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"Setting Up and Urban Management Approach: What is It All About?"

To illustrate the role of practitioners and researchers in setting up a concerted urban management approach, the case study which follows was constructed from actual events in several places, adding to them and distorting them to achieve a set of circumstances which can be profitably explored. Although the result is a fiction, it borrows so heavily from true conditions that it is thought a fair representation of reality.

A Case for Urban Management

A practitioner is faced with the challenge of setting up an urban management approach in a town in southern Africa. This is a new township, one which is to be a model for others soon to be created in order to build throughout the country a level of local government which hardly existed outside the capital city when the country was under foreign domination. A bilateral agency has brought the practitioner into this situation to lead its technical support on the ground. The bilateral's aims are to achieve an effective local government, specifically one which can be instrumental in the achievement of development which is both economic growth and greater equity. Furthermore, it is pursuing decentralisation of government and community development. Although broadly agreeing with these aims, the practitioner is free to balance them against one another and against other considerations, within the requirements of his terms of reference that he assist the town government in building its capacity to manage its town, drawing upon the continuing support of the bilateral agency. This support is in the form of money for learning experiences, related capital investments such as computers, and short term technical advisers.

The practitioner defines his role as that of an agent of change: change from the way the town was administered in the past, change from the performance of routines, and change to the pursuit of new objectives having to do with development. He is guided by a particular notion of urban management, namely, that it is taking sustained responsibility for actions to achieve particular objectives with regard to the activities which take place in an urban area. This has two major implications from the start. One has to do with the objectives, the other with responsibility.

Management Objectives

If to manage is to pursue particular objectives, what are the objectives appropriate to this case? The practitioner is not the manager, nor is the bilateral donor of assistance. Their objectives - shared or not - are not mere technical knowledge to be transferred to the new local government. Objectives provide the source of the values which shape choices of the matters given attention and resources by the town government as well as of the priorities among them. They shape the relations of the council to the civil society it attempts to govern and even to higher levels of government. Consequently, objectives which guide daily operations must be held and maintained by the managers, which means these objectives must be chosen and understood by the managers and owned by them.

In the case under scrutiny here, the leadership of the town council's administration and the council members were initially without any general agreement on what they were trying to achieve, other than various and often vague

ideas of doing their duty, improving the town, and advancing their careers or fortunes. The donor agency from the time of its first encounter with the local government openly declared the objectives of its assistance. The practitioner, finding these consistent with his own beliefs, echoed such statements at every appropriate opportunity. Sympathetic responses have been heard from the town government - a councillor who has worked as a social development officer, a town treasurer with some vision - but the focus of activities remains in general on the performance of the council's day to day operations. Higher, more abstract goals like development are seen as appropriately addressed later, if at all.

What then is the practitioner to do? To assume that development goals drive the town council is to pretend and to go off into another, unreal world. To demand that development be the council's objective - perhaps working with the donor agency to threaten the withdrawal of support - will at best gain only lip-service and placating gestures. Ultimately, the council and its senior officers will pursue with commitment, determination, and perseverance a "mission" which most of them have defined in their own terms and adopted. The practitioner's most useful role can only be to help this come about more quickly.

Responsibility

A sense of responsibility is the source of initiative and accountability. Managing is not passive, and it depends on itself to see that something is done.

Responsibility may be the most difficult aspect of managing a town to put into place. For the council of this case study to feel adequate responsibility for running the town, it needed to be aware of the full scope of town matters which required attention and then to genuinely accept the burden of trying to do something about them. When it was created, this council took up functions which its mandate from central government required. At best, it assumed responsibility for several particular tasks, which is not at all the same as taking responsibility for the social, economic, and physical development of the town. If the practitioner is to assist in moving the council to this different perspective and commitment, more must be pursued than an orientation to development. The practitioner will have to help the councillors and their senior staff to understand the whole of the town - the lives of its people and the activities of its production - are its charge, and that it should attempt to carry out functions which deal with those matters deserving the greatest attention. This will take the council out of the rut of routine functions and provoke it to innovate and initiate.

To then accept responsibility for the public interest in how the town's people live and work is another step, and it is a difficult one for any institution to make. The motivation to do so will come less from the salaries paid and more from professional or personal pride or a sense of duty. It can also arise from a desire for power and possession ("to make this town what we want it to be") which can threaten the achievement of development for all. A properly motivated leader within the governing group could generate inspiration in the others. In this southern African town, such a leader was lacking in the chief executive or in the head of the elected council. There is probably little a practitioner can do to create the necessary motivation in any case. He cannot act the role of leader for the government, and he cannot deliver a sense of responsibility like some kind of technical advice. The most he can hope to assist is the strengthening of self-confidence within the institution so that it is more willing to shoulder whatever degree of responsibility it feels.

Tasks and Processes

Whether or not objectives and responsibility were adequately dealt with, the practitioner of this case found there were contributions he could make to the local government capacity for urban management. The first of these was to improve the council's awareness of the relevant tasks which could be carried out. Once again, looking beyond routines or set duties was advocated. Should the council do anything about low incomes? Should it try to attract investment? Problems and opportunities facing the town now and in the future were highlighted and explored in detail to give them and their consequences more substance. Repeated discussions of them aimed for a familiarity which could produce choices of which is more important and which is less, so as to challenge the notion that all council actions were equally useful. Therefore the possibility was raised and examined for community organisations in poor areas to purchase water from the council, and in effect be responsible for obtaining user fees from those consuming the water. So was the promotion of model pit latrines which had proved adequate in pilot project areas, yet had not been replicated by households elsewhere. The intent was to broaden the scope of what the council recognised as matters to which it could or should give attention, at the same time stressing the practical

need for deciding priorities among them.

Next, a better understanding was sought of management processes cutting through the tasks. These were taken by the practitioner to be planning, providing resources, developing facilities, operating, and maintaining.

The council was given assistance in locating or freeing the funds, equipment, skills, land, etc. which its tasks require. Maintenance had been neglected, so its role was emphasised, as were its connections to constructing, operating and even planning. The practitioner attempted to teach the councillors and staff that certain of these fundamental processes could be overemphasised, while others were neglected. In this case, there was even less planning than there was maintenance. The council's programme for training its staff and new councillors worked on an ad hoc basis. Its adopted "town plan" showed little more than the existing land development and contained no policies for expansion, despite a rapidly growing population. A plan for the council's actions did not yet exist, although the bilateral donor had made repeated requests for it. Consequently, there were no recognised priorities.

Fortunately, since its inception the town council had recognised the importance of generating and obtaining funds. The treasurer's functions had consistently been the focus of technical assistance and of the council's own efforts to build capacity. A more than competent treasurer had been recruited to replace the first office-holder, subordinate staff was being trained in billing, debt collection, and the effective use of computer hardware and software. Nevertheless, the council had for a long time been on a path toward bankruptcy because growing unpaid bills for water and electricity - the major sources of its income - meant cash flows were inadequate even though assets exceeded debts. Despite the warnings given them, the councillors refused to back up the collection efforts of their staff in fear of losing political support. The practitioner could add little to improve this situation, except to highlight the need for the public to realise it must pay for what it received. Encouraged by the practitioner, council staff had organised trips to a nearby power generating plant and to the town's own water treatment and storage facilities involving a selection of councillors, community representatives and council staff. The success of these trips had made it possible to speak within the council of implanting the user pays principle within the community as one of the highest priorities.

New Avenues for Action

The local government staff, and much more the councillors, lacked knowledge and experience which would make them familiar with the many avenues for action - whether for tasks or processes - which an urban management approach can open. Like their perspectives on the range of tasks to be performed, they had views of how to perform tasks which were traditional. However, encouraging the use of the private sector was not difficult because several staff - the town treasurer especially - already recognised the potential. However, the practitioner has so far been unable to assist in launching practices which would tap this potential.

Some even appreciated the gains to be had from working with communities, although most of the councillors were suspicious because fledgling community groups had aligned themselves with an opposition political party in the earliest days of the new independent national government. Moreover, the town clerk had consistently shown hostility to community representatives. Following on the better relationships fostered during local trips, a 10 day study journey to the capital of a neighbouring country was organised by the practitioner with funds of the bilateral donor, involving as before councillors, community representatives and local government officers. This has seemed to lay such a promising foundation for a community support programme pushed by the donor agency that the town clerk appears to have withdrawn his resistance to the participation of his staff. The town treasurer is now actively planning with community groups for the creation of a body with joint representations which will mediate between government and residents of low income areas. While supporting these efforts, the practitioner has been able to bring technical assistance in town planning, land management, and personnel management, the last to improve the ability to better train and otherwise manage the council staff resources.

What has not been given particular attention are the divisions between spending sectors within the council and the division between levels of government.

Overcoming these separations was seen by the practitioner as a key component of an urban management approach. Central government has been unusually cooperative in enabling decentralisation: it agreed to finance many local government salaries on a declining basis for a period of 5 years. It also offered the services of a mobile maintenance unit for water supply facilities which it operated in the region. Real conflicts or duplications regarding

local government programmes and projects have not yet arisen, so this aspect of urban management has yet to be tested. The other matter of challenging expenditure sector divisions within the council has also been largely untried.

Council departments are still very small and loyalties to the council as a whole seem generally much stronger than those to departments, while informal communication among staff is good because they are so few. Yet complaints have begun to surface that information which should be generally available is being lost in the files of individual departments. The practitioner has been aware that the lack of an agreed vision of what the town government is trying to do beyond the traditional routines of a local government means that here is little pressure for activities which involve several departments at once. If the challenges of poverty alleviation and economic growth are to be taken on, a way will be needed of working across traditional department boundaries. The practitioner is hoping that the programme of community support - with its implications of community requests which call for unconventional responses from the council - will provide a vehicle for creating cross-department attitudes and mechanisms at this early stage in the council's existence.

Capacity Building

Simultaneously with his efforts to promote an urban management approach - raising awareness about tasks, processes and the priorities among them, as well as about approaches to carrying them out - the practitioner worked with the senior council officers and the bilateral donor to identify gaps in the skills and knowledge among the councillors and their staff.

Critical gaps were evident very early on: the town engineer had no one with proper knowledge of maintenance of the sewerage system; the treasurer of that time had no ability to prepare annual budgets and capital programmes. With the initial council staff even smaller than today, the gaps were filled with experienced professionals from abroad through a volunteer programme of the donor agency. While this practice continues today as the council expands its scope of activities, emphasis moved to training council staff, sometimes using the technical advisers to cover for trainees absent from work. Visits to other local governments have been a popular way for staff to pick up practical knowledge. However, once again the absence of a clear set of objectives and an action plan which established priorities has meant that every training opportunity is of equal importance. Moreover, training is mainly left to staff to initiate, so it would not be driven by priorities if they existed. The practitioner has been pushing for an overall training plan as another way of pressing for objectives and a council action plan. Most recently, he has been advocating the consolidation of measures taken to build the treasurer's department, believing the council's approaching bankruptcy and the need for adequate funds to improve and extend basic services are reasons for efficient and effective management of council finances to be the highest priority. He is further pushing for training and education that will prepare councillors and their staff to: 1) achieve acceptability of the user pays principle within communities, 2) build good relationship with communities, so that their resources can be used in partnership with the council, and so the council can assist communities and individuals in building their own capacities to deal with problems, 3) guide future land development with planning, 4) promote the use of pit latrines to ensure good sanitary waste management, while avoiding overloading and extending the existing sewerage system, and 5) delivering land to those in need of it.

The council as an organisation has grown in size and ability, and it should continue to do so if it is to manage a growing town. Yet there is not adequate concern to manage its staff assets. Consequently, the practitioner has been working for the development of a personnel management programme, in which there is a continuing capacity building operation. To be successful, this will have to be one which can survive the eventual withdrawal of bilateral donor support and the practitioner's presence.

Research Opportunities

While illustrating how a practitioner might go about putting into place an urban management approach, this fictitious case featuring an African town also reveals many needs for research. Throughout, the practitioner has been working on the basis of various assumptions. They underlie his perceptions of problems and opportunities facing the town, of the strategies and actions which the town government might pursue, of his choices of priority actions, of the barriers to effective and continuous capacity building, and of the actions to build capacity. In some cases, these assumptions can be strengthened with better critical knowledge of what is good practice. In others, there is the need to challenge or test basic concepts and theory.

The practitioner's notion of urban management is an example of the latter. Whatever the motives of those who have drawn world attention to this ill-defined concept, the effect has been to suggest that such an idea, when put into practice, would change for the better what is happening in towns and cities of the South. Does the practitioner's model - or any other - actually offer such a possibility? What kind and quality of change can be expected if the practitioner succeeds, and why? What is missing from this - or any other model - which would significantly improve the outcomes of its application?

Then there is the relationship of the practitioner of to the institution which is to take an urban management approach. How effective and efficient is an advisor from the outside, especially one backed by a foreign donor agency? What can actually be transferred and achieved by a such a relationship? What are its significant faults and limitations?

Finally, it is essential to know what is actually achieved by any attempt at change. Too much of what is advocated is based on blind faith or stubbornly held conviction that personal logic is correct. Little has been learned about urban management by examining actual results. A major cause of this lack of demonstrated outcomes has been the absence of a defined condition upon which change has left its mark. Research is essential which establishes baseline data on conditions relevant to urban management endeavours before they begin, so that there is some possibility for knowing if these efforts achieve anything at all.

Conclusion

To illustrate the role of practitioners and researchers in setting up a concerted urban management approach, a fictitious case was presented drawing from real-life experiences. From this emerged a number of the practical details involved in putting urban management in place in a local government. These details give greater substance to the idea of urban management, producing clearer notions of where important challenges can be made to the assumptions which underlie the concept and its application. They are major challenges for research to pursue.

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References

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