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

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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 offered here as a fair representation of reality.

A Case for Urban Management

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

The practitioner defined 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 was 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 (Mattingly, 1994). This had two major implications from the start. One had to do with the objectives, the other with responsibility.

Management Objectives

If to manage is to pursue particular objectives, what were the objectives appropriate to this case? The practitioner was not the manager, nor was the bilateral donor agency. Their objectives - shared or not - were not bits of technical knowledge to be transferred to the new local government, like budgeting or land planning skills. Objectives are the source of the values used when choosing which matters will be given attention and resources, as well as when deciding the priorities among those matters. Objectives shape the relations of the elected council to the town's people

and even to higher levels of government. Consequently, the objectives which guide daily operations will be those held 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. In contrast, 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. Several sympathetic responses came from the town government - a councillor who had worked as a social development officer, a town treasurer with some vision - but the focus of the council's activities remained in general on the performance of its day to day operations. Higher, more abstract goals like "achieving development" were seen as appropriately addressed later, if at all.

What then was the practitioner to do? To assume that development goals drive the town council was 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 - would at best gain only lip-service and placating gestures. Ultimately, the council and its senior officers would pursue with commitment, determination, and perseverance a "mission" which most of them had defined in their own terms and adopted. The practitioner's most useful role could 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 was to assist in moving the council to this different perspective and commitment, more had to be pursued than an orientation to development. The practitioner would have to help the councillors and their senior staff to understand that the whole of the town - the lives of its people and the activities of its production - were its charge, and that it should attempt to carry out functions which deal with those matters deserving the greatest attention. This would 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 was 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 everyone. 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 was probably little the practitioner could do to create the necessary

motivation in any case. He could not act the role of leader for the government, and he could not deliver a sense of responsibility as if it were some kind of technical skill. The most he could hope was to strengthen self-confidence within the institution so that it was more willing to shoulder whatever degree of responsibility it felt.

Tasks and Processes

Whether or not objectives and responsibility were adequately dealt with, the practitioner in 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 was more important and which was less, so as to challenge the notion that all council actions were equally useful. Therefore the possibility was raised and examined that community organisations in poor areas could 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 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 required. The practitioner attempted to show the councillors and staff that certain of these fundamental processes could be overemphasised, while others were neglected. Maintenance had been neglected, so emphasis was given to its role and to its links with constructing, operating and even planning. 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 inexperienced 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 a growing pile of unpaid bills for water and electricity - the major sources of its income - made cash flows 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, trips were organised for a selection of councillors, community representatives and council staff to a nearby power generating plant and

to the town's own water treatment and storage facilities. The success of these trips had made it possible for the council to give priority to implanting the user pays principle within the community.

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 was 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. Building on the better relationships fostered during initial 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 seemed to lay such a promising foundation for a community support programme pushed by the donor agency that the town clerk withdrew his resistance to the participation of his staff. The town treasurer then planned with community groups the creation of a body with joint representations which could mediate between government and residents of low income areas. In support of these efforts, the practitioner was 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's staff resources.

What was not given particular attention were 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 had 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 had not yet arisen, so this aspect of urban management had yet to be tested. The other matter of challenging expenditure sector divisions within the council had also been largely untried. Council departments were still very small and loyalties to the council as a whole seem generally much stronger than those to departments, while informal communication among staff was good because they were so few. Yet complaints had begun to surface that information which should be generally available was being lost in the files of individual departments. There was little pressure for activities involving several departments at once because of the lack of an agreed vision of what the town government was trying to do beyond the traditional routines of a local government. If the challenges of poverty alleviation and economic growth were to be taken on, a way was needed of working across traditional department boundaries. The practitioner hoped that the programme of community support - with its potential for community requests which call for unconventional responses from the council - would 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 first treasurer had no ability to prepare annual budgets and capital programmes. Because the initial council staff was very small, the gaps were filled with experienced professionals from abroad through a volunteer programme of the donor agency. This practice continued for several years as the council expanded its scope of activities. Then emphasis moved to training council staff, sometimes using the technical advisers to cover for trainees while they were absent from work. Visits to other local governments became 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 meant that every training opportunity was seen as equally important. Moreover, training was mainly left to staff to initiate, so it would not have been driven by priorities if they existed. The practitioner pushed for an overall training plan as another way of pressing for objectives and a council action plan. Later on, he began to advocate the consolidation of measures taken to build the treasurer's department. The council's approaching bankruptcy and the need for adequate funds to improve and extend basic services seemed good reasons to make efficient and effective management of council finances the highest priority. He then pressed for training and education that will prepare councillors and their staff to: 1) achieve the acceptability of the user pays principle within communities, 2) build good relationship with communities, so that their resources could be used in partnership with the council, and so the council could 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 grew in size and ability. Yet there was not adequate concern to manage its staff assets. Consequently, the practitioner worked for the development of a personnel management programme, in which there was a continuing capacity building operation. To be successful, this had to be one which could 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 worked on the basis of various assumptions. They underlay 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 verified with better critical testing 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 badly-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 show that the practitioner has succeeded, 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 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.

References

Mattingly, M. 1994, "Meaning of Urban Management", *Cities*, Vol 11, No 3, Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd., Oxford