Vital assistance in crafting policies for viable local government in South Africa is coming from a small non-governmental organization.

Medical staff at South African hospitals serving the poor are familiar with the illness and injuries that come out of the sprawling shacklands surrounding most cities: gastroenteritis picked up amid uncollected refuse and open sewers, burns from shack fires where paraffin and candles are in daily use. Paraffin itself often puts children at risk when they mistake the clear liquid for water.

These social health problems lie at the door of local government whose job it is to provide clean water, refuse collection, electricity and infrastructure. This tier of government is only now beginning to emerge from a long period of almost complete collapse. It is expected to deliver the bulk of the government's reconstruction and development program (RDP) aimed at uplifting the South African people from what have been described as Dickensian conditions.

In sight are local government elections scheduled for November, the second time all South Africans will go to the polls to complete a democratization process begun in 1994. A great deal of preparations have had to be done, from setting up the first comprehensive voters' rolls, to determining what structures people will be voting for and how those new structures will be financed.

In this setting, the Institute for Local Governance and Development (INLOGOV), a non-governmental organization based in Cape Town, is proving something of a lifeline. INLOGOV emerged out of a recommendation made by the IDRC Urban Policy Mission in South Africa in 1992 to establish an urban institute that would consolidate research and training initiatives already under way.

Andrew Boraine is the former executive director of INLOGOV and now deputy director general of the Department of Constitutional Development and Provincial Affairs. He maintains that local government in South Africa has been in a political, financial and administrative crisis for some time because of a racially segregated past. Black local authorities, in particular, bore the brunt because they had no elected representatives, were never financially viable, and consequently experienced an almost complete breakdown in their ability to deliver even basic services. Many of the uprisings of the 1980s, among them a rent and services payment boycott that still hampers efforts to restore services in disadvantaged communities, were played out in this arena.

President Nelson Mandela recently launched a campaign called Operation Masakhane (Let Us Build Together) aimed partially at persuading people to abandon "the culture of non-payment." INLOGOV played a major role in designing the high-profile campaign, which includes multi-media advertizing and public support from leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Already in Gauteng, one of the areas worst hit by non-payment, there are indications that the campaign is beginning to achieve results.
In 1993, South Africa emerged from protracted negotiations at Kempton Park near Johannesburg with a package of deals designed to take the country peacefully into democratic government.

Thozamile Botha, the first executive director of INLOGOV and now deputy director general of the Eastern Cape (one of South Africa's nine provinces) says that "INLOGOV became the main back- up support for the non-statutory delegation to the national negotiations."

One of the outcomes of these negotiations was the Local Government Transition Act, a document INLOGOV helped draft. It set the ground rules for transition, among them the principle of including all political players in preparations for elections.

The Act prescribed that new local authorities should be appointed in the months before the election, drawing half its members from the mostly white councillors who previously participated in local government, and half from the predominantly black majority who had opposed them. Local negotiating forums were to decide how these appointments should be made and what form the transition would take in their areas.

Boraine says of this aspect of the Act: "Communities who hadn't spoken to each other for 40 years had to sit down together and negotiate to put in place appointed transitional councils. This worked well, contrary to everyone's expectations. It was a bottom-up approach and only a few times did government have to step in."

A crucial area in which INLOGOV's research has had an impact has been on the country's Financial and Fiscal Commission. Issues now being addressed include how local authorities should raise funds in the future (in the past black local authorities relied almost solely on ad-hoc funding), and how revenue sharing should take place to even out the divide between rich and poor. INLOGOV has had input into a fixed formula for channelling funds from the state to communities in need so that local authorities in future can rely on predictable sources of income. Significantly, INLOGOV has also assisted in designing an RDP lead project to deliver municipal infrastructure by helping to devise criteria and project parameters.

At the central government level, the heat is on to finish writing a final constitution that will replace the present interim document governing the country. In this area, INLOGOV's research on rural local government models is a helpful resource for policy formulation. A problem preoccupying those at national level is how traditional leaders will be accommodated in future structures, because their status runs against the right of people to elect their leaders. INLOGOV has completed a valuable study in this regard.

Other issues raised through INLOGOV are how to define the powers and functions of local government, and ensuring financial and political autonomy at the local level. Furthermore, INLOGOV continues to state its commitment to capacity-building. In 1993- 94, INLOGOV trained about 500 negotiators for participation in local government forums, and more recently enriched the skills of 2,000 councillors nominated to transitional councils. It is also assisting technical staff of local councils. But given the enormity of the task, this is a drop in the ocean, a point conceded by training officer Xoliswa Hewu, who says it all depends on available resources.

David Dlali, African National Congress member and now chairman of the executive committee of the Cape Metropolitan Council, says the Institute's policy initiatives have been "100 percent," but says there is a feeling more needs to be done to train new councillors.

In future, INLOGOV's intention is to carry on producing specialist publications through research. It will put as much effort as it can into capacity-building. But perhaps INLOGOV's chief strength lies in its ability to produce answers to tricky questions confronting local government in transition at a speed that usually evades government.
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