

# Expert panel unravels ward councillor system

🕒 06:00 20/08/2019 👤 Nettalie Viljoen @Nettalieviljoen

## People's Post

Extra chairs had to be carried in for those attending a seminar on ward councillor accountability and transparency held on Wednesday 14 August at the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education in Mowbray.

Hosted by the Development Action Group (DAG) and the Civic Action for Public Participation (Capp), the seminar served as a learning session for civic organisations across Cape Town.

Ad



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The event took the form of a panel discussion with three speakers, experts on the topic of accountability in local government.

DAG's Querida Saal coordinated the proceedings while Capp's Tauriq Jenkins kicked off the discussion.

He captured the mood when he spoke of the audience's shared sense of disillusionment.

"We all have to contend with the three-headed hydra," he said, referring to ward councillors. "The one planted by a political party, the second paid by the City and the third who has to serve a community mandate," Jenkins said.

Prof Jaap de Visser, a B2-rated scholar with South Africa's National Research Foundation and co-author of *Local Government Law of South Africa*, explained how we ended up in this situation of disillusionment.

He said a ward council is made up of 50% proportional representation and 50% ward election X both are linked to the outcome of elections.

Proportional representation was elected on a party ticket. On the positive side, it was fair. On the negative side, there is no direct link between the councillors and the voters.

The ward councillor system on paper also seemed to work well. It gives independent candidates the chance to run for election. But it sometimes fell apart because of its "winner takes all" system, whereby candidates win even if their voting numbers are just a percent more than their oppositions'.

Other detracting factors were the sheer size of our municipalities (in some wards as many as 33 000 inhabitants), political parties' domination of the ward system and the comparatively speaking high salaries of ward councillors.

Nelson Mandela Bay municipal manager Johann Mettler, who is on suspension for alleged misconduct, said understanding the planning and budget cycles of municipalities were vital. For example, waiting for the August council meeting to make policy requests were too late. By that time budgets had already been finalised. "The subcouncil meetings held in March is where you want to be."

Civic associations also had to do their homework. "Study the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), a five-year plan which local government is required to compile to determine the development needs of the municipality, in your ward."

He said, before attending meetings, you had to know what happened the previous year, what the backlogs were and the reasons for them. "You have to be on top of the game. If not, you are out of the game."

The third speaker and executive director of Afesis-corplan, an East London based NGO, Nontando Zintle Ngamlana, said seminars like these were important. "It is time we start taking our power back," Ngamlana said.

She agreed with Mettler, saying that proper preparation for meetings was crucial.

"The municipality's annual calendar is important. Make a note of which meetings you can observe and at which ones you can participate. And when you do engage, do so strategically"

She said you wanted to go in armed with the right information. "If reports are technical, get a specialist to look at it for you," she advised.

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