Towards The Professionalization of the Local Government Sector – Report on the Consultation Held with HR Practitioners from Municipalities

18 SEPTEMBER 2012
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1. Introduction

1.1 The analysed results of the research and the assessment carried out in March 2010, on the current reality of human resource management in municipalities revealed that:

1. the transformation process of local government has been retarded by the slow pace of internal transformation in municipalities;

2. A municipal human resource system that is below the average efficiencies required for developmental change by the Constitution, the White Paper on Local Government and the Municipal Systems Act.

In pursuit of solutions to support improvement of municipal HR, SALGA Hosted A Human Resource Management Policy Conference in Bolivia Lodge, Polokwane ON 6-8 September 2010. Commissions were established to deal with several subjects within the HRM domain. One of the Commissions was seized with a responsibility to deliberate on the subject of “Professionalisation of Human Resources Management and Ethos”. This commission identified several factors as inhibitors to professionalisation, these include amongst others, the following:

- Ineffective communication;
- Inconsistent and selective application of policy and legislation;
- Indecisive leadership;
- Inappropriate recruitment processes;
- Ineffective performance management systems.
- Lack of IGR implementation in all spheres of government;
- Lack of respect and accountability between clrs and officials-
- Lack of commitment and common understanding that delays implementation of various programmes;
- Lack of sense of urgency and lack of correct attitude;
- Absence of self discipline which leads to violation of policies; and dereliction of duties;
- Inadequate/Inappropriate or non- implementation of policies/municipal bylaws and legislations;
- Lack of cascading performance management system to all employees;
- Unethical conduct: corruption fraud, nepotism,
- Lack of shared values;
- Lack of acknowledging good performance; failure to recognize and learn from best practice;
- Poor planning and lack of management of in house monitoring systems;
- The difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified and experienced technical and management professionals outside of the urban areas.
- The decline of municipal professional associations and poor linkages between local government and the tertiary education sector which has contributed to the serious breakdown in the supply of municipal professionals.
- Equally capacitated individuals do not render an efficient and ideal municipal administration.
In light of the above, conference took the following resolutions:

**SALGA should undertake the following:**

- Establish effective relations with professional bodies and evaluate their admission criteria towards strengthening value to municipalities.
- Collaborate with the LGSETA to develop continuous capacity building programmes for councillors synchronised with their term of office and focused on their specific portfolio areas.
- Develop and enforce norms, standards and systems for uniformity across the local government sector.
- Conduct empirical research on professionalisation and its impact on Local Government.
- Develop and implement a standardised policy framework for performance management to be cascaded down to all employees.
- Define customer service standards for all municipalities.

**Municipalities should undertake the following:**

- Ensure that Job advertisements clearly set out competencies and qualifications required for the position such as values, ethics, customer orientation etc.
- Develop and execute effective communication systems to ensure that all employees, councillors and communities embrace the organisational values and goals.
- Effectively apply Batho Pele principles as a means to professionalise service delivery,
1.2 A partnership consisting of SALGA, COGTA, and the LGSETA resulted in a concept paper towards the development of a national professionalisation framework for local government drafted by the University of Western Cape as commissioned by GIZ.

1.3 The concept paper addresses the following issues:

- To provide an understanding of the concepts of profession, professionalisation and professionalism, particularly in the context of the public service in general and local government in particular;
- To distinguish in particular between the notions of technical professionalism, managerial professionalism, and a broader ‘public service’ professionalism based on professional ethos, ethics and behaviour;
- To identify the need for the professionalisation of local government in South Africa;
- To outline and critically review the developments that have taken place to date in the area of local government professionalisation in South Africa, and the roles that have been played by key stakeholders;
- To identify strengths and weaknesses in current approaches to professionalisation, and in particular issues and challenges that will need to be addressed if a more integrated and coherent framework is to be established;
- To provide a review of the international experience, with a view to deriving lessons that might usefully inform the local government professionalisation process in South Africa;
- To identify different options and conceptual approaches that can be used to professionalise local government.
- To highlight key principles and considerations that will need to be taken into account by a more integrated and coherent framework for local government professionalisation.

The concept paper was distributed to stakeholders to enable them to consult within their constituencies on the matters contained therein.

The report below is the outcome of a consultation session convened by SALGA with eighteen (17) HRM senior practitioners from municipalities, nine (9) Programme Managers, some Directors and Specialists from SALGA’s Municipal Institutional Development Directorate. The structure of the report is such that it covers five (5) key areas, namely, case for the professionalization of the sector, defining professionalism and professionalization in the context of local government, dealing with the content for professionalization and making the recommendation towards an action plan for professionalization.

| 5.12 | A partnership consisting of SALGA, COGTA, and the LGSETA resulted in a concept paper towards the development of a national professionalisation framework for local government drafted by the University of Western Cape as commissioned by GIZ. | Professionalization of the Sector |
2. The Case for the Professionalization in the Sector

The workshop was unanimous in its diagnosis and characterisation of the problems that are associated with poor or lack of professionalism and what continues to bedevil the image of the local government sector. Overall, lack of professionalism has direct connection in the failure of the sector and municipalities in particular to meet service delivery needs of communities across the country. In turn this situation has resulted in the increase in service delivery protests across the length and breadth of the nation. The specific manifestation of the lack or poor professionalism in the local government sector is found in the following persistent problems; Low staff morale, low productivity levels, high staff turnover, general instability within municipalities and adverse financial audit results.

2.1. Factors Impeding Professionalization

In addition to the characterisation above the workshop dealt with the main issues that are either the causes of lack of professionalism or the impediments to towards professionalization.

2.1.1. Politicization of the Environment

There was a general feeling that the local government environment is highly politicised with the results that lines are often blurred between the roles played by politicians and officials on the other hand. This has compromised the ability of many municipalities in their duty of fulfilling and realising their constitutional mandate to provide services to communities in an impartial and unbiased manner.

2.1.2. Lack of Political Oversight

It was noted that in other cases the prevalence of ambiguous roles between Councillors and Officials has led to the situation where the former are unable to fully exercise their roles of oversight over the work of the latter and this has dire consequences for service delivery and professionalization.

2.1.3. Lack of Policy Frameworks, and Inconsistent Implementation of Policies

Although it was acknowledged that there is regulatory framework as represented by legislation and national policies, this often does not always translate to the existence of clear policy regimes in most municipalities across the country. Different municipalities are at different
levels of policy formulation and application with many of these lacking in the institutional and organisational culture required to establish and maintain a professional environment and culture.

2.1.4. Poor Employee Recruitment and Retention and Employment Practices
There is widespread and shared understanding that there are poor recruitment and retention practices in the sector. Many of the country’s municipalities have a very low skills base and this situation continues unabated. In recent times many municipalities have suffered serious blows in the areas of recruiting and retaining experienced professionals, especially in the key service delivery areas of the municipalities. Without appropriate expertise the very foundation of professionalism in local government is seriously threatened.

The workshop argued further that as well as poor skills base in the sector, the current employment practices are not helping matters much. The lack of flexibility with regard conditions of service was identified as having a huge contribution in the plight of small and rural municipalities with regard their ability or lack thereof to attract and retain good quality employees.

There was also a general observation that even with situations where appropriate skills are prevalent, all too often incumbents lack appropriate experience. This too is a source of lack of professionalization in the sector.

2.1.5. Lack of Service Standards
Norms and standards are a basic and important feature of professionalism whatever the definition of professionalism is. In the case of the local government sector, there was general agreement in the workshop that lack of service standards and norms for the key occupational groups and occupational jobs is hampering the prevalence of common approach to performing the same functions in different municipalities across the country.

2.1.6. Lack of Respect for the Law
The last impediment to professionalization in the sector was the observation that most municipalities lack the mandatory capacity and attitude for implementing and respecting the country’s laws. There is a serious challenge and a need for municipalities to enforce all
legislation, from by-laws passed by their Councils to national legislation that provide the basis for compliance.

3. What Constitutes Professionalism
Based on the challenges highlighted in the preceding section and against the backdrop of the issues raised by the concept paper and the HRM policy conference resolutions, the working session clarified the meaning and context of professionalism in the local government sector of South Africa. Discussions in this regard relied on the understanding and the challenges facing the sector in terms of providing sustainable and quality services that resonates and fully addresses the needs and aspirations of the citizenry. In this regard, both practical and theoretical platform for the definition processes were established.

At a theoretical level the contribution of the concept document in defining professionalism provided some guidance as per the extract below:

- “A common body of specialised knowledge and expertise . . .” that will be used a basis for assessing one’s suitability,
- “A system for certifying that individuals possess such knowledge and expertise. . . .”
- “A closed community with a strong sense of collegial responsibility and corporate solidarity (esprit de corps), characterised by shared norms and values”,
- “Adherence to high ethical standards and codes of behaviour, together with provisions for the monitoring and enforcement of compliance by individual members”,
- “A commitment to a social ideal that prioritises service to the welfare, health and safety of citizens, communities and society as whole over the personal interests of practitioners”,
- “A high level of societal status, esteem and legitimacy, arising from the higher social function of the work of the profession”,
- “The existence of a professional body or organisation able to certify and ensure the competence of practitioners and encourage and enforce ethical standards of behaviour”,

What Constitutes Professionalism | Professionalization of the Sector
- “A broad measure of discretionary autonomy allowed to members of the profession over the management of their affairs, the development of new knowledge and the setting of standards of performance and behaviour”

3.1. **Key Elements of Professionalism**

Based on the practical consideration and the challenges facing the sector, the workshop considered two critical areas in attempt to define professionalism as per the illustration below.

*Figure 1 - Elements of Professionalism*

The above illustration not only list the component of professionalism as viewed by the workshop but also emphasises their equal importance and status in the definition, so that expertise without behavioural competency and behavioural competency without expertise have serious implications for and affect the overall occupational or professional proficiency in an chosen area of work. The full context and explanation of the two is provided in the subsections below:

3.1.1. **Expertise**

Expertise refers to both knowledge and skills required in any specific occupation to measure the suitability of any candidate to perform or to qualify for that occupation. It is important to
distinguish between the two component of expertise, namely knowledge and skills. The key distinguishing factor between the two concepts can be seen as information and know-how. A skill refers to the ability, the know-how, to do something. This is the practical aspect of expertise. On the other hand, to be knowledgeable in a particular field one needs to amass formal and systematically organised information about the field. It is important to note that in most occupations there is a requisite expectation for one to possess enough knowledge and be technically sound in respect of their chosen field of occupation, to qualify.

Using this example a lawyer is someone whose has the understanding and knowledge of the legal prescripts (laws) and the technical ability to practice law (prepare a case, lead evidence in a court of law, cross examine witnesses, etc) both of which must be established to certain levels of proficiency before they can be designated as a lawyer by an accredited authority.

3.1.2. Behavioural Competency
Attitude or behavioural competency is a critical component of professionalism that is often downplayed with devastating consequences to individuals, organisations and society at large. Behavioural competency defines what the expected posture or attitude of an employee towards his or her work should be, whether or not that employee has the necessary knowledge and technical expertise (know-how). As alluded to in the expert section above, skills and knowledge alone do provide a sufficient base for one to qualify as a professional in many fields. Our attitude defines how we approach our work and ultimately put our skills and knowledge to good use.

Consider an example of a nurse who lacks empathy and compassion for her/his patient or lacks an appropriate ethical conduct that is necessary to the requirements of her/his job. How much of this deficiency will affect the quality of the nurse’s work in totality? Can this nurse even with the best qualifications (knowledge and skills) be referred to as a professional nurse in the true sense of the word?

3.2. Defining Professionalism and Professionalization
Based on the two elements discussed above,
Professionalism on the other hand is a structured and formal process of bringing about professionalism in an organisation, in this case the local government sector.

3.3. The Scope of Professionalization
The first and big question facing professionalization of the local government sector has to do with the scope of professionalization or who should be covered by the process. The working session considered this issue seriously and provided the following guidance.

The key consideration made by the session related to the need for the total transformation of the sector in general and every possible municipality in particular. Accordingly, the session envisaged a sector wide process of cleansing the local government in South Africa of a negative and derogatory image that has the majority of the citizen regarding local government as a symbol of inefficiency and poor service delivery.

To achieve this total transformation, the session was of the view that every official in the sector (political and administrative) at all levels must be transformed into an efficient and capable servant of communities and society in general. The figure below provides an illustration of the scope of professionalization.
The rationale for the inclusion of every category and level of personnel within the sector is based on the understanding that professionalization must be used rightly as a vehicle to transform the municipality in totality. To achieve the bigger goal of ensuring that professionalization is made a mantra and a cornerstone for the change going into the future it must target every single participant in the local government sector, by clarifying and distinguishing roles, developing a set of norms and standards for all categories and levels of participants, monitoring performance based on the norms and standards and evaluating the impact on service delivery and the quality of life of citizenry.

4. What should be the Content of Professionalization of the Sector
The HR session considered the approach to professionalization as a key and crucial driver to its content. The view of the delegates was that for professionalization to be successful the sector needs to identify the pillars or key drivers as illustrated in the figure below.
The three pillars of professionalization as recommended by the HR session are elaborated briefly.

4.1. The Pillars of the Professionalization Process

4.1.1. The Competency Framework
In the wisdom of the HR session the starting point for a sector wide professionalization is the development of a competency framework for all major occupational categories across the sector. The framework must address the three critical areas of competency, namely knowledge, skills and behavioural competency. Once adopted, the framework must guide all municipalities in the framing of their job profiles (or description). In this regard, the framework will have three benefits to the sector.
- It will standardise job profiles in all municipalities (the content thereof and not necessarily the form),
- It will provide a uniform platform for the recruitment of appropriate skills in all municipalities,
- It will provide the basis for skills development programmes across the sector and within all municipalities.

4.1.2. Norms and Standards
The second important challenge in the professionalization process is the development and adoption of norms and standards for all the major occupational disciplines in the entire sector. In this regard, the challenge is to ensure that every position available in the local government sector has a home in any one occupational discipline. As far as possible occupational disciplines must roughly coincide with professional areas, e.g., Information Technology, Supply Chain Management, Engineering and Infrastructure.

The session could not overemphasise the importance of the sector dictating the norms and standards that are applicable and suitable for the local government to the professional bodies which might or might not transcend the local government sector boundaries in their scope.

4.1.3. Professional Bodies
The last pillar for professionalization is the critical role that needs to be played by professional bodies whose critical role includes the accreditation of members, regulating the conduct and professional behaviour of individual as well ensuring adherence to discipline and norms and standards by their members.

4.2. An Integrated Approach to Professionalization
In addition to strengthening the focus on the pillars for professionalization, the session elaborated on the content of the professionalization system by identifying key elements that will ensure its success in an integrated and coordinated way. The elements of the system that were identified are as follows:
4.2.1. Performance Management System
The session agreed that there is a compelling case for the promotion of accountability by individuals and institution across the sector and a move away from a system that excludes the management of performance of all municipal staff save the Section 57 members. A system of performance management is key to the sector wide professionalization of the disciplines in local government.

4.2.2. Communication Strategy
Communication was identified as a central part of modern and successful organisations. Professionalism in the sector and within each municipality will test their ability to mobilise all employees and convert them into willing champions of the new way of doing things. A multilevel system of communication that will enable flow of communication from national to local and within each municipality is what is required to lead the change in the sector. The importance of communication is also underscored by the fact that for sustained behavioural change to happen communication must be constant.

4.2.3. Building Culture, Ethics and Values
The success of the professionalization process can also be measured by how much of a sector wide culture, ethics and values will emerge to guide leaders and employees alike in a journey towards new beginnings. This will require a concerted and coordinated strategy and approach of soliciting the views and sentiments of all who are involved in the professionalization process. In the end the sector must define for itself the kind of culture that will be in line with the provisions of the constitution, the organisational values that will underpin the attitudes, behaviours and actions of all in the sector and finally the set of ethics that become a compass for appropriate behaviour in local government.

4.2.4. Collective Bargaining
The sector already boasts a collective bargaining structure and processes. Further improvements and adjustment might be necessary to ensure that flexible and responsive system of local government emerges and is sustained. The session noted variances between big and small municipalities and recognises the need to align things more appropriately in order to
build the expected flexibility whilst maintaining a common approach to building a professional and responsive system of local government.

4.2.5. **Employee Induction**

The characterisation of local government as a sector will require a lot more than a call for professionalization. Critical of all efforts is to instil a new culture and belief system in all employees at all levels and to inspire them to want to do more to help realise the constitutional responsibility of local government in a broader system of a developmental local government. In this regard, a greater attention will need to be paid to individual employees as well as to facilitate that they become part of this important service delivery component of our state. There is no better way of doing this than to invest in the induction of all new employees as well as continuously engaging all employees to establish total alignment with the culture, values and ethical conduct.

Figure 4 - Approach to Professionalization

5. **Towards an Action Plan**

The session recognised that the professionalization journey will be a protracted and deep process of change that will require careful planning and execution. Informed by this
understanding, the session suggested steps and things that need to be taken into account as the sector moves ahead.

5.1. **The Next Immediate Steps**

The identified immediate steps that must be taken in order to kick start the professionalization process are the following:

5.1.1. **The Adoption of a Professionalization Framework for the Sector**

The very steps in the professionalization journey of local government is to conclude and adopt a framework that will guide individual municipalities in their journey to turn their institutions into modern, dynamic, efficient and effective service delivery machinery. The framework must also provide enough ammunition and impetus for other structures within the sector, most importantly COGTA and SALGA to play their supportive role effectively.

5.1.2. **Preparation**

Considering the scale and size of the professionalization process, the session is strongly advising for a structured and well considered approach. Preparations must be undertaken that will ensure that at every level of the sector across the country, there is sufficient understanding and readiness to engage in such a process.

Such preparations will be based on the respective roles of role-players and ensure that each fully grasps and is prepared for their roles. Key in this regard will be the thoroughgoing process of consulting and engaging all stakeholders and soliciting their support for the programme in advance.

5.1.3. **Designing of the Professionalization Process**

During discussions at the session a very robust and healthy debate ensued regarding the best approach for the roll out of the professionalization process. The one view favoured piloting the programme whilst the other argued for a full roll-out process. Ultimately, the choice between which approach should be followed should be informed by the state of readiness in the sector and within individual municipalities and the broader goals of professionalization of local government.
5.2. The Middle to Long-Term Issues / Activities
The process of professionalization will go through many stages that will involve many of the role-players in the sector. Amongst the activities that will help lay a foundation for professionalization of the sector are the following activities:

- Development of clear set of norms and standards for all the disciplines in the local government sector,
- Identify professional bodies that are operating within the disciplines that are also covered in the sector and engaging them on the best ways of representing the sector and its peculiar service delivery challenges. This process might include formulating the criteria for the operations of these bodies in so far as the local government issues and challenges are concerned.
- Recognition of RPL through membership to professional body, where the professional body assist the employee in obtaining accredited qualification after RPL process completed.
- Professional bodies working together with SALGA should conduct research and develop training programmes to mitigate the challenges that face the sector needs.
- Implementation of effective control measures within Municipalities as to facilitate an environment that will be conducive for individual employees as professionals to thrive personally and for the benefit of the municipalities as well as to enhance excellent organisational and individual performance.
5.3. **Clarifying the Roles**
The workshop also engaged in a process of identifying key role-players and their probable role in the professionalization journey. The table below provide the sessions’ suggestion in this regard.

**Table 1 - Role Clarification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY ROLE-PLAYER</th>
<th>RESPONSIBILITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COGTA</td>
<td>o  Provide Legislation and ensure compliance,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Financial and human capital assistance and roll out of programme,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Monitoring/ Accredited guidelines for professional bodies and processes,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Overarching body to oversee the above responsibility.</td>
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<td>SALGA</td>
<td>o  Coordinating role/Monitoring/quality control,</td>
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<td>o  Lobbying for legislation,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Development of policy and strategy,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Consult Trade unions (not negotiate but rather inform so as to achieve buy-in),</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o  Research and Development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Bodies</td>
<td>o  Development of norms and standards for accreditation, registration and credits accumulation,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Career pathing and support for members,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Discipline (professionalism and Corrective),</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Common and integrated approach between professional bodies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGSETA</td>
<td>o  Standard setting and Accreditation of Training programmes,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Funding for relevant Training (professions) and support role related to accreditation,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o  Roll out processes,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o  Research and Development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>KEY ROLE-PLAYER</td>
<td>RESPONSIBILITY</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Higher Education</td>
<td>o Accreditation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Career Guidance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Unit standards setting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Skills control (channel students appropriately career-wise)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tertiary Institutions</td>
<td>o Development of Training Qualifications in line with the various professions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Market research related to skills control</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o RPL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Career Guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treasury</td>
<td>o Assistance – programmes relating to finance (MFMA)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Funding (for the programme)</td>
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<td>o Control Mechanisms – legislative controls (all stakeholders involved)</td>
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<td>o Financial Management standards and competencies development (in collaboration with COGTA)</td>
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<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>o Buy-in</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Implementation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Affiliation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Role clarification (stakeholders)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade Unions</td>
<td>o Consultative process</td>
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</table>
6. Conclusion

There is firm realisation and acceptance of the fact that lack of professionalism and professionalization in the sector has a major impact on the capacity of individual municipalities to deliver quality services.

Professionalization of the local government sector in South African is a huge project. One that is bound to shake the sector and possibly change everything about the way we do things and the things we do. At the end of a project, every receptionist in all the 278 municipalities our country, every driver, every debtors clerk, every engineer and all the practitioners covering all the employees of the municipalities should be in a position do things based on commonly held standards and norm in accordance with the broader ethos of a developmental and service delivery oriented local government sector.