WORKSHOP REPORT

WORKSHOP ON "Exploring the Role of Community Engagement in Strengthening Local Government Processes in Coalition-Led Municipalities"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 5 June 2025, the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) and Governance and Livelihoods Agenda (AgendaGL) convened a one day workshop in Northern KwaZulu-Natal to explore how community engagement can strengthen local government processes, particularly in coalition-led municipalities. The workshop brought together civic leaders, community-based organisations, and local activists and leaders from Nongoma, Vryheid, Dundee, and Ulundi, to assess challenges and share solutions for enhancing democratic participation. The participants underscored the central role communities must play in shaping responsive, transparent, and accountable local governance. They highlighted both the obstacles and possibilities of community participation in coalition-led municipalities and set the stage for ongoing capacity-building efforts and collaborative governance models.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Coalition politics have become a key feature of South Africa's political landscape, especially at the local level. While coalitions have been formed since the 2000 local government elections, these were mostly limited to small councils and drew little attention. This changed after the 2016 and 2021 local government elections, where there was a sharp rise in hung councils particularly in metropolitan councils leading to instability and frequent leadership changes. The formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2024, following the national and provincial elections has further heightened interest in coalitions, with a growing focus on their role ahead of the 2026 local elections. However, coalition discussions have largely been dominated by political parties, with limited input from communities.

The workshop sought to address this narrative by engaging structures of leadership at a community level to ensure that coalition governance is responsive to the needs and voices of the people, so that no one is left behind. ACCORD and AgendaGL hosted a workshop under the theme: **"Exploring the Role of Community Engagement in Strengthening Local Government Processes in Coalition-Led Municipalities."** This initiative forms part of ACCORD's broader work on coalitions, supported by the Irish Embassy, and AgendaGL's Sophakama Project that focuses on building civic agency and strengthening social accountability across rural municipalities.

SUMMARY OF THEMATIC AREAS COVERED

1. Deepening Democracy Through Community Participation

Dr Stephen Shisanya of AgendaGL opened Session One with a presentation on the theme *"Deepening Democracy: Community Participation in Coalition-Led Local Government."* He emphasised that community engagement is a fundamental pillar of effective governance, especially in municipalities governed by coalitions where political instability often undermines service delivery. Dr Shisanya framed the session as a facilitated dialogue, highlighting how inclusive participation enables citizens to shape policy, demand accountability, and ensure that decisions reflect grassroots priorities. He noted that in a coalition context, meaningful community involvement is crucial for building trust, enhancing transparency, and promoting responsive governance. Participants were encouraged to break into groups to discuss best practices, challenges, and opportunities related to community participation in coalition-led municipalities. Participants were urged to share lived experiences, identify practical strategies for inclusive governance, and remain committed to fostering local governments that are truly accountable and people-centred. The session offered valuable lessons about how deepening democracy requires continuous collaboration between civil society, communities, and their elected representatives.

2. Session Two: Enhancing Governance Accountability Through Local Advocacy

This session emphasised the power of local advocacy in holding coalition-led municipalities to account, using the Endumeni Civic Association as a case study. Ms Nompumelelo Nkosi shared the Association's experience of challenging a housing corruption scandal involving the misallocation and illegal sale of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses using legal mechanisms. Despite court victories, she noted delays in implementation and continued governance instability, which was further complicated by ongoing coalition conflicts. The Association has widened its advocacy to include access to clean water, sanitation, and environmental health, including independent water testing. Ms Nkosi acknowledged the risks that civic activists face in KwaZulu-Natal's volatile political climate, but emphasised their unwavering commitment to justice. She also emphasised the importance of unity in action at a community level, moral leadership, and grassroots resilience in advancing accountability and protecting public interests.

3. Session Three: Sharing Best Practices for Community–Local Government Collaborations

This session addressed the importance of documenting and promoting best practices in community-municipality collaborations, particularly within coalition-led contexts. It was stressed that while legal frameworks such as the Municipal Systems Act exist to support community involvement, many residents are unaware of their roles, rights, and avenues for participation. Participants discussed how elite-driven planning often side-lines community voices, resulting in development initiatives, especially Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), that lack relevance and ownership. Emphasis was placed on early and continuous community consultation, civic education about governance structures, and the prevention of destructive protests by fostering inclusion from the beginning. Additional suggestions included greater use of parliamentary constituency offices for community engagement and the introduction of deputy councillors in large wards to support service delivery and representation. Although support structures such as ward committees and proportional representation (PR) councillors are already in place to assist ward councillors, the introduction of deputy councillors in larger wards could further reinforce this system, thus enhancing service delivery, strengthening existing mechanisms, and improving community representation. The session concluded with a call for sustained civic education and institutional reforms that place communities at the centre of local governance.

4.   Insights and Recommendations

The workshop revealed several insights into the realities of community participation in coalition-led municipalities. One of the most pressing challenges identified was the instability caused by political party rivalries within coalitions, which often shift the focus of governance away from service delivery and towards political power struggles. This dynamic has led to the marginalisation of community voices, political apathy, and disillusionment with democratic processes. Many communities lack a clear understanding of how coalitions function and where their own roles and responsibilities lie within local government structures. The absence of consistent and structured civic education was repeatedly emphasised as a barrier to meaningful engagement. Furthermore, while ward committees are designed to strengthen community representation, they are often composed of individuals who have not been properly trained, limiting their effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the presence of multiple political actors within coalition governments presents an opportunity to foster greater transparency and mutual oversight, provided that the right institutional mechanisms are in place.

Building on these insights, the workshop produced the following strategic recommendations:

- Civic education must be prioritised to equip communities with knowledge about governance processes, their constitutional rights, and the role of coalitions in service delivery;

- Municipalities should institutionalise inclusive consultation processes, especially around IDPs, and establish feedback systems to ensure that community input directly influences policy decisions;

- There is a need to capacitate ward committees through targeted trainings and resources, enabling them to function as effective intermediaries between citizens and local councils;

- Legal empowerment and easier access to justice are essential for communities to challenge corruption and non-performance, and the roles of institutions such as the Legal Aid Board should be actively promoted;

- Civic organisations and grassroots advocacy groups must be protected and supported, given the personal risks their members often face in politically contested environments;

- The use of parliamentary constituency offices for genuine community engagement, rather than partisan purposes, should be reinforced; and

- Innovations such as appointing deputy councillors in large wards can help improve local representation and responsiveness, ensuring that no part of the community is left behind in governance and service delivery.

- Together, these recommendations point towards a more inclusive, accountable, and participatory model of local governance rooted in genuine community empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This workshop represented a vital step in reimagining local governance in South Africa, particularly in a time when coalition governments are becoming the norm rather than the exception. The conversations held in Northern KwaZulu-Natal highlighted the persistent gaps between communities and the political structures meant to serve them, while also revealing a deep well of resilience, innovation, and determination within civil society. As the country approaches the 2026 local government elections, the insights and commitments from this workshop provide a strong foundation for building more inclusive, accountable, and participatory local governance systems. Community leaders, civil society organisations, and municipalities must carry this momentum forward, working hand-in-hand to ensure that local government truly reflects and serves the people.