



THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER and JOHANNESBURG

A discussion with Pascal Moloi
Convenor, White Paper Review Process

In May 2026, CDE convened a meeting on the draft Local Government White Paper. The discussion forms part of CDE's ongoing engagement with organisations, initiatives and individuals concerned about the state of Johannesburg. The aim is to reflect on the city's challenges and to explore potential solutions. This report focuses on issues that emerged from the discussion that were most directly linked to Johannesburg's challenges.

Pascal Moloi, convenor of the 2025/6 Local Government White Paper review process and former City Manager of Johannesburg (2001 to 2006) was the lead speaker. In his view South Africa's local government framework no longer reflects the realities facing municipalities. The current White Paper was developed in 1998. Since then, cities have expanded rapidly while infrastructure, municipal finances and governance systems have come under increasing strain.

The draft White Paper proposes a far-reaching reform of the local government system in response to these challenges. It argues that many municipalities face declining infrastructure, financial pressure, weak governance, political instability and significant differences in institutional capacity. The review therefore examined the structure of local government, the allocation of powers and functions, political and administrative governance, relations between municipalities and other spheres of government, partnerships with business and communities, and the systems used to finance, manage and deliver services. Its central objective is to create a local government system that is better able to govern effectively, maintain infrastructure,

deliver services, and respond to the different circumstances facing municipalities across the country.

An important point raised in the White Paper is the failure of South Africa's 'one-size-fits-all' approach to local government. Moloi argued that municipalities face vastly different economic, administrative, and governance conditions, yet operate within the same institutional framework. The draft White Paper proposes a more differentiated system that would replace the current model of local, district, and metropolitan governments with a differentiated single tier municipal system. Under this framework, metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg could receive greater authority and mandates, while smaller municipalities would have limited responsibilities, with some functions taken over by provincial or national government.

Moloi pointed to Addis Ababa as an example of a city operating in terms of a special arrangement that reflects its central importance within Ethiopia. Addis Ababa operates as a chartered city with a self-governing administration, headed by a mayor. While it is directly accountable to the federal government of Ethiopia, the city maintains its own executive, legislative, and judicial branches to manage its municipal affairs and public services. The mayor exercises both municipal and state level responsibilities, including oversight of policing, health and taxation.

For Johannesburg, this could mean the city takes control over functions currently managed by provincial or national government, such as housing, rail, policing and aspects of

health administration. In discussion, several participants questioned whether the city is currently capable of managing additional responsibilities given its existing governance and service delivery challenges. All agreed that the capacity of local government should play a crucial role in deciding how to allocate roles and responsibilities at the local level.

A major part of the discussion centred on the role of business in addressing municipal decline. Several participants highlighted the willingness of businesses to play a more active role in resolving local infrastructure and service delivery problems. One example involved a business seeking to repair a road near its warehouse because the deteriorating infrastructure was affecting operations. According to participants, the company offered to fund and undertake the repairs itself, but overlapping departmental responsibilities, procurement rules, and intergovernmental complexities prevented the business from fixing the road.

Moloi acknowledged that existing legislation often prevents municipalities from responding flexibly to unsolicited offers of assistance or investment, even when it could directly help the residents and the city.

He linked this concern directly to the draft White Paper's proposals around 'place-based compacts'. According to Moloi, the current system forces municipalities into rigid and highly procedural processes that make practical collaboration between government, business and communities unnecessarily difficult. The proposed compacts would create formal agreements between different spheres of government, businesses, communities, and other stakeholders around shared priorities such as infrastructure maintenance, local economic growth and service reliability. Rather than trying to work through fragmented departmental mandates or competing spheres of government, the approach focuses on achieving practical outcomes within specific places and communities.

Another major theme of the discussion was political instability and administrative dysfunction in local government, particularly in Johannesburg. Participants raised concerns about unstable coalition governments, repeated motions of no confidence, and political interference in municipal administration, problems that have plagued Johannesburg over the past decade. It was generally agreed that municipalities cannot function effectively when leadership changes constantly and administrative decisions are shaped by factional politics rather than competence.

Moloi said the draft White Paper supports a proposed Municipal Structures Amendment Bill (the 'Coalitions Bill'), which would require coalition agreements to be formalised and made public. The proposal would also limit motions of no confidence during the first two years of an administration's term, except in cases involving serious misconduct, in order to stabilise administrations and allow sufficient time for reform implementation.

Participants argued that such reforms could be particularly significant for Johannesburg given the instability associated with coalition politics in the city in recent years.

Concerns were raised about governance capabilities throughout the city, and especially at ward and committee level. Several participants argued that local political structures have become increasingly politicised and disconnected from competence or expertise. Questions were raised about the lack of effective training and onboarding for newly elected councillors, many of whom enter office without a clear understanding of governance systems, committee responsibilities or municipal procedures. Moloi acknowledged that induction systems already exist through institutions such as SALGA but argued that they are often inconsistently implemented and insufficiently effective.

Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly returned to the urgency of reform and whether the timelines associated with the draft White Paper process adequately reflect the severity of municipal decline, particularly in Johannesburg.

Moloi responded that the review process distinguishes between long-term structural reform and an immediate 'stabilisation phase'. According to him, certain reforms related to service stabilisation and administrative functionality could proceed immediately without constitutional amendment, while more fundamental reforms involving powers and functions would require a longer legislative and constitutional process which could mean that the reform proposal will take years to be effected.

A number of participants expressed the view that South Africa is not short of legislation or policy proposals. The greater challenge is whether government possesses the leadership, institutional capacity and urgency required to implement reforms quickly enough to stabilise Johannesburg's rapidly deteriorating performance levels.



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Published in July 2026 by The Centre for Development and Enterprise
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