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IMPLEMENTING MONITORING AND EVALUATION AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL: THE CASE OF A SOUTH AFRICAN DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) have been identified as important management and planning instruments for the South African government. M&E in government have therefore been implemented at the national and provincial levels by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), while the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (DCoGTA) has been responsible for M&E in the local government sphere (Phillips et al 2014; DCoGTA 2015: 35). The implementation of the government-wide M&E system proved not to be mandatory for local government, although some municipalities piloted its introduction (Govender 2011; Gopane 2012; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Zwane 2014; Mthethwa & Jili 2016; Nelson 2016; Mello 2018). One of the municipalities that did introduce the system is the Ilanga District Municipality.¹

The Ilanga District Municipality decided to establish an M&E unit in 2014. However, because staff left the service of the municipality around that time and as a result of a subsequent lack of capacity after the decision was taken, the unit was dormant for several months. As part of an international development and co-operative governance support initiative, the municipality received additional support from a development advisor and restarted actively setting up the M&E unit from early 2015 onwards. The purpose of this chapter is to use this municipality as an evaluation case in order to illustrate the typical challenges that could be faced by municipalities when they establish an M&E unit. The case is also useful as a way of sharing the lessons learned during this process.

The first part of the chapter discusses the theoretical and methodological

1 The name of the municipality has been changed to a fictional name after a request from the administrators working there who were interviewed.

implications of this case study. The second part provides an introduction to M&E at the level of local government in South Africa. The third section then describes the development of the M&E unit at the Ilanga District Municipality and highlights a critical incident of evaluation. Finally, the case is discussed and analysed for its implications and the possible lessons to be learned by public administrators who introduce M&E systems. The last section concludes the chapter and once again highlights the significant findings and offers some points for further discussion.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

From an organisational management perspective, the introduction of M&E systems falls in line with the increased use of results-based management, which is a tool for monitoring the implementation of a strategy and whether an organisation reaches its desired goals (Kusek & Rist 2004). The principles of results-based management (RBM) are to monitor performance and report findings to management in order for them to take informed steps to improve performance. However, the introduction of such systems is usually marked by a deep impact on organisations and a number of challenges, which, significantly, are usually not of a technical nature but are instead linked to the social uptake and organisational consequences of such a change (Mayne 2007).

From an organisational–theoretical perspective, it is therefore helpful to understand how people in organisations make sense of what is happening in their organisation by trying to explain and give meaning to specific actions and events (Weick 1995; Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills 2010; Schildt, Mantere & Cornelissen 2020). This is particularly interesting, considering the uncertainty caused, for example, by the introduction of new organisational practices and processes – such as M&E in this case. The expectation is therefore that public administrators, when confronted with such a change or whose projects are monitored and evaluated, will use their existing experience and insight to make sense of the newly introduced methods. By doing so, they will add meaning to their existing frame of reference. New experiences will therefore be cognitively framed in a meaningful way for the person experiencing a situation or an event. Such understanding will create narratives which, in turn, will lead to specific actions in organisations. Such a conceptual framework is useful for analysing and understanding different actors’ interpretations of and perspectives on situations and their connected interests. The collective provision of meaning therefore results in actual consequences in organisations.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The primary purpose of this chapter is to offer insights into the introduction and practice of M&E in the sphere of local government in South Africa. The way of doing so is through studying a district municipality as an example of a typical case of such an introduction and practice. The overall time frame for the analysis and description is from the introduction of M&E into the district municipality's organisational structure in 2014 until the end of 2019. However, the main reason for providing insights into the practice of M&E in local government in South Africa is to describe the train of events that ensued after one specific evaluation performed in 2015. This is because the episode is rich in information and has also had lasting effects both at the municipality and on the overall operation of the M&E unit in particular. It seemed most appropriate, therefore, to focus on this case as a critical incident (Flanagan 1954; Butterfield et al 2005; Weatherbee 2010) that occurred shortly after the introduction of M&E at the municipality, since this incident is rich in material for illustrative and analytical purposes.

The methodological approach to the data collection for this study consists of a thematic document and literature analysis, while narrative key informant interviews were used for the specific information on the case itself. Those individuals interviewed were selected on the basis of their positions and expertise but also on their differing roles in the train of events. For the description of the case and incident, document content and interview notes have been hermeneutically analysed (ie their meaning interpreted) following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 2012) and paraphrased to provide a description of the material.

It needs to be noted that the authors have been asked to anonymise the persons and institutions involved, and they followed this wish in line with codes of research ethics. The authors are confident that, although the names will be anonymised, this real-life case will still serve its purpose and offer rich learning for other institutions and practitioners.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This section describes the South African government system. It then provides an overview of the recent developments in the area of M&E in the government, before focusing on the legal mandate of introducing M&E in local government.

Brief introduction to the South African system of government

South Africa is a democratic republic and its government is structured in three co-operative spheres: the 'national, provincial and local spheres of government which are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated' (RSA 1996: s 40(1)). According

to the Constitution, each sphere of government is autonomous, yet is required to co-operate with the other spheres in the best interests of the citizens. In particular, national legislation takes precedence over that governing the provincial and local spheres and provincial legislation trumps local bye-laws.

Each of the three spheres consists of distinct elements:

- legislatures (or councils) comprising elected representatives of the public responsible for approving laws and policies; and
- executive bodies responsible for co-ordinating the creation of policies and laws, and overseeing their implementation by the administrative departments and public servants.

In addition to the legislative and executive branches of government, the judicial authority is vested in the independent courts: magistrates' courts, High Courts, a Supreme Court of Appeal and, at the apex, the Constitutional Court.

There are nine provinces in South Africa, each with an elected provincial legislature and executive, which is headed by a premier and an executive committee. These executive committees, their members and the DCoGTA are responsible for co-ordinating, monitoring and supporting the municipalities in each province.

Local government is performed by 257 municipalities, which are differentiated into three tiers or categories. There are eight Category A municipalities, which oversee greater metropolitan areas and are governed by councils. Metropolitan municipalities can choose whether they want to use a mayoral executive system or a collective executive committee system. Areas that are more rural in nature are governed by the 44 district municipalities (Category C municipalities), which are further subdivided into Category B local municipalities. Category B and C municipalities are governed by local and district councils respectively. Whereas local councils govern the local municipality sphere directly, district councils are mainly responsible for capacity-building, providing support to local municipalities and district-wide planning.

Metropolitan and local municipalities are further divided into wards, which elect councillors to municipal councils and are represented by ward committees that link municipalities to local communities (RSA 1998; RSA 2000; South African Government 2020).

The administration of municipalities is headed by a municipal manager, who is effectively the link between the municipal council and the administration. Furthermore, units directly under the municipal manager and reporting to the manager are responsible for managing the municipality; then there are departments headed by general managers that are responsible for realising the municipalities' integrated development plans (IDPs).

Background to monitoring and evaluation in the South African government sector

The South African government introduced a policy framework for government-wide M&E in 2007 (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2007). The scope of this framework explicitly included all three spheres of government (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2007: 1). This policy framework provided a broad rationale for the introduction of M&E, an overview of the envisaged M&E system, institutionalisation, role-players and their responsibilities, capacity requirements, and the legal mandate for such a system.

Following the publication of the policy framework document in 2007, a Ministry for Performance Monitoring and Evaluation in the Presidency was established in 2009 to drive the process. Soon after that (in 2010), the Department for Performance Management and Evaluation (DPME) (2018) was created with an approved establishment of 191 posts to be filled by the end of 2012 (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2012: 2). Simultaneously, the then President of the Republic of South Africa appointed the National Planning Commission (NPC) as an advisory body consisting of 26 commissioners in April 2010. The NPC was tasked with drafting a vision statement and a national development plan for the country (NPC 2011a: 1; 2012: 15). As a first step, the NPC released a diagnostic overview in June 2011 in which South Africa's achievements and shortcomings since 1994 were identified (NPC 2011b). As a consequence, and informed by the nine primary challenges identified in the diagnostic overview, the NPC crafted the National Development Plan 2030 (NPC 2012) with its 14 outcomes to mark a policy shift from output-centred management towards result-based management (Phillips et al 2014; Ijeoma 2014).

The implementation of the government-wide monitoring and evaluation (GWM&E) framework followed a top-down approach for introducing and piloting M&E systems, with a primary focus on the national and provincial government spheres (Goldman et al 2012). While the local government sphere was evidently 'performing poorly' with a lack of 'integrated minimum norms or standards of performance' (Goldman et al 2012: 8), the introduction and implementation of the GWM&E framework did not focus on the local government sphere in the early stages (Goldman et al 2015: 4): the focus was primarily on the national and provincial domains in order to draw from the lessons learned from these two spheres and not to overburden the newly established DPME. At a later stage, this process was extended to metropolitan cities following a step-by-step approach (Goldman et al 2015: 5, 8). The implementation of the GWM&E framework had a sound but highly complex regulatory mandate, which is discussed below.

Legal mandate for introducing M&E in local government

The policy framework for GWM&E provided an overview of the legal mandate for the role-players and their responsibilities as envisaged in 2007 (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2007: 17–18). Since the publication of this policy framework, the role-players and their authorising frameworks have expanded to include the following:

- The president and cabinet members, who are constitutionally mandated with the executive authority, among other functions, to develop and implement policy and co-ordinate the functions of state departments and administrations according to, among other guidelines, the principles of co-operative governance and intergovernmental relations (RSA 1996: s 85, Chapter 3).
- The DPME (DPME 2018) is mandated by sections 85(2)(b)–(c) and 195 of the Constitution (RSA 1996) and also by several national policy documents and cabinet decisions to enhance the government's performance and impact on society through improved planning, implementation-monitoring and evaluation systems (DPME 2019: 13, 19).
- The NPC serves as an advisory body to guide planning in the South African government, appointed by the President through the Revised Green Paper: National Planning Commission (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2010) in terms of section 85(2) of the Constitution (RSA 1996).
- The National Treasury, mandated by the Constitution and other national legislation (RSA 1996: ss 215, 216; RSA 1999a; RSA 2003), with the brief to ensure that 'information on inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes underpins planning, budgeting, implementation management and accountability reporting' (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2007: 17–18).
- The Statistician-General, authorised by the Statistics Act 6 of 1999 to provide or designate official statistics (RSA 1999b: ss 14.7, 14.8).
- The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), mandated by the Public Service Act of 1994 to establish norms and standards related to the functions of the public service in the national and provincial spheres of government, increased public-service effectiveness and improved governance (RSA 1994b: s 3(1)).
- The Department of Provincial and Local Government, restructured in 2010 to become the DCoGTA (Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) 2009), mandated by the Constitution to develop policies and legislation regarding provincial administrations, departments and municipalities, to monitor their implementation and support them in fulfilling their constitutional and legal mandates (RSA 1996: Chapters 3, 7; DCoGTA 2018: 17).
- The National School of Government (NSG), mandated by the Public

Administration Management Act of 2014 to, 'through education and training, promote the progressive realisation of the values and principles governing public administration and enhance the quality, extent and impact of the development of human resource capacity in institutions' (RSA 2014: Chapter 4, s 11(2)). This mandate includes municipalities after the necessary consultation with the responsible minister (RSA 2014: Chapter 4, s 12(2)).

- The Office of the Public Service Commission (OPSC), as mandated by sections 195 and 196 of the Constitution (RSA 1996), the Public Service Act of 1994 (RSA 1994a) and the Public Service Commission Act 46 of 1997 (RSA 1997), ultimately to ensure effective and efficient performance in the public service. However, the provisions of the Public Service Commission Act are applicable only to administration in the national and provincial spheres of government (RSA 1997: s 2).
- The Auditor-General, as mandated by section 188 of the Constitution (RSA 1996), must audit and report on the accounts, financial statements and financial management of, among other public entities, all national and provincial departments and all municipalities, and by the Public Audit Act 25 of 2004 to 'reflect an opinion, conclusion or findings on ... reported performance of the auditee against its predetermined objectives' (RSA 2004: s 20).
- The premiers of the various provinces, mandated by section 125 and Chapter 3 of the Constitution, among other functions, to initiate provincial legislation, to implement national and provincial legislation, to develop and implement provincial policies, and to co-ordinate the functions of the respective provincial administrations and their departments according to, among other guidelines, the principles of co-operative governance and intergovernmental relations (RSA 1996: s 125, Chapter 3).
- Municipalities, as required and mandated by the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act (MSA) 32 of 2000 (RSA 2000), to monitor the performance of the municipalities and their staff, and also the service levels of external service-providers. As described in Chapter 6 of the MSA, municipalities are therefore required to establish a performance monitoring system. According to section 11(3) of the MSA:

A municipality exercises its legislative or executive authority by ... (g) monitoring and, where appropriate, regulating municipal services where those services are provided by service providers other than the municipality; ... (j) monitoring the impact and effectiveness of any services, policies, programmes or plans.

This system must also include the participation of local communities in ‘the monitoring and review of its performance, including the outcomes and impact of such performance’ (MSA: Chapter 4, s 16(1)(a)(iii)). The MEC for local government in each province is required to monitor the municipalities regarding their five-year IDPs (MSA: Chapter 5, s 31; Chapter 10, s 105). Their performance management system should therefore include the following core components (RSA 2000: Chapter 6, s 41(1)):

- (a) ... appropriate key performance indicators as a yardstick for measuring performance, including outcomes and impact, with regard to the municipality’s development priorities and objectives set out in its integrated development plan;
- (b) ... measurable performance targets with regard to each of those development priorities and objectives;
- (c) ... monitor performance; and
- (d) ... measure and review performance at least once per year.

A complex network of role-players, mechanisms and authorising documents exists to ensure the M&E of government performance and outcomes in all three spheres of government. However, in the municipal domain no explicit requirement is evident for local government to establish M&E units in municipalities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

This section provides important information on the case by describing the events chronologically and highlighting the development of a single evaluation that took place in 2015 as a critical incident in Ilanga District Municipality. This section presents an interpretive narrative account informed by the lived experiences of the primary author of this chapter, who served as an external advisor during this critical incident. However, all the relevant background information on the establishment of an M&E unit in the Ilanga District Municipality is provided first.

Background notes

While M&E has received increasing attention from the South African government, the relevant legislation does not directly provide for the M&E of local government. This is besides the monitoring work of the Organisational Performance Management (OPM) unit placed in the office of municipal managers, and the DCoGTA, which is responsible for impact evaluation and the provision of an oversight and support function to provincial institutions through co-operative governance interventions. This case study reports on a specific

project aimed at launching M&E at a South African district municipality.

This project was identified as a development co-operation project in 2014 and became officially operational in 2015. It entailed the provision of external assistance and support to the selected district municipality; the support took the form of an external advisor working full-time at the municipality for two years. A general manager (GM) at the municipality acted as the focal person for managing this process. The selected district municipality was one of the partner municipalities of an international development agency which provided support to pilot an M&E unit and system at the municipality. The municipality selected for this case study had reportedly tried to establish an M&E unit previously, but with little success. The municipality possessed little information about and had almost no practical experience with M&E other than the work the OPM unit was doing in line with its legal mandate. The office of the municipal manager took responsibility for the M&E unit.

Prior to the commencement of this development co-operation project, in a first attempt to monitor and evaluate the impact of its projects, the Ilanga District Municipality set out to establish an M&E unit in the office of the municipal manager. This occurred in the first part of 2014. A draft M&E framework was developed; however, it was not submitted to the council for approval. As a result of the resignation of the incumbent responsible for co-ordinating the M&E processes at the district municipality, the unit remained inactive.

The municipality subsequently appointed a new deputy manager and an M&E officer to re-staff the unit. After the unit developed the M&E framework for the municipality, the council approved it in October 2014. However, it became evident that the framework was incomplete and inconsistent: it lacked clarity on its theory of change, a description of the roles and responsibilities of key actors, a results measurement plan and an implementation methodology. Since the newly appointed personnel had little theoretical knowledge of and no practical experience with M&E, the municipality applied for assistance from an international government support organisation. This application was granted and a technical development advisor was appointed to support the unit. The advisor started work on the project in January 2015.

The unit started with the development of an action plan for the following two years, including the drafting of an M&E framework and an indication of the number and timing of the evaluations to be performed. But while the targets and objectives of the municipality's projects were formulated in the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP) and IDP, a coherent system of attribution in the form of results chains or activities that link projects to outputs and outcomes was non-existent. As a result, the unit started with

the development of a results-based monitoring model for the projects related to one of the municipality's key strategic objectives: delivering services and the implementation of projects in line with the mandate of the Ilanga District Municipality. The unit began by linking activities, targets and objectives to overall strategic objectives following a logical framework approach. This piloting of the results-based monitoring model was meant to inform a broader rollout of the M&E model as part of the next five-year IDP cycle. The expectation was therefore that the implementation of the IDP over the following five years would be outcome- and impact-based.

The evaluation

As implied by its name, the M&E unit focused on two areas: monitoring and evaluation. After the arrival of the advisor and the drafting of the action plan and the M&E framework, the unit started to evaluate two of the district municipality's projects to test the newly developed evaluation approach.

The first of these projects was the technical department's boreholes project on which a quantitative ex-post evaluation was done. The unit selected this project because it was perceived to be a project that was not difficult to evaluate both methodologically and in terms of access to data and information. It was therefore regarded as a suitable pilot for the unit's new approach. The evaluation process consisted of a simple count exercise to check whether the project was still functional. The second project consisted of a qualitative implementation evaluation of a specific tourism promotion carried out by the district's Local Economic Development (LED) unit.

Whereas the first project was selected by the M&E unit, the second was assigned to them. Here, the municipal manager (MM) tasked the M&E unit with evaluating a smaller economic growth project that included the municipality's participation in a trade fair in Durban, held from 9 to 11 May 2015. This was an annual project of the municipality's Department for Local Economic Development and Tourism (DEDaT), with an annual budget of approximately ZAR200 000. The DEDaT was also the municipality's liaison department for external partnerships, which included offers of development assistance to the municipality. The GM of the DEDaT was the focal point of contact for the international organisation that provided the development advisor to the municipality and it was part of the GM's portfolio to manage such external relations. Therefore, receiving additional support for the M&E unit was at least partially a result of the work of the GM.

It is important to point out that the M&E unit did not select the LED project for evaluation: on the contrary, it was assigned to them by the MM to determine

whether the project would show value for money. The reasons for assigning this specific project to the unit for evaluation were not transparent: however, rumour had it that the decision was driven by the rivalry between the MM and the GM for LED. Also, that the MM wanted to cast the GM in a bad light, or even to control her, and that the MM wanted to check whether those colleagues who had to travel to a nice city to implement the project were actually working there. It is not possible to validate claims that the selection and assignment of this project was not motivated to enhance the oversight role of municipal management or whether it was part of a power-play between the MM and the specific GM in the municipality. The mere existence of such rumours, though, shows that such action was perceived as likely or plausible by some staff at the municipality and that such narratives have been used to partially discredit the evaluation results.

With regard to the unit's monitoring task, it was evident at the start of the co-operative project in January 2015 that the municipality was not using a results-based monitoring system. The activities and outcomes to be achieved were not clearly defined and projects' targets were monitored on an output basis only. Ideally, the municipality's projects were supposed to be guided by its strategic objectives, as stated in the IDP. Furthermore, the SDBIP did not link these strategic objectives to individual departmental objective-guiding programmes and finally to project objectives, which would have been expected. Therefore, it was possible neither to establish clear links between the strategic objectives of the municipality and the new M&E system nor to measure and evaluate the outcomes of projects and their contribution to the overall strategic goals of the municipality.

The Organisational Performance Management System (OPMS) unit, on the other hand, proved to be responsible for monitoring the outputs related to the projects and the achievement of set targets in order to report on the institution's performance. The theory of change underlying the projects, however, was not explicitly defined and this was also not questioned. Instead, it was somehow assumed that the implementation of a water-related project, for example, would lead to the overall objective of improving the strategic goal of general service delivery. But this meant that the outcome concerning the strategic goal was not questioned, nor was it fed back into the planning process.

As a first step in the evaluation of the LED project, the M&E unit engaged with the LED GM and discussed the project to gather information and find ways of data-collection. The GM was supportive but at the same time warned the M&E team that the selection of the project might have been based on political reasons rather than strategic considerations. Furthermore, she mentioned that the project had been a great success throughout the years, there was nothing to hide, and the M&E team would see for itself that it was a great project. There

were further limited engagements with the GM's departmental staff in order to collect data. These included providing the M&E team with documents, such as the SDBIP, previous expenditure reports, explanations of the municipality's approach to trade shows and involved logistics with the stand, in addition to practical information on how to register for the trade fair. However, the decision by the MM that the M&E unit should also attend the trade fair in Durban to collect data on site was met with resentment by the LED unit. They apparently held the view that it was not necessary for the M&E unit to attend the fair as the unit could collect the information afterwards from them.

The tourism project was seen as a promotional project for the municipality. Therefore, it was a tool showcasing success in meeting certain strategic objectives: in particular, bringing more tourists to the district to generate economic opportunities and promoting the district in general. However, the existing evaluation criteria were not appropriate to attributing specific outcomes to the activities performed as part of the project under evaluation. Furthermore, the available statistics on tourism in the region were already aggregated to such a high level that they were not useful. In other words, it was difficult to link the activities of the municipality's staff during the fair to increased numbers of tourists visiting the district and the economic turnover generated by the event. The challenge of the M&E team was to collect information on whether the project was 'value for money', as the MM put it. To collect information on the potential effect of the municipality's engagement in the fair, the M&E team developed:

- a data-collection instrument, including a set of proxy-indicators (eg how many and what kind of people have visited the district municipality's stand – were they working for travel agencies or otherwise engaged in the tourism industry or were they not involved in such business and therefore probably not working as multipliers for tourism);
- qualitative methods (observations of engagements at the stand – did people engage in discussion and the information material provided or were they interested instead in the hand-out promotional items – and interviews with persons visiting the stand to gain a better understanding of their function and to gather feedback on their impression); tools for data-collection and data-capturing (registration forms for visitors to the stand, interview guidelines and observation capture sheets).

The team involved in implementing the project under evaluation was asked to help with the data-collection, yet this request was denied by the GM as it would imply additional work for them. In preparation for evaluating the attendance at the trade fair, the M&E team made appointments with local and municipal

stakeholders to obtain their perspective on the municipality's interventions to stimulate economic growth. Semi-structured focus-group interviews were used to obtain both specific information related to the evaluation process and additional non-specific information.

On the project site in Durban, the M&E team and the project implementation team were based in the same hotel. While the two teams were polite to each other, a degree of resentment from the project team towards the M&E unit was nevertheless marked. Despite minor engagements during the implementation of the project and the collection of data, the teams worked in parallel. The LED unit apparently assumed that the evaluation process would not be supportive of them and their project but would serve instead as a control mechanism.

Back in the office, the M&E team started drafting its report. The findings were based on the information they collected and the report contained findings both in favour of and opposed to the continuation of the project. Among their suggestions, it was recommended that the municipality join forces with other stakeholders in the district to minimise costs and avoid duplication in economic development projects such as trade fair attendance. In addition, some findings were particularly concerned with the performance of the LED unit. These included the following:

- It was reported that no representative of the LED unit was present during the province's opening ceremony on 9 May 2015, hosted by the provincial MEC for Economic Development of the particular province at the trade fair. The LED staff later stated they had arrived late in Durban. Yet the assumptions drawn by the M&E unit staff were that they had arrived in time, but had spent their time on other activities.
- Only a few of the LED staff members attended any thematic workshops or presentations that were held during the fair, as they were supposed to have done. While the purpose of their attendance was to gather information and disseminate it to local stakeholders, they apparently had no strategy or action plan for how to do that.

As the M&E unit had to submit their report by a deadline set by the MM – with limited time available as a result – they provided only a small window for feedback from the LED unit's GM, whose project was evaluated; no feedback was received. The report was submitted to the MM. The GM of the LED provided feedback to the M&E unit only after the MM had received his copy of the report. The GM's feedback indicated that the GM did not accept the contents of the report and was displeased with the fact that the MM had received the report before she did and the LED unit had been able to provide their response to it.

Clash and showdown

The GM requested a meeting between the M&E unit and her department. This meeting was attended by almost the entire LED unit, even though most of the attending staff (eg interns, secretaries, administrators, co-ordinators and managers) were not part of the project or previously engaged in the course of an evaluation. The M&E unit of three people was therefore largely outnumbered.

The tone of the meeting quickly turned aggressive as accusations ensued from the LED unit (including from people not involved in the process thus far) that the M&E unit wanted to make them look bad. They felt ambushed by their own colleagues. They perceived the M&E unit as not understanding their work. The staff members from the LED unit held the view that the M&E unit was used as a political tool by other powers at the municipality. The MM was accused of wanting 'to bring the departmental manager down' and discredit her work through the M&E unit. The M&E unit's staff were accused of having had no idea about the content of the trade fair project. The unit's external adviser was reminded that his appointment as a consultant was made possible by the GM of the LED. Furthermore, the department's staff claimed that other stakeholders from within the district were complaining about the M&E unit and that they would be perceived as spies, even though those specific stakeholders had not actually been involved in the evaluation.

In reaction, the M&E unit went on the defensive during the meeting. It was agreed that there was too little time for feedback and that the MM would be requested to allow more time. The LED GM was angry that she could not influence or change the content of the report but did not say so openly. The meeting was adjourned in bad spirits – the M&E unit left, since there was no discussion of the content, only accusations and insults. Following the meeting, rumours were spread around the municipality about the M&E unit. After the meeting and insults, two staff members of the LED unit, who were actually quite verbal in defending the department even though they were not involved in the process (perhaps out of fear that the GM had supported them, but in fact they had a different understanding of the situation than the GM), informed the MM about the GM's verbal attacks. The MM called the GM in and made her apologise, and he later also apologised on behalf of his staff to the adviser.

There was a follow-up meeting between the M&E unit, the LED unit and the MM. The MM criticised the approach taken by the department and requested their response to the recommendations provided in the report. The LED GM was defensive, stating that there were few people attending the trade conference and the municipality's stand because of the xenophobic attacks on foreigners at that time, yet that was not the case since other stands were busy.

The upshot was that the LED unit accepted the recommendations of the report and was tasked with drafting an action document on its implementation – which was not done in the end. Finally, there was no response (most probably out of resentment towards the whole process rather than out of acceptance of the report) and the report was accepted as it stood. The LED unit, in fact, followed some of the recommendations, such as joining a provincial stand at the next fair rather than having only its own stand, while previously they had claimed it was too expensive or that the province did not want them to be part of its stand.

In addition, the MM requested clarification of the overall M&E process in order to clarify it for future evaluations and asked the team to establish criteria by which projects would be selected for evaluation in order to avoid situations in which the management team would be accused of making political rather than strategic decisions. The result was that the M&E unit drafted a plan on how to select projects in the future in a more transparent manner, and how long feedback loops were supposed to be.

The aftermath

As a result of this process, the standing of the M&E unit in the municipality was unfavourable. Departments were reluctant to co-operate. The atmosphere in the municipality was hostile towards the members of the M&E unit and the overall relationship between the M&E unit and the LED unit, in particular, was ‘poisoned’ and cold. The M&E unit tried to avoid further engagement whenever possible. When the GM of the LED unit went on maternity leave, however, the relationship between some of the colleagues of the LED unit and the M&E unit improved slightly. But at this point the MM, who had been defending the M&E unit, left the municipality as a result of other infighting at the institution.

While some of the recommendations in the evaluation were considered in the implementation of the project by the LED unit, there was no significant change to the municipality’s general approach to trade fairs. This did not result in any consequences for the unit. It was decided furthermore that the selection of projects for evaluation should be made neither by the municipal management nor by the M&E unit alone, but rather by a steering committee consisting of various unit representatives.

Later, during the evaluation of another project of the LED unit (while the GM of the LED was on maternity leave), the conflict heated up again. The M&E unit’s evaluation of this small, medium and micro-enterprise (SMME) project of the LED unit resulted in anonymous threats to the unit to refrain from going to a particular farm since ‘people would be waiting there for them’. While there

was no evidence of a direct relationship between the threat and the LED unit, speculation had it that the farm was probably not eligible to receive support from the municipality – the threats possibly being intended to prevent the M&E unit from uncovering possible irregularities there.

The M&E unit itself did not survive these challenges unscathed. Owing to the threats, one M&E officer almost resigned but was relocated by management to another unit instead. This official was subsequently replaced by another who could continue rendering support to the M&E manager in their evaluation activities. However, the evaluation of the particular farm project was discontinued. Finally, the manager of the M&E unit was also re-assigned, while the unit itself merged with the OPM unit at the municipality, the result being that the evaluation function become dormant.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Several challenges arose with the establishment of the M&E unit at the Ilanga District Municipality (for additional reading on the challenges from other municipalities, see the following case studies: Govender 2011; Gopane 2012; Vyas-Doorgapersad & Zwane 2014; Mthethwa & Jili 2016; Nelson 2016; Mello 2018). While the unit had to face differing understandings of M&E which led to it encountering difficulties in executing its work, there was also a need to clarify the various roles of units at the municipality concerning the implementation of a monitoring system and their relationship with a dedicated M&E unit. Furthermore, no link was established between M&E and the district municipality's strategic objectives. Another factor which influenced the implementation of M&E for results-based management was that the current five-year IDP's strategic objectives and projects were set at an output-based level, which was not supportive of measuring the achievement of objectives at an outcomes-based level (ie what has been produced versus what has been achieved). As a result, a twofold challenge arose at Ilanga District Municipality in introducing outcomes and impact monitoring indicators: on the one hand, such indicators would have been beyond the individual department's immediate control and could therefore have led to a negative interpretation of its performance internally by the municipality's management and political leadership and externally by the Auditor-General and the DCoGTA during the performance assessment. These issues are discussed in more detail below.

Differing understanding of M&E among the municipality's management

The first challenge that can be identified is the differing understandings of M&E at the municipality. Since the M&E unit was newly introduced into the local government structures, there was no clear and shared understanding of its role and function. To some extent, M&E was not appreciated as a results-based management tool or a means to improve project planning, management and implementation, but rather perceived as a control instrument meant to focus on weaknesses and the negligence of the evaluated units and departments at the municipality. So, on the one hand, it was understood to be a means of creating accountability, but, on the other, such accountability was not desired.

It is quite evident that such a misunderstanding led to the rather defensive stance of units and departments towards the new M&E unit. Managers were not too keen to become 'targets' of M&E. They were also reluctant to co-operate with the unit, for example, through handing over documents and providing timely information on their projects. Some even went to the extreme of suggesting that the M&E unit would be politically biased and attempt to influence the evaluation findings in order to render them more benevolent for the respective implementing unit or department. It was therefore also perceived as a political tool to be used in the competition for power.

In short, no one wants to be held accountable for shortcomings; evaluations, on the other hand, have the potential to show gaps in performance and to point out responsibilities. In this instance, instead of understanding M&E as a supportive measure with which to improve performance, it was viewed as a policing instrument. Findings should therefore not lead to negative consequences, whereas not taking up recommendations or improving performance should. Unclear result chains and attributions of responsibility in this regard might therefore be understood as an easy way to hide a lack of performance.

Given these obstacles, it is easy to understand that the M&E unit's project evaluations were not necessarily supported by the respective units and departments. Yet, thinking another step further, such reluctance also results in ignorance regarding the evaluations' findings. Units found it difficult to respond to evaluation findings and the connected recommendations for further planning that the M&E unit produced. This lack of response, however, might also have been due to the lack of binding process descriptions of the managers' duty to respond to evaluation findings and recommendations. To a certain extent, the strong leadership of the MM supported the work of the M&E unit and functioned as guidance to the departments and units, although they might not necessarily have

supported the overall process. With the change in leadership, this support ended, as did most of the activities of the M&E unit.

An important lesson to be learned from this case is that management needs to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and transparent, as should the decision-making processes be. The way in which M&E is understood at the management level is key to how it may contribute to the public administrative culture in local government. While a lack of accountability can be observed at the leadership level (and which, in general, poses a great problem to South African public administration at present), there is a need to overcome this challenge in order to improve local government performance. As has been illustrated here, the implementation of M&E lies at the core of accountability. Leaders must ensure that M&E is not used as an internal power tool or to justify political decisions.

Uncertainty about roles and responsibilities

The differing understandings of M&E and the uncertain role of the M&E unit also affected its organisational positioning in the municipality's setting. For example, the OPMS unit monitored projects and departments and reported on the overall performance of the institution.² However, these performance-monitoring efforts focused on the *output* level. The new M&E unit was supposed to expand that perspective to the *results* level in order to inform management about the outcomes and impacts as a way of enhancing steering and decision-making. The organisation was required to align, clarify and segregate duties regarding which unit would conduct the monitoring of projects' and programmes' implementation, and the results.

Yet a clarification of roles and responsibilities, including workflows and organisational processes, was needed not only in relation to the OPMS unit. There were also other units that interrelate with the core tasks of the M&E unit, such as the Individual Performance Management System (IPMS) unit, the Research unit, the Geographical Information System (GIS) unit and the Planning unit. Those units also worked on matters that were linked to M&E. For example, the GIS unit might have provided useful geographical and other data for M&E purposes, while the Planning unit had to consider M&E findings and recommendations in its planning phase. Therefore, these units needed to be clearly aligned in order to avoid duplication, to enable streamlined organisational processes, and to allow for timely implementation and workflows.

So, in general, it became crucial to define roles and responsibilities between the units to promote better co-ordination of organisational processes, to use

² In line with Chapter 6 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000.

knowledge effectively and to better identify projects for evaluation. There was a need for a clear understanding of what each unit could provide in order to attain the institution's organisational goals and objectives, and this would ultimately have fostered better workflows and a beneficial working climate. Only in that way would it have been possible for each unit and department to know what to expect from the other departments and also what others could have expected from each unit and department.

Lack of capacity for M&E outcomes and impacts

To a point, the Ilanga District Municipality monitored its projects according to activities and output levels; usually, the previous year's activities and outputs were used as a baseline for each department's project, or the baseline for new projects was simply set to zero. It was the task of the M&E unit to develop an M&E system that would go beyond the output level towards M&E focused on outcomes and impacts. However, there were two significant difficulties inherent in this task: the available capacity and the implementation capability needed to do so, and a lack of data.

Regarding capacity and capability, the M&E unit was simply understaffed. In this case, the unit consisted only of a half-managerial-level position and one full supporting officer position. Added to that, both the deputy manager and the officer had undergone some theoretical M&E training, but did not have practical experience in M&E. Consequently, the unit was not able to perform all the relevant steps for full-scale M&E (study design, data-collection and analysis for all the departments and programmes of the institution) of all the projects of the institution while also supporting the local municipalities' M&E capacity-building. There were simply too many projects and too few staff to monitor and evaluate them regularly.

The other issue was the lack of information and available data at the municipal level, as well as shortcomings in processing and analysing existing data. Programmes were usually not planned in line with a statistical data-based identification of needs. Instead, they were planned in terms of a more general needs assessment during the participatory phase of the IDP process. As a result, there were no valid baselines and no information on comparable outcomes was available. Because of this gap in the statistical information and data, it was difficult to define baselines, set targets and compare their variances in order to evaluate projects' outcomes. The M&E unit, at the time of writing, was not able to make good these information shortcomings and provide such data.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, some emerging aspects can be deduced from the case study described and the challenges identified. Following this, an outlook for future consideration will be provided. Looking back at the findings stated above, there are five general aspects of the establishment of M&E structures in local government that need to be seriously considered:

- the M&E capacity and capability of government officials and institutions;
- transparency in decision-making and reporting processes;
- the M&E understanding of management;
- strong leadership support; and
- clear legislation and practical alignment of M&E processes across the three spheres of government.

First, there is a need to support local municipality staff tasked with M&E by building their capacity to do so. Officials must have the basic, essential knowledge of M&E practices and their application to ensure the implementation of M&E activities. Of course, this statement seems rather obvious, but when taking a closer look at local government M&E units, it cannot be denied that staff, at times, are not optimally prepared and equipped to perform their duties effectively. Capacity here should not be understood only in the sense of capability, but also in terms of the womanpower and manpower in the units. Furthermore, clear job descriptions could also help to prevent the placement of people in M&E positions who might be better suited for other positions.

Critical to this is the need to sensitise management to the concept and purpose of M&E. A full and joint understanding of management underlies the practice of results-based management. Furthermore, it enables management to understand the possible benefits of M&E for improved decision-making and allow them to take a more appreciative and supportive stance regarding M&E activities. Only when management is fully conversant with M&E activities and processes can such activities result in proper evaluations, and improved projects result in effective service delivery.

In this sense, it is also crucial that there is strong leadership and management-level buy-in for M&E work. Without the necessary support, it might not be possible for M&E units to operate in the institution since the unit needs information and recommendations to be translated into action. At the same time, strong leadership is of fundamental importance, since departments might try to manipulate findings or simply not consider them without the more senior level of the organisation supporting and championing the process.

Furthermore, there is a need to keep the decision-making and evaluation processes transparent. Units and departments should be enabled to follow decisions about why they have been selected for evaluation, be actively engaged in discussions about the evaluation process of the M&E unit, and be informed about how exactly the M&E team will conduct the evaluation and how they are supposed to respond to the evaluation findings and recommendations.

Finally, it is also necessary to mention that a clearly legislated and practical alignment of M&E processes across the three spheres of government is needed to support its local implementation. So far, there are no clear regulations on the role of district municipalities' M&E function and the support they require in order to support local municipalities in turn. A clear description of roles and responsibilities and an alignment of M&E processes across other spheres of government with a co-ordination responsibility could contribute to strengthening M&E activities. The result could be improved management practice and decision-making, and a saving on data-collection costs by reducing duplication between departments and spheres of government.

Regarding future developments, the following four issues could be recommended as being worth consideration by decision-makers.

First, it might be useful to consider capacity-development programmes for local government administrators. Such programmes may not be very sophisticated in their approaches from the start, yet they should enable and empower local administrators in their capacity to monitor and evaluate projects at a basic level. It is essential to focus on what is really needed instead of investing budgets and time in providing training initiatives that are not useful at the local level.

Second, it might be of great value if decision-makers were to consider creating a nationwide concept for local government M&E. Of course, one could argue that one system might not fit all purposes, yet an easy-to-implement M&E system, including a framework, tools and some external guidance, could save resources at the local level and make results comparable across and between municipalities. The rule that should apply here is to keep it simple; it might still be possible to advance to a more sophisticated system at a later stage. This will be made easier once municipalities have the basics in place from the beginning.

As a third consideration, one could emphasise that sophisticated M&E systems place an undue burden on the capacity of local governments in South Africa, which often experience problems in running effective organisations (a number of municipalities are currently regarded as 'dysfunctional'). A good starting point could rather be to get the basic M&E systems and practices right in order to monitor, evaluate and finally improve service delivery. It will also be critical to ensure that M&E in municipalities are properly integrated into existing functional

structures and processes. Furthermore, there needs to be political buy-in and support from management and leaders.

Fourth and finally, the creation of an information- and experience-sharing platform seems to be pivotal to the establishment of a community of M&E practice in municipalities and provinces. Such a platform could enhance practice-learning among M&E practitioners and result in the invention and sharing of solutions to common problems. Such a forum or platform could be used to broaden learning and provide specific support to local government bodies.

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