



Pictured left to right: Daniel Mametja (Bloodriver Advice Office), Peter Sema (Morwakola Drop-in Centre), Millicent Maretela (Thuso Advice and Development Centre), Thato Hobyane (Morwakola Drop-in Centre YAAC), and Mahlatse Maruma (Bloodriver Advice Office YAAC).

Local government cannot be overlooked in responding to climate change

Southern Africa is a global climate change hotspot - temperature increases at twice the rate of the global average. Rural communities across South Africa are already facing these climate impacts - temperature increases, erratic rainfall and increasingly extreme weather events. Simultaneously, climate change will also affect the daily functioning of local governments, through droughts threatening municipalities' ability to provide water and sanitation, floods destroying infrastructure and disrupting service delivery, or heatwaves impacting the health of the local population and increasing the load on health services.

The original conceptualisation in the early days of democracy placed the greatest responsibility for the day-to-day delivery of services on local government. The 1998 White Paper on Local Government built on the constitution's outlining of three independent tiers of government, with a system of municipalities extending across

all areas of the country, divided into metropolitan municipalities, for bigger city areas, and local and district municipalities, for more rural areas. Given the local government's role in services, they also carried the weight of work addressing developmental, spatial and structural legacies of apartheid. It was a progressive model at the time that intended to bring democracy and local decision-making closer to the people.

This vision of local government in South Africa was only partially realised. According to the Auditor General of South Africa's report, only 16% of municipalities have received clean audits this year, continuing an ongoing trend of poor audit outcomes. This reflects municipalities poor performance and financial mismanagement due to their inability to accurately plan and project their revenue and expenditure, as well as due to corruption. Municipalities often return money to the National Treasury earmarked for free basic services, despite the dire need for these services. Communities across the country, like those we work with in the Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project, live through daily realities of poor service delivery and the ongoing legacy of inequality. Some only receive water once a week. Others struggle with erratic municipal waste collection causing waste buildup, polluting rivers and blocking stormwater systems, and impacting the health of community members.

While climate impacts will further threaten and worsen service delivery, discussions in the RACR project have focused on how poor service delivery and weak local governments will, in turn, act to undermine community-level climate resilience. Insufficient sanitation and water infrastructure and irregular maintenance causes leaks, straining the water supply. Inadequate housing and homelessness increases exposure to heatwaves. Communities must then endure increasing droughts and heatwaves, while barely having enough water to drink or shelter to avoid heatstroke and stay healthy. Irregular municipal waste collection causes garbage to accumulate that washes into drains, blocking them and worsening flooding from increasingly heavy rainfall. This damages roads and infrastructure, effectively stranding communities from accessing services and carrying out their daily lives.

Thus, the crisis of local government service provision and the climate crisis are intertwined. They exacerbate each other's impacts in a downward spiral of worsening services and capacity that threaten community health and survival. The severity of a climate-induced humanitarian crisis on the horizon could be lessened if inadequate delivery by our local governments is addressed. Adapting, responding and preparing for climate change impacts will require a robust local government response, but developing this response will require changes in local government functioning across the country.

Within the RACR project, participants have shared their struggles with local government are both systemic and structural. Documents that are foundational to democratic processes that involve communities are inaccessible, usually written in only English and dense and complex. Planning processes and opportunities for public participation are poorly communicated. The roles and responsibilities within local government are often unclear to communities, and this obscures accountability. Community members are often unaware of their rights and responsibilities under the constitution, or are afraid to stand up due to the threat of criminality and political violence at the municipal level. The rising costs of living and unemployment make it increasingly hard for community members to pay for public services. Those who do manage to pay often still struggle with poor service delivery. Together, this further undermines the trust in municipalities' commitment to service delivery, especially for poor and marginalised communities. This sense of abandonment, by those elected to serve locally, contributes to community-wide impacts, such as increasing crime and levels of gender based violence.

These challenges are recognised, at least at a national government level. Earlier this year, the national government released a review of the White Paper on local government for comment. It outlined many of these challenges and also highlighted the need for climate governance in our local governments, but it fell short of outlining how this might be practically implemented. It focused on high-level outputs such as digitalisation of governance tools to increase efficiencies, transitioning energy to renewables, and addressing extreme emergencies. It did not address the need for integrating climate considerations into daily operations or budgeting. This points to a superficial engagement with the interventions the climate crisis will actually require of local government, rather than a grounding in the daily reality of climate impacts. While many municipalities have climate strategies or some response plan, these are written by consultants and not considered in the daily operations of municipalities, beset by corruption and mismanagement.

The capacity to implement responsiveness to daily climate impacts in local governments needs to be improved, and goes hand in hand with improving service delivery. Municipalities need to incorporate climate budgeting so they have contingency funds to address unplanned infrastructure repairs and maintenance, and investing in climate preparedness. Addressing climate change will mean ensuring a truly Just Energy Transition for those most vulnerable, and ring-fencing emergency expenditure where needed. It is about adaptation and building resilience to climate impacts. Adaptation and resilience will require additional funds at the local government level, as well as capacity and accountability to spend these funds effectively. It is about preventing further investment into fossil fuels and

emission-intensive activities and addressing inequality around resource access and spatial development.

Through the RACR project, we are working with rural communities and faith leaders to push for stronger, climate-resilient, accountable leadership at the municipal level. Through building a shared understanding and supporting engagement with local governments, the intention is to create more accountable and responsible climate leadership in our municipalities that can support sustainable development planning and climate change responses.

The capabilities, budgets and responsiveness of our local governments will heavily shape our daily experiences of climate change. Given ongoing processes reviewing local government structures and upcoming municipal elections in 2026, it is imperative that we collectively engage to shape our local development. We need to hold our local governments accountable to the promises they have made and responsibilities they hold, to deliver services and address apartheid era legacies, if we are to build resilience to the climate crisis.

The RACR project made a detailed submission on the Review of the White Paper for Local Government based on project participants' inputs. The submission received 33 organisational endorsements and can be found [here](#). We invited all stakeholders, community leaders and concerned citizens to review the submission and actively engage with its recommendations to push for stronger, accountable and climate-resilient local governance.

The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project empowers rural communities in South Africa to build resilience against climate change. By partnering with community-based organisations and faith leaders, RACR enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural populations, particularly in the Eastern, Western, Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape provinces. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland.