

# Opinion - The Windhoek Institute for Municipal Research

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That the cabinet and parliament are the most important governance sites is post-colonial orientation that has had tragic developmental consequences.

Local charlatans thus do anything, including bending backwards to enter these sites.

As scholars Ellison Tjirera and Malakia Haimbodi once observed, “there is yet to be an appreciation of the significance of local governance in Namibia. All too often, the experiences of and insights from sub-national authorities are overlooked in favour of an obsession with centralised politics and administration.”

The belittling of local government has caused it to degenerate into a site of suffering and despondency.

Firstly, the rush for central government has delivered local authority into the hands of the ungifted and scoundrels.

The consequences of entrusting a mouse to guard a cheese factory are obvious. Indeed,

as the Africans say, when a hyena is the judge, a goat has no rights.

It is the illiterate and/or semi-literate in charge of local government. Walde Ndevashiya, as a then chief executive of Eenhana town council, frustratingly confessed to a journalist in 2017, “you have a situation where some of them are semi-literate and are elected for either being in a certain party for too long or for being loyal. How do you make proper decisions on things you cannot make sense of?”

Second, local authority has effectively been reduced to an upward mobility springboard in the context of neo-patrimonialism. Enjoying the political elite support is not he/she delivering local developmental opportunities but he/she religiously following instructions of the big man of politics. Those who disagree must explain how corruption convict Katrina Hanse Himarwa climbed from local government to cabinet. Local government, thus, becomes a theatre of entertaining, impressive and dancing for the central big man of politics – service delivery is, therefore, insignificant.

Third, the Namibian local government operates on the premise of the principle of extract and dispose for profit. They extract rates and taxes from the residents to fund their operations. Resources in their custodian, particularly land, are disposed to fund their operations. The tin brains of illiterate and semi-literate councillors are incapable of going beyond the extract and dispose for profit principle.

Fourth, dancing local councillor’s proximity to corruption and rent seeking is common. A simple search of the names Katrina Shimbulu, Jack Tsanigab, Immanuel Wilfred, just to mention a few, is one of the many exhibits. Corruption at this level is, however, not a new development.

In 2004, Gerhard Totemeyer, then local government deputy minister, once observed; “we have noticed that the lust for money is the root of many evils. To some local authority councillors, money comes first and then possibly service to the people.” What can be expected of a person in transition? Think of an unconcerned bus-awaiting person standing at a bus station who is expected to have regard to the cleanliness of the bus station.

Fifth, and consequently, local authorities are thus starved of innovation and strategic foresight. Expecting a dancing and transitioning politician to think innovatively and strategically is to expect a bull to give birth to a calf. Only when the enlightened, honest, talented, dedicated and independent councillors take local authority steering wheels can innovation and strategic foresight be experienced at local authority.

Since independence, Namibia has not embarked on any innovative local government initiatives beyond proclaiming existing settlements and villages without any strategic foresight. Can Omuthiya or Tses pass any 21st-century local government innovation test? After obtaining independence in 1975, the Malaysian leadership embarked on a vision for a city underpinned by Malaysian values and culture. The city of Putrajaya was thus conceived in the late 1980s. The construction began in 1996.

Putrajaya is now regarded as an important landmark project in the developmental history of local government in Malaysia. It was planned, designed and constructed by Malaysian companies with only 10% of the materials imported. It is one of the most intelligent cities in the world. It was innovation and strategic foresight that accounted for Putrajaya.

In 2041, Windhoek's population will increase by 500 000 inhabitants. The City is without a structural plan anticipating this occurrence in less than 20 years. Kigali, Rwanda's capital, has taken innovative steps to prepare for the future. Its conceptual master plan has unveiled a long-term direction on how development is to occur over the next 50 years to accommodate an additional 3 million inhabitants. They seek to create a livable community underpinned by a sense of belonging and optimism, economic vitality for citizens, environment protection and preservation and Rwandan culture. Despite being under an economic embargo, the ingenuity and people centeredness of the Cuban leadership has delivered the City of Havana as one of the world's harmonious cities.

When Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was deteriorating, the authorities involved the city residents in its restoration. Unlike Windhoek, Kigali and Havana place residents at the centre of their innovative planning thus creating a sense of belonging.

With a coming political leadership prioritizing innovation and strategic foresight, it is possible for Windhoek to take a leaf from Putrajaya, Kigali and Havana.

Required is a strong research and development entity to not only lead Windhoek research and development agenda but also solve the complex developmental questions that may perplex its leadership. As such, it is envisaged that the Windhoek Institute for Municipal Research (WIMUR) will be established as a research and innovation entity to drive the municipal research agenda for Windhoek and the entire local government in Namibia.

WIMUR is to be established in partnership with both University of Namibia (Unam) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST).

The city recently signed a research memorandum of understanding with Unam and also signed a similar agreement with NUST last year. The establishment of WIMUR will thus be easy and smooth.

With correct political leadership, Windhoek can unshackle itself from the socioeconomic escapades, corruption, neo-patrimonialism and mediocrity status quo to become a bastion of innovation, economic vitality and social harmony. WIMUR is one of the many needed urgent solutions.

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