remains to be seen whether or not South Africans will truly begin to take up their local grievances at the ballot box. Or, though the need for strong messages from voters to local government representatives has perhaps never before been greater, will most South Africans once again stay away from polling stations? Lefko-Everett is project leader at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's Political Analysis Unit