Book Review

Local Government in South Africa Since 1994: Leadership, Democracy, Development and Service Delivery in a Post-Apartheid Era

Alexius Amtaika
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Reviewer’s bio sketch

Charles Sampson, PhD (sampsonc@missouri.edu) is a founding faculty member of the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs. He joined the MU faculty in the summer of 1988 initially serving as associate dean of the Graduate School and as Chief Academic Officer (graduate dean) from 1996-2000. During his appointment at MU he sought and obtained greater than $15M in grants and contracts to support the matriculation of graduate and under graduate programs on the MU campus and across the state. These contributions allowed him to provide unique opportunities for future scholars. Dr. Sampson has served as a member of the national council of American Society of Public Administration (ASPA) and on editorial boards of American Review of Public Administration, Public Administration Review, and Journal of Social Policy and Public Management. His public policy and administration research has been published in refereed scholarly journals and book chapters. One of his primary areas of research is redistributive public policies with current emphasis on the impact of voting rights policy on the emergence of minority-governed municipalities. Professor Sampson serves as the MU representative to the International Consortium on Public Management Policy and Development (ICPMPD) a group of institutions, agencies and nongovernmental organizations in Africa and the United States devoted to facilitating public-civil society partnerships in the advancement of sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2012 he was appointed as a
Fulbright Scholar in Thailand and served as visiting professor, Khon Kaen University. Dr. Sampson continues to work with the International Association of Local Governments. He is an emeritus professor in the Truman School.

### Understanding Amtaika’s Local Government in South Africa Since 1994

A close read of Amtaika’s *Local Governments in South Africa Since 1994* (2013) compels this reader to conclude that local governments in South Africa can become incubators of deliberative democracy, i.e., places or situations that enable or encourage the creation and development of participants in a deliberative governance situation. A place where, eventually citizen input is earnestly sought on matters that advance the well-being of both the citizen and the state (province). To be sure, my futuristic statement may be based more on hope than empirical data. Local governments in South Africa bear the burden of service delivery in spite of their variations and limitations; moreover, these units serve the humble and the patrician.

The professor’s narrative depicts these South African “incubators” and their commitment to serve in a place and time in which they are challenged by an array of bedeviling internal and external factors despite their brief existence. The author makes the case that South African local governments are challenged to emerge into vital political arenas which are critical to promoting citizenship, building the human capital and the facilitating links necessary for cities and towns to compete in the postindustrial global economy. In a 325 page text which reflects the influence of classical political theory and its application to studying the youngest democracy on planet earth, he adroitly draws attention to the relevance of institutionalism as an additional lens for observing the emergence of South African republic.

### Comparing South African Democracy with American Democracy

As I read the Amtaika contribution, I make a comparison with the United States of America. There are many similarities in American local government and South African local government; The structural relations are similar, i.e., local governments rarely have the financial wherewithal to support service delivery, leadership acumen is crucial to the success of those units of government, and the challenge of development should not be overlooked. However, when I compare the country South Africa with the country that is the United States of America, I observe that the US government was designed first as a limited government with a democracy secondary. In South Africa, the emphasis is not so much as limited government as there is placing on the shoulder of the government the responsibility for providing unlimited service with limited means of reasonably achieving its mission. For example, The South African Constitution embraces the Universal Declaration of Human rights as adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The declaration of the Constitution lists political, civil, economic, cultural and social rights. These include the right to work, the right to education, the right of freely participating in the cultural life of the community and the right to health care and well-being. The South African Constitution acknowledges the local government as a participant in governance and a conduit for democratic governance while the US Constitution never recognizes the existence of local government. Yet, the Constitutional or structural arrangement for local
government in both countries is similar: local governments reside in the cellar of the administrative apparatus. The peril of this circumstance of statutory impotence coupled with a paucity of resources keeps them in a subservient posture.

The burden of service delivery is far more massive for South African local government than that of the USA. In the USA, Scholars of American urban politics have classified local government services and subsequent spending into three key categories: 1) allocational, 2) developmental and 3) redistributive spending (Peterson, 1981; Stein, 1990). Allocational services include a range of basic city services that can be considered housekeeping services. Allocational spending funds developmentally and distributionally neutral housekeeping obligations. These expenditures function with less than perfect efficiency and spillovers of social benefits and social costs cannot always be identified. Moreover, many allocational functions involve sub functions for which the amount of inter-community spillover varies. It is difficult to define an area of benefit consumption for certain services; many of the beneficiaries (especially the indirect beneficiaries) cannot even be identified, and, therefore, the area to which benefits extend cannot be circumscribed. Allocational spending includes: 1) education, 2) education other than capital, 3) fire protection, 4) police protection, 5) sewerage, 6) electric utilities, 7) gas utilities and 8) general expenditures.

By contrast, developmental expenditures include what Molotch (1976) refers to as preconditions of growth they include the following expenditures 1) water utilities finance the ‘operation, maintenance, and construction of public water supply systems’; 2) regular highways include expenditures for the ‘maintenance, operation, repair, and construction of non-toll highways, streets, roads, alleys, sidewalks, bridges, and related structures’; 3) parks and recreation funds the ‘provision and support of recreational and cultural-scientific facilities’; 4) sewerage expenditures fund the ‘provision, maintenance, and operation of sanitary and storm sewer systems and sewage disposal and treatment facilities’; 5) central staff services funds ‘government wide executive, administrative, and staff service agencies’; 6) general public buildings include spending for ‘construction, equipping, maintenance and operation of general public buildings not related to specific functions or agencies’; 7) parking facilities fund the ‘provision, construction, maintenance, and operation of local government public parking facilities operated on a commercial basis’; and 8) health services other funds the ‘provision of services for the conservation and enhancement of public health.’ These expenditures have historically supported business development and sustained cities, and they continue to be the ‘significant dynamic’ of contemporary local political economy and are essential to public resources and local issue agendas. Our listing is intended to complement Tiebout (1956), and Logan and Molotch (1987) arguments that cities will spend funds to attract businesses and tax-paying residents.

Finally, redistributive policies are those that tend to focus and assist less-advantaged residents. They are operationalized to include health, hospitals other than capital, welfare, and limited public housing. Hajnal and Trounstine (2010) state that a range of different kinds of surveys all claim that financially poor minority residents are primarily concerned about redistribution and social services, whereas Whites and the middle class are primarily concerned about attracting businesses and other aspects of development, reducing taxes and improving their quality of life through better parks and recreation and easier transportation (Clark & Ferguson, 1983; Lovrich, 1984; Welch, Sigelman, Bledsoe, & Combs, 2001). Political and Civil rights
may have begun as local and state responsibility; however circumstance and federalism has placed those responsibilities at the national level in the USA.

The reality of structured impotence of local government is not, however, limited to South Africa and the USA. Local governments in democratic societies are challenged to provide services to its citizens but rarely have sufficient resources to deliver them. They are universally situated at the bottom of the governance hegemony; often referred to as sub-national units, towns, townships, municipalities, minor civil divisions, amphoe’s, tambons, or mubans, etc.

**South Africa: an incubator for deliberative democracy**

It is not the Professor’s intent to argue that local government in South Africa is an incubator for deliberative democracy, but when one takes account of the character and chronology of events that preceded the adoption of the Constitution, institution that is the centerpiece of Professor Amtaika’s contribution. In post-apartheid South Africa, the issue of governmental structures was a contentious issue between parties involved in the Kempton Park processes during the period 1992 – 1996, when the nation’s new constitution was under development. Most of the members of the African National Congress (ANC) were against a decentralized state structure and other political parties, i.e., Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) rejected the idea of a centralized government in favor of a federal structure. By 1996, a new constitution was adopted. The Constitution included provisions for dividing the country into nine provinces. A federal system such as that demanded by the national party and the remaining parties was rejected, and a compromise led to recognition of nine provinces with its own elected government and parliament, but these governing institutions would be limited in terms of legislative and executive power and taxing power. To their credit, the South African Founders made sure the importance of local government. Yet, nearly two decades after apartheid these provincial and local structures are subjects of controversy.

Providing services in a democratic fashion is a messy business. Attention to the details of effectiveness, fairness, and transparency are joined by issues of tribal and ethnic representativeness. All these challenges to local governments develop in the midst of dwindling financial resources.

**Core values and local government democracy**

Professor Amtaika makes clear that core democratic values control service delivery and governmental effectiveness. He argues that core values such as citizen participation (democracy) and knowledge of market considerations are central to legitimate governance. In some provinces, these dynamics complement each other while, in others they contradict each other. Corrosiveness and contradictions are evident in the microeconomic policies of provinces and they serve to divide residents of communities into plebeians and patricians; an outcome which serves to undermine perceptions of a real democracy.

The author makes the case that elected officials in South Africa offer “lip service” to supporting democratic principles when in four policy areas: (1) devolution of power to lower tiers of government (self-determination) and equitable distribution of power and resources; (2) accountability and responsiveness of the representatives to the electorate; (3) participation of the citizenry in the election of their government; and (4) participation of the citizenry in the decision-making processes. These policy areas draw verbal support from elected officials but policy implementation requires financial action and more frequently such financial action is “corroded by economic policies which are hierarchical and elitist”. Officials are shielded by
structuralism, i.e., administrative structure and processes that are fundamentally undemocratic and largely dismissive of citizen input. Traditionally, the economic policies of the provinces are formulated and adopted by governmental technocrats without consultation with, or the inputs of, ordinary people. “They are usually dictated by external forces and factors. Political leaders and bureaucrats decide on which policies to adopt and implement on behalf of the people, but without consulting their citizens. Officials often demonstrate parantela behavior (thinking for) their constituents rather than clientela behavior when they consult and think with their constituents. Professor Amtaika suggests that this is because states are inherently hierarchical a notion which is amply supported by diverse theorists such as William James, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White; and that officials and administrators at the top of a political unit are often unaccountable to those at the bottom, resulting in unintended consequences, in which choices of economic policies (in South Africa) are often biased towards serving the long-term interests of the ruling class. In so doing, the author affirms that this state of affairs impacts how services are delivered, how financial management (and mismanagement) is perceived, and how these understandings explain the roots of corruption.

**Fiscal decentralization and the devolution of power**

The author’s treatment of the subject of South African democracy and the devolution of power to local governments facilitates an enlightening discussion on how democratic institutions of government are corroded by non-existing or limited opportunities for educating citizens and leaders alike. Structural or constitutional arrangements are plentiful. Consider that the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa divides the country into three spheres of government, namely (1) the national government; (2) the nine provincial governments; and (3) the 284 local governments/municipalities (SA Constitution, 1996). These spheres are “distinctive, interdependent, and interrelated” in terms of section 40(1) of the Constitution, they operate through a bifurcated structure of government, establishing direct relations and responsibilities between the national government and provinces, on one hand, and between the national government and the local governments on the other (ibid). This resulted in the creation of two separate spheres of sub-national governments in South Africa, namely provincial and local government.

Local government is responsible for the provision of local infrastructure and basic services such as sanitation and water reticulation. Local government is tasked to perform developmental roles and is responsible for improving the standard of living and quality of life of the people.

**Conclusion**

I find it helpful to examine Amtaika (2013) through the lens of Dryzek (1996). Where Amtaika more than adequately describes the administrative structures and processes for South African democracy and South Africa’s provision for plebiscitary democracy, he does not take into consideration that, beyond voting, societies have to become accustomed to discussions which lead to problem identification and subsequently problem resolution. Perhaps more than is rationally justified, many observers of politics believe that instrumental rationality (the ability to choose expedient means to ends) comes “automatically”. Dryzek’s theory of deliberative democracy challenges all scholars who focus overly on instrumental rationality, neglecting
communicative rationality. To be fair, the notion of instrumental versus deliberative processes is beyond the scope of Amtaika’s contribution, yet, both Amtaika and Dryzek’s contributions are connected.

Dryzek (1996) argues that the reliance on instrumental politics and the technocracies of expert cultures are counter-productive and ill-equipped for dealing with complex social problems. (Any cursory examination of the South African service delivery function will quickly affirm the notion that the challenge is highly complex.) An alternative program for local government is a form of communicatively rational democracy (discursive democracy) which stresses the importance of active citizenship and public discourse. The development of discursive democracy requires a passage of time that goes beyond the three decades of the democratic experiment in South Africa. Deliberative democracy rests on the core idea of citizens and their representatives deliberating about public problems and solutions under conditions that are conducive to reasoned reflection and refined public judgment; a mutual willingness to interpret the values, perspectives, and interests of others; and the possibility of reframing their interests and perspectives in light of a joint search for common interests and mutually acceptable solutions.

Chapter 4 in the Amtaika contribution suggests that over time the world will see evidence that the South Africa is an incubator for deliberative democracy. Given time, the South African people will move from instrumental to deliberative and will discover how the political process can be made more energetic and relevant. At the same time, it shows how such an invigorated process will serve as a more effective catalyst for social problem solving.

It seems that the missing element is a process for a higher conceptual level than plebiscitary representative democracy. The void is ‘discursive democracy’ (Dryzek, 1990). Modern democratic societies are based on three pillars: 1) market economy, 2) meaningful democracy, i.e., beyond the plebiscite, 3) public institutions, and; 4) Non-governmental organizations. Beyond the four or five year plebiscite is opportunities for engaging citizens.

Visionary leadership can transform a culture, and in so doing, 1) empower and educate community members through Democracy Schools and Citizenship Schools; 2) “re-educate” administrators with effective communication and interpersonal skills, 3) enable administrative structures and processes, 4) democratize institutions, and 5) distinguish between managing and governing.

Structuralism and governance processes that acknowledge the value of consulting with citizens are crucial to facilitating “good governance”. The combination of structure and process can produce efficient and accountable institutions and systems; rules that promote development and ensure that people are free to participate in decision-making processes, and be heard on issues of national interest and promote the development of decisions that directly affect the lives of the people. These are incremental steps that move from plebiscitary democracy to deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is the strongest form of democracy, and it is rarely found even in societies which are recognized as advanced democracies. Conditions for ordered rule and collective action which merge boundaries between and within public and private sectors and place a focus on mechanisms which do not rest on recourse of authority and sanctions of government reflect the movement toward deliberative democracy. These are the “preconditions” that empower citizens by pushing control out of the bureaucracy into the community and
redefines citizens as customers. Such “preconditions” foster governance practices that favor outcomes rather than inputs. They incubate within a society and become the ethos. Such an ethos goes beyond local government; it comes from citizens, their government, and the bureaucracy and its administrators. The reach of the South African Constitution includes universal suffrage, quality of life of its citizens, generates massive promise. If its reach is to be realized, it can only do so if the country moves from plebiscitary democracy to deliberative democracy.

The 1998 White Paper on Local Government mandates South African municipalities to develop strategies and mechanisms which continuously engage citizens in their capacities as voters. Further, to ensure democratic accountability, citizens through a variety of stakeholder organizations, can contribute to policy processes. Consumers and end users whom expert value for their money and affordable services; and organized partners engaged in resource mobilization for development objectives (White Paper, 1998).

If this reviewer’s claim has any substance, the next phase of democratic development in South Africa is an extensive discovery process. Visionary leadership will enable an incrementally induced deliberative democracy. The ethos for this incrementally induced culture shift results from the incubation process which is underway. The public sphere can generate opportunities for forming, refining, and revising preferences through discourse that takes multiple perspectives into account and orients itself towards mutual understanding and common action.

References


