

The Service Providers Forum – a vital institution for integrated development

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Abstract

In recent years more attention has been given to the preparation of integrated development plans than to their implementation. The Service Providers Forum in KwaZulu-Natal has emerged as an institution that has potential to improve the alignment of Service Providers and thereby contribute to the implementation of Integrated Development Plans (IDP). The paper traces the origins of the Service Providers Forums and analyses the achievements and problems encountered up to 2000. It discusses the implications of legislative changes about that time for the Service Providers Forums and examines the Zululand district as a case study of how the Forum was used in the early stages of the integrated development planning process (2001-2002). The paper identifies issues that need to be addressed in order for Service Providers Forums to fulfil their potential as instruments for integrated development.

DIE DIENSVERSKAFFERSFORUM – 'N BELANGRIKE LIGGAAM IN SAAMGESTELDE ONTWIKKELING

In die laaste jare is meer aandag gegee aan die voorbereiding van saamgestelde ontwikkelingsplanne as die uitvoering daarvan. Die diensverskaffersforum in KwaZulu-Natal het na vore getree as 'n liggaam met potensiaal om die diensverskaffers te groepeer en sodoende by te dra tot die implementering van Geïntegreerde Ontwikkelingsplanne (IDP). Hierdie studie ondersoek die ontstaan van diensverskaffersforums en analiseer die suksesse en mislukkings tot en met die jaar 2000. Die gevolge van wetlike veranderinge word bespreek en Zululand-distrik word as gevallestudie gebruik om aan te dui hoe die forums gebruik is om die IDP-proses (2001-2002) te stuur. Die studie identifiseer kwessies wat aangespreek moet word om diensverskaffersforums in staat te stel om hulle rol te vervul in saamgestelde ontwikkeling.

Introduction

During the past five years a great deal of attention has been devoted to integrated development planning in South Africa. Most of this effort has been directed towards the preparation of Integrated Development Plans, but relatively little work has been done on the implementation of the plans. Yet this is a fundamentally important aspect if these plans are to have any purpose. The link between planning and implementation has recently been highlighted as one of the critical dimensions of integrated development planning (Robinson *et al* 2002). The need for mechanisms to put Integrated Development Plans into practice has never been more apparent.

During the mid-1990s a development institution had begun to take shape in KwaZulu-Natal, which could prove to be of considerable significance for integrated development planning throughout South Africa. The establishment of a Service Providers Forum, initially at provincial level and later in the regions and districts, represented a breakthrough in translating principles of integrated development planning into a workable form. The aim of the Service Providers Forum was to improve co-ordination among the major service providers and to find synergies by working co-operatively. This was a non-statutory arrangement intended to promote co-ordination in the rendering of

services throughout the province. This Article traces the origins of the Service Providers Forums, focusing on those operating at regional and (after the demarcation process was completed in December 2000) district levels. Typical objectives and activities will be discussed as background for an analysis of the achievements and failures of the regional Service Providers Forums (between 1997 and 2000).

The completion of the demarcation process (in December 2000) and the advent of the Municipal Systems Act (2000) changed the legislative basis and the institutional context for planning and development dramatically. The subsequent experience of the Zululand district Service Providers Forum will be examined in detail as an example of attempts by a new District Municipality to revive the Forum as part of its integrated development planning process. Comment will also be made about the role and function of the provincial Service Providers Forum. An assessment of the outcomes up to mid-2002 provides the context for identifying ways in which this, still embryonic, institution could become an effective mechanism for implementation.

The research upon which this paper is based included interviews with all the service providers operating in KwaZulu-Natal in 1998, and with a leading person from each of the eight regional Service Providers Forums in 2000. It also involved participation in the Service Providers Forums in three regions (Ilembe, Ugu and Zululand) during their early years (1998-2000), in the Zululand District Service Providers Forum during the preparation of its Integrated Development Plan (2001-2002), and in the Provincial Service Providers Forum (2000-2002).

Origins of the Service Providers Forums in KwaZulu-Natal

The original Service Providers Forum was set up informally at provincial level in 1994, comprising Eskom, Telkom, the provincial Department of Transport and Umgeni Water. Its aim was to improve co-ordination among the major service providers

and to try to find ways of working together more effectively. One of its early initiatives was a pilot project in the Impendle area, where each of these service providers was active. The outcome was two-fold: all four organizations discovered a lot of practical ways in which they could have co-operated more effectively and, of greater significance, all recognized the value of the pilot and resolved to continue to meet and to extend the process to involve other service providers. This subsequently became institutionalized as a non-statutory committee operating under the auspices and with active support of the (then) provincial Department of Local Government and Housing. This function has subsequently been taken over by the Department of Traditional and Local Government Affairs.

About this time (1997-1999) all the Regional Councils in KwaZulu-Natal embarked on a process of preparing integrated regional development plans. This was followed by preparation of more detailed plans for sub-regions (1999-2000). Service Providers Forums were established in each of the Regional Council areas during 1998 and 1999. These were non-statutory arrangements, modeled on the provincial SPF and designed to promote co-ordination in the delivery of services in the KZN regions. These Service Providers Forums were expected to operate as mechanisms to counter the sectoral focus that had been prevalent in development initiatives and to improve co-ordination. (Robinson *et al.* 2000:17).

Regional scale Service Providers Forums – composition, objectives and operation (1997-2000)

Who are the "service providers? They include any national or provincial government department or para-statal organization, or non-governmental organisation, which had responsibility for rendering a service in one or more of the KwaZulu-Natal regions. These services included physical infrastructure, social, community and economic development, land and environment, training and capacity building and funding. It was intended that the Service Providers Forum composition be as inclusive as possible, so as to embrace all the organisations that had responsibility for service provision in the region.

The agencies involved are listed below as part of the discussion of the Zululand case study.

Typical objectives of these Regional Service Providers Forums were as follows:

- to facilitate the sharing of project plans among the Service Providers
- to provide a central information base to facilitate sharing this information, in most cases using a Geographic Information System
- to improve coordination of existing plans and to bring them to the attention of other agencies
- to promote integrated development planning through the integrated development plans (Ilembe, Ugu and Zululand Service Providers Forum Minutes).

These Forums generally met three or four times a year, with meetings lasting up to 4 hours on occasion. The main activities at the meetings included the following:

- Provision and exchange of information about intended projects and investments being undertaken by each service provider within the region
- Provision of information from each service provider about their past, current and future projects for inclusion on the Geographic Information Systems data base
- Briefing of service providers in the use of the Regional Council's Geographic Information System in order to update their information and to be in a position to access information about the activities of other service providers
- Identification of the criteria each service provider used for identification and prioritisation of projects (this met with limited success as few Service Providers undertook much technical planning)
- Linking the service providers into the preparation of the Regional Development Plans (1998-1999) and subsequently the Sub-regional Development Plans (1999-2000).

For the most part, these Service Providers Forums started out as reporting venues, which provided an initial amount of interest for the participants who, for the first time, were able to find out what each other was doing in a region. This limited focus proved to be unsustainable with the result that some of the more enterprising Service Providers Forums introduced a more strategic focus and shifted into more of a problem solving mode. However, their significance at the time lay in "the very fact that these had been set up in all regions and had been operating for some years" (Robinson *et al.* 2000:17).

Assessment: achievements, problems and expectations (1997-2000)

The most significant achievement was undoubtedly the very establishment of a Service Providers Forum in all KwaZulu-Natal regions, as this provided an opportunity that had not existed before, for regular and structured interaction between many of the Service Providers. These enabled Service Providers to exchange information and discuss common problems; it provided a mechanism for the Regional Councils to obtain information from all, or most of the Service Providers in a cost effective manner; and it achieved a measure of understanding of each service provider's approach to project identification and prioritization. Another important achievement was the establishment of contact between the key persons in different Service Providers operating in a region. The effectiveness of this networking depended heavily on the individual attending the meetings. Over time, there were other invisible benefits where Service Providers made use of the information gained through the Forum and the Geographic Information System to improve their planning, prioritization and budgeting in relation to other service providers.

The Service Providers Forums were also the nexus for the development of new tools for planning at regional scale. Notable examples were the field verification of data and the Spatial Data Support System, which was developed initially in Zululand region; development of "hardship indices" to measure the relative need of settlements in relation to each of a bundle of basic services. These were subsequently adapted

into a model, which identified settlements in the Zululand region that had the greatest need of services. This was called the Dalisu model and was later adapted for use by other regions. The pro-active way in which Mhaltuze Water embraced the opportunities of the Service Providers Forums in Uthungulu and Zululand regions, both for its own needs and as a contribution to the development of these regions, is another example (Robinson *et al.* 2002:17).

In the context of the highly fragmented approach to planning and implementation, which had prevailed for decades, these were no mean achievements. However, the Service Providers Forums fell far short of expectations during this period. Although some worked more effectively than others, it is possible to identify a number of common problems.

One of the most intractable problems was inconsistency in attendance at Service Provider Forum meetings. This gave rise to a host of operational difficulties and frustrations for the service providers themselves and for the Regional Councils. Service Providers did not always send the same persons to meetings, those who attended often lacked the seniority to take decisions, or to follow-up decisions taken, with the result that there were situations where a representative was unable to deliver an expected report-back. Often junior members of staff were sent to the meetings without adequate briefing, or mandate; in some instances a service provider would not be represented at all. There was often lack of head office support for field staff that attended Service Providers meetings. The continual arrival of different people at meetings made it necessary to repeat information and re-trace previous debates, which prolonged meetings and reduced the time available for important agenda items.

Another set of problems related to uneven levels of information between different service providers. While some were working from well organized internal data bases and were readily able to provide information about their current and planned projects in a region, others were hampered by far more rudimentary data systems. In one case representatives from a service

provider were unable to provide geographic locations for their projects. A related difficulty stemmed from each service provider having their own service areas, which were often different to the Regional (and later District) Council boundaries. These factors combined to make the apparently simple task of collating data about all the current projects in a region, into a major exercise. Even those Regional Councils, which had sophisticated GIS systems and support, had difficulty in establishing and maintaining an accurate data base of all service provider projects.

Related problems occurred because there was no common plan during this period. Regional and sub-regional plans were in the process of being drawn up, while each service provider had its own plan for its projects. In many cases service providers used different data bases (e.g. for population). Each service provider had their own criteria for prioritizing projects and for determining their location; and in some cases service provider representatives had difficulty in locating projects or explaining the criteria upon which priorities were allocated. Some service providers planned several years in advance, while others operated on a year-to-year basis. The budget cycles of the service providers differed and did not coincide with that of the Regional Councils. Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that attempts to align these plans, on a voluntary basis, proved to be almost impossible.

There were also criticisms relating to the manner in which the Service Providers Forum meetings were structured, with too much time devoted to reporting back, but insufficient on strategic issues. The roles and responsibilities of service providers were not always clear and, at times, some appeared to have different mandates to others in regard to the Service Providers Forum. In retrospect, this was to be expected given the informal nature of the Forums and the prevailing state of flux in planning at regional level.

Communications were another source of problems, with relatively little evidence of contact between service providers outside the meetings. There were also breaks in communication between the

Regional Councils, which were managing the Service Providers Forums and their constituent urban and rural authorities, as well as between service providers and councilors/communities.

To summarize, the early expectations that the Service Providers Forums would pave the way for integrated development in the regions were not met. Yet the array of problems encountered can be partly attributed to the absence of a clear institutional and legislative context within which these Forums were expected to operate, partly to the wide differences in capabilities between service providers, and partly to the inherent difficulty in getting line function agencies to operate in an integrated manner. It should also be recognised that the Service Providers Forums were voluntary associations whose members were primarily responsible to line function departments/agencies. This accounts for the inherent tendency "... for service providers to retain their own criteria for determining investment location and priorities, and a nagging reluctance on the part of some to use the (new regional and sub-regional) plans as the framework for decision-making" (Robinson *et al.* 2000:17).

The new institutional era for integrated development (2000-2002)

If the Service Providers Forums were to play an effective role in integrated development a number of issues needed to be addressed in response to the experiences of 1997-2000. Towards the end of 2000, the completion of the municipal demarcation process finalized the boundaries of local and district municipalities on a 'wall-to-wall' basis throughout the country. The Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 required that every municipality had to produce a new form of plan: the Integrated Development Plan by 31 March 2002. These Integrated Development Plans were to be the single plan for a municipality and would supersede any sector (or service provider's) plans. All service providers were required to adjust their service areas to conform to the new municipal boundaries. The integrated development planning process was to be highly participative involving all service providers as well as all other

stakeholders. (DPLG Guide Packs 2001; Harrison 2001).

These legislative changes created an institutional context for addressing some of the Service Providers Forum problems, such as the need for a single development plan for a district with that Integrated Development Plan having precedence over sector plans drawn up by line function departments, common service boundaries and the linking of projects to municipal or service provider's budgets. In practice, however, it would take a long time for these changes to start taking effect.

Meanwhile, other issues remained unresolved by the legislative changes. At the district level, Service Providers Forums experienced difficulty in getting sufficiently senior staff to attend meetings and to do this on a regular basis. This was indicative of either a perception within line function departments that the Forums were not particularly important, or to equivalent difficulties in achieving integration of purpose between departments and parastatal agencies at provincial level. Associated with this was a lack of clarity of the respective roles of the Provincial and District Service Providers Forums. There has been a prolonged period of uncertainty over the allocation of functions between District and Local Municipalities, with interim measures being introduced to avoid a breakdown in service delivery. At a practical level, municipalities had difficulty in establishing uniform project information capture and approval procedures, which were needed to start bringing implementation of projects by Service Providers into line with the emergent Integrated Development Plans.

Throughout the earlier period and during the transition under the new legislation, the Provincial Service Providers Forum had continued to meet twice a year. Membership included the Technical Directors of each region/district and a wide range of senior representatives of Service Providers. But it was the providers of the 'hard' services, which predominated. Issues that recurred on the agenda were those of alignment between legislation governing service providers and the Integrated Development Plans. In particular there were the discrepancies between the boundaries for

which different service providers were licensed and those of the newly demarcated municipalities. Other issues attracting positive attention were the increasing availability of information from the Integrated Development Plans about areas of geographic focus in the districts, the wider availability of common information bases and a network of key people at different levels.

The integrated development planning process and the role of service providers: a case study of Zululand District Municipality

As outlined above, in terms of the Municipal Systems Act, all municipalities were required to produce Integrated Development Plans. The Integrated Development Plan was to be the primary plan for each municipality. All sector and Service Provider plans were to fall within the umbrella of the IDP and be consistent with it. At the same time, all departments and Service Providers are required to adjust their service delivery areas to conform with the boundaries of the newly demarcated municipalities. For these reasons, the Service Providers had a vital contribution to make to the integrated development planning process, not only during the plan preparation phases, but also during implementation and monitoring.

Throughout the country, the planning process started in July 2001 and was to be completed by March 2002. It was typically arranged into phases as follows:

- Phase 1 – Analysis
- Phase 2 – Strategies
- Phase 3 – Projects
- Phase 4 – Adoption.

The Zululand District Municipality inherited a Service Providers Forum from the regional council period that been fairly active in its heyday, during which time its more committed members had contributed to the formulation of "hardship indices" and the Dalisu model. However, on account of inconsistent attendance, wide differences in the capabilities and interests of the service providers, and the uncertainty accompanying the demarcation process and allocation of functions between local and district municipalities, the Zululand Service Providers Forum had declined into a 'talk-shop' without

much focus. This was typical of many Forums during the course of 1999 and 2000.

With the advent of the integrated development planning process and the tight timetable for completion of the first round of plans, the ZDM made a concerted effort to re-activate its Service Providers Forum as an instrument for co-ordination and alignment. There had been close co-operation between the planners in the five constituent local municipalities and the Zululand District Municipality, resulting in agreement to combine the district Integrated Development Plan Steering Committee with the Service Providers Forum. In response to a strong drive by the municipality's Technical Director, the Service Provider Forum meetings during most of 2001 and 2002 were well attended by relatively senior staff from up to 36 Service Providers, local and district municipality officials.

At its first meeting in 2001, members undertook an analysis of the problems and achievements of the previous Service Providers Forum. Service Providers also identified the following potential benefits that could be derived from a revitalized Forum:

- Establish clear objectives and a strategy, for the Forum and communicate these
- Concentrate on strategic integration of different sectors in line with the Integrated Development Plans
- Provide clear guidance to Departments regarding their role in the Integrated Development Plans
- Provide a framework for sharing project information and an understanding of what other service providers were doing in the district
- Share experiences about innovative and cost effective approaches to service provision
- Become a channel of communication between all service providers and the Municipalities and identify the key contact persons in each Department and the Municipalities
- Provide standard guidelines as to how and where services should be provided

- Establish a reliable and up to date Geographic Information system data base for use by all service providers
- Prevent overlapping and duplication of services/planning
- Synchronise financial year ends and resolve overlapping boundaries
- Promote co-operation and co-ordination among service providers operating in the district
- Improve provision of services to communities and come up with procedures to identify projects in the Traditional Authority areas (Zululand Service Provider Forum Minutes April 2001).

On the basis of this review, the Forum adopted new terms of reference. These were similar, but more sharply focused than the objectives of their predecessors (see above):

- To provide a central information base to facilitate sharing of information about service rendering in Zululand district using the GIS
- To promote integrated development planning by using the IDP process
- To improve co-ordination of existing plans and to bring them to the attention of other Service Providers
- To facilitate the sharing of project plan information among Service Providers
- To monitor and review project implementation on a regular basis
- To align all planning on a continuous basis.

At the same time it was recognized that while the full Service Providers Forum meetings (held quarterly) were useful for disseminating information from the District Municipality to service providers, it was too cumbersome to attend to specific activities called for in the terms of reference. Accordingly, the service providers in closely related fields were grouped into five 'sector committees', viz.

- Physical Infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity,

transport and roads, telecommunications, housing)

- Economic development (agriculture, tourism, local economic development, mining)
- Social development (health, education, welfare, police, labour, heritage, documentation and information, poverty, gender and HIV/Aids)
- Land and environment (nature conservation, development planning, land reform)
- Institutional (funding agencies, training and capacity building).

These sector committees were to meet more frequently to generate the information required for the district and local municipal Integrated Development Plans. Each service provider was given a detailed list of the information to be provided for the Analysis, the Strategies and the Projects phases of the plan preparation. This was supplemented by district-wide data sets that had been generated by the Zululand District Municipality (e. g. an up to date population distribution for all settlements in the Zululand district; 20-year population projections based on commonly agreed assumptions; the main elements of the district spatial development framework). The expectation was that with clear direction and a common set of parameters, the service providers would each produce the requisite information for their organization that would, in turn, become the basis for the Integrated Development Plan and for closer alignment between themselves.

In the event the results were variable. Only about a third of the 36 service providers responded promptly and with detailed, useful information for the Analysis stage. Fewer provided any input for the Strategies or the Projects stages. Over half the service providers did not respond in any way throughout the year during which the Integrated Development Plan was being drawn up. There was one case where a service provider identified projects in another district, believing that these were located within Zululand district. Analysis of the organizations, which responded adequately indicated a direct correlation with capacity levels and

degree of organisation within a particular agency. Service providers in the water sector were by far the most capable in this regard. Interestingly, two organizations suddenly responded late in the process, which seemed to reflect a subsequent increase in internal capacity.

Conclusions and future prospects for Service Providers Forums

In spite of considerable effort by the Zululand District Municipality to support and shepherd the Service Providers Forum, the contribution to improved integration was less than anticipated. Nonetheless, these Forums should not be written off as institutions for alignment in integrated development planning. There can be no doubt that the full spectrum of service providers need to work together in some co-operative way if integrated development is to be achieved. The integrated Development Plans are formulated in a manner that reflects cross-sector thinking and integration at all stages, however, line-function service providers, which implement the project, tend to operate in a compartmentalized way.

Although the Municipal Systems Act created an institutional environment that was conducive to improved integration among service providers and their investments with those of the municipalities, achievement of the intended levels of alignment has not yet occurred to any extent. There are several reasons for this. In order for the Service Providers Forum to have an effective decision-making context within which to operate, there needs to be only one plan. The Integrated Development Plan will now fulfil this function. However, these plans will need to be practical enough to guide development at a local and project level, something that was lacking in the past, and be formulated in close co-operation with the service providers. A closely related problem was one of precedence. The Act stipulates that an Integrated Development Plan will have precedence over sector plans drawn up by line function departments. For this to become accepted in practice, not only will service providers have to have been fully involved in the planning process, but the sector components of the Integrated Development Plans will need to be developed to a far greater level of specificity (both

functional and spatial) than has been the case with the first round of the new plans.

At the same time the decision-making processes of Service Providers and the criteria used for prioritization and location of investments will need to be aligned with those of the municipalities within a district. Earlier attempts by the Zululand Regional Council to achieve this in order to establish region-wide "hardship indices" for their Dalisu model, demonstrated the practical difficulties in achieving this degree of alignment.

The 'rules of the game' for both provincial and district Service Providers Forums need to be established at Provincial executive level in order to send the necessary signals down the lines as to the importance of co-operation between sectors in order to achieve improved integration on the ground. So too, the significant role of the Service Providers Forums (at provincial and district levels) has to be communicated in order to accord these institutions the status they need in order to be effective. In the absence of strong support from top provincial level, the district Service Providers Forums are likely to remain plagued by inconsistent attendance and wavering commitment.

The question remains as to whether Service Providers Forums should become statutory bodies. As understanding about the varied nature and potential of different forms of partnership in development in South Africa has expanded and matured over the last few years (McCarthy & Forster 2002), the case strengthens for these institutions to continue in their non-statutory role. All service providers and municipalities are bound by the common need to co-operate under the Integrated Development Plans. This provides a sufficient legislative context. The 'glue' required to cohere the service providers and municipalities in any district is likely to be found among participants in each district and this will be far more effective than any further statutory requirement. Evidence of the type of drive and enthusiasm needed to motivate Service Providers Forums can be found in the co-operative attitudes that prevail at provincial Service Provider Forum meetings, and in the impact that several

individuals have had in different Service Providers Forums within KwaZulu-Natal over the past five years.

In conclusion, recognition of the inextricable link between planning and implementation has taken a long time, but is now firmly embedded in the integrated development planning process through the requirement that municipal budgets be linked to the Integrated Development Plan, and that Departmental expenditure be based on its priorities. The Service Providers Forums provide a logical response to the inherent problem of achieving alignment between different line function agencies, and between provincial and district/local levels of government.

The Service Providers Forum may be an imperfect institution, but it is the best there is to date and should not be discarded at this early stage. The achievements to date may be small (though some, such as improved mutual understanding and networking, tend to be invisible) but these have been made in the face of a changing socio-political and institutional environment. It was only from 2001 onwards that this environment stabilized after completion of the municipal demarcation and the introduction of the integrated development planning process. Further work is required to find ways to bolster the internal capacity of Service Providers which are weak (so as to bring most to an equivalent operational level); to work out appropriate roles for all service providers to play in the planning process (such as pilot projects within districts to provide a cluster of inter-related projects at a selected place); and to find effective institutional configurations, particularly at district level, to cohere their vital contribution to integrated development.

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