

## **Understanding why service delivery protests take place and who is to blame**

By Kevin Allan and Karen Heese

For anyone who watches the news, even only on occasion, there is little doubt that service delivery protests have escalated in number and severity over the last few months. The latest data from Municipal IQ's Hotspots Monitor, which monitors the occurrence of major service delivery protests across South Africa, shows that there have been more major protests so far this year than any previous year since service delivery protests first started in 2004, and the year is not over yet.

Given the large number of protests that have occurred this year it is no surprise that there is a growing concern amongst the public as to why these protests are happening and whether, and where, they will happen next. The somewhat uncertain response by both government and analysts has done little to allay the public's fears.

In truth, the reasons behind protests are generally poorly understood and this has fuelled speculation on why protests occur and indeed whether these protests are even about service delivery. But for Municipal IQ, the term "service delivery protest" if not always absolutely accurate is wholly adequate – it describes a protest which is galvanised by inadequate local services or tardy service delivery, the responsibility for which lies with a municipality. The term is also useful in that it makes clear that there are similar protests occurring across the country – to re-define such protests in different ways confuses the issue and draws attention away from the fact that this is a national phenomenon with some pressing causes.

Research from Municipal IQ's Hotspots Monitors shows clear evidence that most protests this year continue to occur in informal settlement in our largest metros (a continuation of a trend of previous years). Cities such as Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Cape Town have experienced a rash of service delivery protests this year in addition to a number of fairly specific cases in the provinces of the North West and Mpumalanga like the now notorious Balfour.

But it must be remembered that these cities experience the highest population growth rates of all our localities; and in fact there is a strong statistical link between high levels of migration and service delivery protests.

Urbanisation, essentially the influx of poor migrants to cities, is prompted by the search for jobs, and therefore is most pronounced in areas of economic growth. But this results in an irony – although service delivery protests are commonly perceived as an indication of a failure of local government, Municipal IQ has found a strong link between municipal productivity (a measure of local government success) and service delivery protests – those in search of jobs move to successful cities where they perceive there to be economic opportunity. Unfortunately, most migrants find themselves unemployed, living in one of the many hundreds of informal settlements on the periphery of these large metros, effectively marginalised from both access to economic opportunity, as well as housing and services.

The rapid growth of informal settlements as well as metros' (until recent) unwillingness to accept them as a permanent reality in their midst has meant a slow response to the service delivery needs of communities in these areas.

In these cases, a large part of the problem sparking protests has been very poor communication between representatives of metros and communities, essentially the task of ward councillors and local officials. The reason for this is partly pragmatic – informal settlements contain neither the number of registered voters nor the local branch lobbying strength of more formalised areas, but also because the fluidity of informal settlements is such that they do not necessarily present themselves as organised communities with representative leaders. In truth, including communities from informal settlements in local governance and planning processes requires far more work than in other more formal areas of metros.

An assessment of service delivery protests in metros makes clear how a lack of access to information often leads to the rapid spread of rumours of favouritism, corruption, and mismanagement – sometimes true, but often untrue. Added to this, the need for services in these areas is not only greater than any other area of a metro but indeed in most cases absolutely desperate.

While the violence and criminality often associated with service delivery protests is unacceptable and should be condemned out of hand, it is worth remembering that the communities living in informal settlements are essentially excluded from society – they have access neither to economic nor social opportunity and find themselves on the outside looking in. But Municipal IQ research on poverty levels in wards where protests take place shows that while communities in these areas are desperately poor and contain some of the highest unemployment rates in the country, they still have better access to local services than residents in the poorest municipalities in our rural areas and indeed than a national average. However, they are significantly poorer than neighbouring wards. They observe communities in more formalised neighbouring areas benefiting from upgraded services and they observe councillors and local officials cruising past in large cars, while they wait endlessly for their turn to arrive.

This sense of relative deprivation, and inequality within an urban context, is key to understanding why protests take place. People will wait for service delivery, but not if it seems that everyone else in their municipality is getting services before them. Add to this the marginalisation and exclusion felt by communities in informal settlements and the general desperation for services in these areas, and top it all up with a lack of information from the municipality. In this environment a fast spreading rumour of mismanagement or corruption or nepotism is all the spark needed to set off a violence fuelled protest.

Government at all levels (national, provincial and local) has to look, in a number of practical ways, at why service delivery protests are taking place and what can be done to mitigate them. Central to this is a recognition that local councils can no longer afford to ignore the plight of informal settlements in the metros where most protests take place. Two things seem pertinent to Municipal IQ:

Local councils, through ward councillors and local officials, need to develop a specific communication strategy to include communities in informal settlements in the processes of local councils. This will not only serve to include people in planning processes and alleviate the current frustration that most of

these communities have expressed of being excluded, but will also deal with the current lack of communication in these areas and the spread of often false or exaggerated rumours of corruption, nepotism and mis-management.

The national departments of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs as well as Human Settlements in partnership with local government, should clarify a much needed interim policy on the formalisation of informal settlements and the integration of these areas into those urban municipalities where they occur.

Johannesburg, a few weeks ago, was the first South African city to put such a policy in place and certainly much can be learned by other municipalities from this experience.

**Ends**

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