

Balancing the books against bread and butter

The fault lines in Msunduzi Municipality's
budget process

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JULIE Smith's opinion piece, "The hunger games" (30 April), aptly commented on the impact of proposed water and electricity tariff increases from the perspective of the consumer. In some ways it is simplistic in its blaming an "oligarchy" and "a small group of the rich and locally powerful for adopting anti-poor policies". In other ways she does not go far enough in her reach of the average low-income consumer. She talks of being deprived of the decision to (or not to) take a bath or flush a toilet with the desired result, but to many living in what we commonly refer to as "RDP housing" those are luxuries.

In the last few weeks, Msunduzi Municipality embarked on a public consultation on its draft budget. It was a welcome relief, after two years of being under provincial administration, and a near-breakdown in communication between citizens governed by the municipality and the powers that were. It was not without faults. In particular, community representatives who rely on public transport cannot get home from the city hall at night and their voices were not heard in the process.

There are arguments that the budget is 90% set in stone by the time it goes out to statutory public consultation. The acid test of the current imbizo process will be whether it results in any tariff revisions before the final draft is submitted to the executive committee and full council, as hyper-inflation increases in water and electricity will have a devastating impact on those who can least afford them.

The 2009 National Turnaround Strategy for Local Government, adopted in the wake of prolonged service delivery protests, recognised the need for deeper engagement with civil society on matters of municipal governance. As the Municipal Systems Act refers, it is about going beyond the right to vote every five years to a system of "participatory governance". The turnaround strategy acknowledges the failings of elected representatives who are blissfully ignorant of their obligation to conduct quarterly community meetings, to report back on municipal activities and provide space to engage on matters of civic concern. It is in the Code of Conduct annexed to the act.

The turnaround strategy also made strong statements about reforming ward committees, and establishing sub-structures such as "block" and "street" committees. While this may sound very ambitious, it is a space citizens — either by virtue of being neighbours or sharing a common interest — can and should occupy, and not wait for government to do it for them. And yet it is only when citizens are driven to desperation that they form social movements or organise protest marches.

Two notes of caution should not go unheeded by the administration. Firstly, if it is not seen to be sincere in its engagement with citizens, people will rapidly lose faith, more so because their hopes have been dashed on so many previous occasions. Placing Mayor Chris Ndlela on a podium to be "asking for a 22% increase in water and 16% in electricity tariffs" without a motivation simply calls for cries of protest. It does not invite engagement and does not empower citizens to do so.

Julie Smith raised an important analytical point about how the bulk and municipal tariffs are constructed, and how we were misled in the representation of the municipal tariff increase. I had this corroborated by a senior manager in Umgeni Water, unfortunately after the imbizo. We did make some comparisons and ask, in a written submission, why uMgungundlovu District can balance its books with a proposed tariff 36% below that of Msunduzi.

The second cautionary is that arguing tariff alone, without taking into account supply and demand factors, does not deal with underlying performance issues in the municipality. Positive measures have been made to reduce mains pressure (and thereby the incidence of burst pipes), replace our ageing infrastructure using non-invasive trenchless technology, and encourage people to report leaks. Again, if the public does not see results — when water leaks are repeatedly reported and left unattended — they will lose faith and interest, even though it affects us all in the form of higher tariffs to recover the cost of the losses.

Another final aspect of service delivery that probably falls below the radar of most consumers is billing. We hear of numerous complaints of incorrect billing that give rise to anger and frustration in the customer service hall at the A. S. Chetty Building. BESG discovered, in the course of doing a spot community survey, that several newly developed areas still do not have a postal delivery system. Accounts are either wedged in garden fences or simply thrown over the fence into the garden. Some are billed for refuse collection but receive no service. We do not have the resources to undertake a comprehensive city-wide survey. It is surely the responsibility of the administration, in the interests of reducing waste and customer dissatisfaction, to undertake a performance audit of the entire meter-reading and billing system, and from there instigate a major overhaul of service delivery.

We should all look forward to regular reports from our ward councillors on how the administration is managing these challenges before next year's imbizo process.

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