15 YEARS OF THE GOOD GOVERNANCE LEARNING NETWORK

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This paper aims to reflect on the work of the Good Governance Learning Network since its inception in 2003. It commences by outlining the local government context and the motivations behind the establishment of the Network. This is followed by insights into the value that it adds to the work of its members through reflection on its inherent characteristics, programmatic achievements and review and evaluation outcomes. The lessons that the Network has learnt is then given attention. Finally, the paper looks forward to future Network developments.

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SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE – MILESTONES AND CHALLENGES

One of the major milestones of South Africa's democratisation process was the transformation of the local government system. The Constitution of 1996 introduced, for the first time, a comprehensive local government system with wall-to-wall municipalities, covering the entire republic. Local government became an autonomous, yet inter-dependent, sphere of government with municipalities given the right to govern the affairs of their geographic demarcation. The transformation process was further underpinned by a comprehensive policy developed to give effect to the new constitutional vision of local government, namely, the White Paper on Local Government of 1998. The White Paper set out a framework and programme for the radical transformation of the entire local government system. The central thrust of the White Paper was the concept of developmental local government, defined as "local

government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives" (RSA 1998).

The new local government system was implemented in December 2000 and municipalities subsequently made significant development progress. Multiple gains were made, including the delivery of services, the implementation of policies around free basic services and integrated development planning, and equitable share funding (De Visser 2009; RSA 2014). However, by 2004, there were signs that the new system was not functioning properly (Nel & Dunoon-Stevens 2015) – among these signs were direct action protests against municipalities, which became a frequent occurrence (Ballard et al 2006).

According to Pieterse (2007), the major challenges local government faced at the time included:
• Weak integrated development plans and local economic development programmes.
• Inadequate intergovernmental coordination and alignment of municipal planning and service delivery.
• Unsatisfactory and weak citizen participation.
• Poor municipal capacity.

The National Department of Provincial and Local Government (2006) at the time responded to these and other challenges with a policy agenda called the Local Government Strategic Agenda 2006-2011. The agenda specifically focused on addressing institutional capacity constraints, service delivery backlogs, poor local economic development, poor financial management and governance shortcomings; it further informed Project Consolidate, a special national local government support programme initiated in 2004.

Project Consolidate involved multiple support measures to assist 136 dysfunctional municipalities to become capable service delivery entities, prioritising those with the most serious capacity and financial management constraints and reflecting high rates of unemployment and poverty (Pieterse 2007; City Press 2011).

Despite providing hands-on support to local government, as well as a systemic local government work and reporting framework, Project Consolidate failed to live up to expectations (City Press 2011). Project Consolidate was followed by a raft of subsequent similar local government support programmes attempting to deal with largely the same challenges albeit with different strategic approaches. These interventions included the national Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affair's (CoGTA's) Local Government Turnaround Strategy (2009), which aimed to re-build and improve the basic requirements for local government, and the Back to Basics Programme (2014), which tailored support to different levels of municipal performance.

Despite these efforts, the continued dissatisfaction of the public with the performance of local government was reflected in an increasing number of violent civic protests targeted at local government. Nationally, the number of protests reached the 100 per annum mark in 2008, peaking at 204 in 2009 and remaining at more than 100 protests per annum between 2010 and 2017 (Dullah Omar Institute 2018).

In early 2018, the Auditor-General (AG), reported a decline in accountability and decisive leadership at the municipal level based on the 2016-17 municipal audit outcomes. Among other statistics, the AG reported a 75% increase in municipal irregular expenditure (Auditor-General of South Africa 2018).

The municipal audit results further headlined the 2018 CoGTA budget vote speech in May delivered by Minister Zweli Mkhize. The speech highlighted that the performance of the majority of municipalities

is below expectations with 87 priority municipalities identified by CoGTA and National Treasury as distressed or dysfunctional, requiring urgent intervention. It further noted that 27 municipalities received disclaimers from the AG in 2016/2017, 11 are currently under administration and there is an exorbitant level of municipal debt which continues to be a problem (Mkhize 2018).

Mkhize (2018) further punted an aggressive turnaround strategy, similar to past interventions such as Project Consolidate and the Turnaround Strategy, to reverse poor municipal performance and build functional municipalities. This intervention includes a comprehensive review of non-viable municipalities, as well an intensive Recovery Programme in line with the Back to Basics Programme launched in 2014. The Recovery Programme will provide municipalities with support in three areas, namely governance, financial management and service delivery.

CoGTA, further launched a four-point plan through which this department will tackle the local government challenges (Van Rensburg 2018). The plan focuses on issues of governance, financial management, infrastructure delivery and political problems.

It remains to be seen if current interventions will yield any tangible results, particularly in the current climate of increasingly violent public protests, targeted not only at local government (Mafhokala 2018) but at broader national issues falling within the ambit of local government such as land expropriation (February 2018).

A RESPONSE TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CHALLENGE

The GGLN was established in 2003 in response to the need for improved networking, peer learning, practice and partnerships among civil society organisations working to strengthen local governance in South Africa. The GGLN emerged at a time in South Africa's local government trajectory when problems with the local government system started to emerge. The establishment of the GGLN therefore represented a much-needed strengthened response by civil society organisations in South Africa to a growing local governance challenge.

The networking and learning work of the GGLN has responded to the continued challenges experienced in the local governance space. The thematic areas of focus across all GGLN interventions are linked to the broader role of South African civil society in local governance and the Network's work has, over the years, touched on many aspects of local government policy and practice. Evidenced by a range of interventions over the years, these aspects include:

- Deepening local participatory democracy with an emphasis on active citizenship across communities and with youth.

- Public participation in local government processes including pro-poor and community-based integrated development planning, planning land access via spatial development frameworks and participatory budgeting.

- Service delivery and access to basic services, particularly community-based monitoring of local government services and related community-based activism.

- Politics and policies of local government including urban politics and policy in informal settlement upgrading, as well as local government political culture.

- Governance, specifically the role of women in local governance, professionalisation of local government, intergovernmental coordination as well as local government ethics, responsiveness and accountability.

CHALLENGES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

The GGLN further emerged in response to continuing institutional and sector changes and challenges experienced by CSOs working in local governance.

The advent of the democratic era in South Africa saw significant shifts in the civil society landscape, including changes in organisations' relationships with government, with a notable shift toward the "development partner" approach; the freedom to significantly contribute toward establishing a healthy democracy; and the establishment as well as closure of a number of organisations (Habib & Taylor 1999; Burger et al 2017). At the same time, South African CSOs face, among other changes and challenges, decreasing funding and stricter funding conditions at the local and international level, while human resource limitations, organisational regulation and accountability continue to be complex issues that organisations continue to grapple with (Habib & Taylor 1999; Burger et al 2017).

THE VALUE ADDED BY THE GGLN TO THE WORK OF ITS MEMBERS OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS

The value that the Network has added to the work of its members is reflected upon using three mechanisms – a mini analysis of the GGLN based on learning network theory and practice, a reflection on the programmatic achievements of the network, as well as insights from the various reviews and evaluations conducted on the work of the Network.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICE-BASED MINI-ANALYSIS

The works of Ruggie (2002) and Downes (2007) on the theory and practice of learning networks, outlines the defining characteristics of inter-organisational learning networks. The left column in Table 1 below outlines these characteristics and the column on the right provides an indication of whether or not the GGLN reflects these characteristics or not. A '✓' symbol indicates that the characteristic is reflected by the Network, while an '✕' indicates that it is not. The results indicate that the GGLN generally meets the definitive characteristics of an inter-organisational learning network, providing its membership, from a theoretical and practice-based perspective, with a complete and robust mechanism for peer networking and learning.

Characteristic	GGLN
Voluntarily established by autonomous organisations combining their efforts to attain objective that they cannot attain effectively or at all on their own.	✓
Typically established to help their participants better understand and work through ambiguity and complexity in their work.	✓
Guided by a shared vision and common purpose.	✓
Operates as a shared conceptual system within which the participating entities perceive, understand and frame aspects of their work. Creates no new entities, but is a framework for co-ordinated behaviour to produce a new collective outcome.	✓
Loose organisational form based non-directive horizontal organising principles.	✓
Diversity. Involves or aims to involve widest possible spectrum of points of view.	✓
Is designed and organised to support/facilitate learning.	✓
Is interactive and connected. The knowledge produced by a network is the product of an interaction between the members, and an aggregation of the member perspectives.	✓
Is open. Each member is able to contribute to the network, and each member needs to be able to receive from the network.	✓

Table 1: Applying the characteristics of inter-organisational learning networks to the GGLN

PROGRAMMATIC ACHIEVEMENTS

The GGLN has reached a number of programmatic milestones over its 15-year lifespan. These include:

An active, engaged and sustained membership of organisations working across South Africa

The GGLN is a learning network driven strategically and operationally by the requirements and needs of its membership. The network is currently constituted by 21 member organisations (18 CSOs, two academic departments and one public sector consultancy). The GGLN has since its inception been subject to the shifts in the South African civil society landscape. Despite this, membership numbers have remained largely stable over the years. Starting with less than 10 organisations, membership has grown slowly but consistently. Over the years, membership numbers have been influenced by: organisational closure, the strategic re-orientation of organisations away from a focus on local governance matters, and an inability of members (one in particular) to adhere to the core values of the network resulting in membership termination.

A continued appetite among members for peer networking and learning

Face-to-face networking and learning events and activities have over the years anchored the GGLN's networking and learning offering, successfully facilitating member collaboration.

These events and activities have over time been supported by a number of communications tools including a newsletter, website and social media platforms.

Current face-to face events and activities:

Members' meetings
Members' meetings provide opportunities for members to reflect, learn and share their work and related challenges and successes. They create important opportunities for networking, information and knowledge sharing and sector strengthening. They also provide a platform for external sector stakeholders including the national Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), the Auditor-General's office and CoGTA to share information on current affairs and developments in the local governance sector.

The Managers' Forum
The Managers' Forum has been run since 2011, and provides a regular meeting space for the leadership of GGLN member organisations. Structured as a two-day retreat, it facilitates strategic reflection, networking and peer learning.

Past face-to-face events and activities:

Local learning exchanges
Local learning exchanges facilitated capacity building by allowing members to engage with fellow members or external sector stakeholders around local governance events or interventions.

Regional learning events
Members and participants of these events focused on facilitating knowledge sharing and peer learning, indicated that they were particularly useful and valuable in terms of bringing together people from a range of organisations across civil society and the state while providing information about the different government and civil society approaches to particular issues. The events were also an important strategic opportunity for members to showcase their work and have a positive impact on current debates and discussions on a particular issue.

International exchanges
International exchanges provided an opportunity for members to learn across South Africa's borders from countries with similar development trajectories and local government contexts to South Africa.

Sustained joint knowledge production

GGLN knowledge production in support of learning has been anchored by the publication of the *State of Local Governance*. The *State of Local Governance* encompasses contributions from member organisations including peer reviewed papers and short project profiles/perspectives related to an annually identified theme. As the GGLN's flagship research project, this publication offers perspectives from civil society on the key challenges, debates and progress with governance and development at local level in South Africa. 2018 is the 10th publication year.

In the past, members were also able to access research grants in support of knowledge production. Research grants aimed to provide GGLN members with an opportunity to expand on their existing work and research initiatives, either by adding a research activity to existing work or by facilitating the production of new/additional research outputs.

An experienced Secretariat and member host coordinating all Network activities

Isandla Institute has hosted the GGLN Secretariat and managed associated funding grants since 2010. To date, the Secretariat has been able to successfully deliver against its mandate and GGLN objectives, providing evidence of the need for and value of an experienced management structure to coordinate an intervention like the GGLN.

Local governance sector networking and influencing

As evidence of the recognition of the Network by external stakeholders, the GGLN Secretariat and membership is regularly invited and well-represented at relevant, strategic local government events and on relevant bodies. The Network has been formally represented on a number of external structures over the years including Local Government Action, the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation's (DPME's) Citizen-Based Monitoring Framework Committee, the Open Government Partnership South Africa, the CoGTA Steering Committee, and the DPME's Strengthening Monitoring and Performance Management for the Poor project. 2018 participation includes Parliament and SALGA's Local Government Week 2018. The Network has also engaged in select joint advocacy through occasional policy submissions.

FINDINGS FROM REVIEWS AND EVALUATIONS

The GGLN has, since 2003, contributed significantly to creating a strong local governance civil society sector. The GGLN seeks to be reflective in nature, respond to members' needs and opportunities, and continually strengthen its offerings and influence. Various reviews and evaluations have therefore been conducted on the work of the Network over the years. This section will specifically focus on the outcomes of a 2013 evaluation, a 2017 independent strategic review and a 2018 evaluation. The outcomes of the review and outcomes indicate that despite facing constraints, the GGLN has managed, over the past five years in particular, to maintain the value it adds to the work of its members.

KEY FINDINGS FROM 2013 EVALUATION

Subsequent to the development of an impact assessment framework (Mosdell 2012), a baseline evaluation of the GGLN programme of work was conducted in 2013. 2013 marked the Network's 10th anniversary, serving as an important reflective moment on its value and functioning. The assessment was predominantly internal but did include external

elements. Overall, members reported that the GGLN added significant value to their work (Konstant 2013). The key results from the assessment (Konstant 2013), which used survey and interview methods, were:

- Overall satisfaction of the membership with the GGLN programme of work was generally very high.
- Opportunities for joint learning were generally well received by the membership, and considered to be valuable.
- Knowledge generation by the GGLN, and particularly the production of the SoLG, was considered by both internal and external respondents to meet an excellent standard, adding value to the local governance sector. It was seen as the network's 'strongest asset'. Internal and external respondents ranked it highly.
- Improvement of network profile, visibility and outreach via various communications mechanisms was deemed to be an area requiring major improvement.
- The external networking and influencing role the Network could play in the local governance sector was a point of comment, discussion and debate by internal members.
- The Secretariat was widely acknowledged to operate at a very high standard and to have provided an efficient and professional service with the execution of the GGLN programme of work.

2017 INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW

An independent strategic review conducted at the end of 2017. The review, which formed part of a broader strategic review process which commenced in early 2017, formally confirmed and reiterated previously indicated requirements and further assessed the future needs of members. The review engaged members via interviews and indicated that

the GGLN adds value to the work of its members, albeit to varying degrees (Moolman 2018). Member perspectives ranged from those indicating that the GGLN generally performs its purpose well, to those indicating that certain aspects of the programme were useful but that there is room for improvement (Moolman 2018). The platform for the sharing of experiences and learning that the GGLN provides was considered valuable, with increased member access and collaboration leading to significant programmatic gains in certain instances (Moolman 2018).

2018 ASSESSMENT FINDINGS AND REFLECTION ON THE GGLN'S IMPACTS

As 2018 marks 15 years since the establishment of the GGLN, including the end of a programmatic phase, the GGLN Secretariat undertook a short retrospective summative evaluation in July 2018 to determine, together with other evaluation outcomes, the benefits that members have derived from the programme, and ultimately the value of the programme. The evaluation was conducted in line with aspects of the impact assessment framework developed in 2013.

The internal mini-evaluation helped to determine, through self-reported means, the extent to which the GGLN has delivered on its outcomes as well as its goal of building the capacity of its member organisations. The evaluation made use of a quantitative methodology with a survey. The survey specifically focused on member perceptions on outcomes delivered as well as if and how they think the GGLN has contributed to growing their knowledge and abilities.

Selected individual staff members representing member organisations were requested to complete an online questionnaire. The 16 respondents were a mixture of individuals based at member organisations

operating at practitioner level (37%) or senior management level (62%) within their organisations, and who have engaged with GGLN interventions. Their perceptions on outcomes delivered were assessed using the Likert scale (very poor; poor; okay; good; very good).

Overall, respondents rated outcomes to be good. Key results were:

- 94% of respondents considered the general standard of the GGLN programme to be good.
- 68% considered the standard of face-to-face learning activities and events to be good while 31% considered it to be very good.
- 44% considered the standard of standard of knowledge production, specifically the *State of Local Governance* publication, to be good, while a further 50% considered it to be very good.
- 50% considered the standard of GGLN communications, including the website and newsletter, to be good, while 25% considered it to be very good.
- 75% considered the execution of the GGLN programme of work to be good.
- The question around the quality of relationships with and/or nature of support given to organisations in the governance sector other than GGLN members e.g. Parliament, or Open Government Partnership garnered a mixed response. More than 50% of respondents ranked this as okay to good with approximately 31% indicating that they were unable to answer the question – this is mostly attributed to their lack of awareness on these activities partially due to the level of seniority (practitioner) within the organisation.

The second part of the survey focused on the effectiveness of the GGLN. Respondents were specifically requested to reflect on the benefits they have derived from the Network's activities. Specific results were:

- 88% indicated they know significantly more about the work undertaken by civil society organisations in the local governance sector.
- 81% indicated that they have developed at least one or more professional working relationship with other organisations in the local governance sector.
- 50% indicated that they know a little more about local government policy and practice while 50% indicated they know significantly more.
- 75% say they have improved their practice in the local government sector somewhat while 25% indicate they have improved it significantly.

Table 2 below further outlines the ways in which respondents indicated that the GGLN helped them to improve their practice, while via Box 2 members indicate in their own words what value GGLN activities have added to their work:

Practice improvements	Percentage of respondents
I have increased or am planning to increase the amount of local governance work I am doing.	25%
I am doing local governance work in a more (sector) strategic way.	25%
The effectiveness/quality of my local governance work has improved.	38%
I have embarked on a new local governance project.	25%
I am collaborating with other organisations on a local governance project.	56%
I am better able to respond to the strategic and operational issues facing my organisation.	56%

Box 2 - How the GGLN has added value to my work - quotes from members

The networking with organisations that do similar work has allowed us access to information about other programmes, methodologies and possibilities of collaboration.
Rama Naidu, CEO, Democracy Development Program

The GGLN has opened up avenues of potential collaboration and has also broadened the horizons of the work that I do within local governance...
Kevin Foster, Associate, PDG

The GGLN has created a platform where we can meet with like-minded individuals and organisations, learn from each other's work and improve our effectiveness in the local government space.
Edward Molopi, Research and Advocacy Officer, Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa

Our involvement in GGLN is invaluable in placing our work in a broader policy context. It has also been instrumental in enabling the formation of a national consortium project between 2016 and 2018 in the "Accounting for Basic Services" project which has facilitated a national footprint for the project partners.
Cameron Brisbane, Executive Director, Built Environment Support Group

Being an associate member of the GGLN has significantly enriched our work in the Department of Political Studies at the University of the Western Cape. We have formed strong networks with fellow members which has led to improved analysis in our research and writing. Beyond this, these networks have contributed to the department developing new and enriched post-graduate courses, focused on local governance and community engagement.
Fiona Anciano, Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Studies, University of the Western Cape

GGLN provides a unique platform for critical engagement with others in the sector as well as an analysis of local government trends and policies. It also assists with internal reflection and strategies in dealing with common challenges which PEP and other civil society actors face.
Noah Schermbrucker, Programme Coordinator, People's Environmental Planning

The GGLN offers the Black Sash the opportunity to think strategically about the leadership and governance challenges at a national and local level that negatively impact on local service delivery. The insights gained from the work of GGLN members helped us to improve our ways of engaging effected communities and adjust our methods of engaging government. Lynette Maart, National Director, Black Sash Connectivity, spur to thought, spur to action.
Lynette Maart, National Director, Black Sash

...It's been particularly effective and impactful to work together with other GGLN organisations in the local community of practice space in Cape Town. In this way our tactics, experience and engagement can be complimented to gain more comprehensive insight and understanding of a particular issue.
Yolande Hendler, Research and Documentation, Community Organisation Resource Centre

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Ruggie (2002) argues that the chief strength of learning networks is also their main weakness: an autonomous networks of actors, each with different interests and needs that intersect only partially. This diversity is apparent in the nature and range of commentary provided by members on the value of the GGLN as part of the 2017 independent strategic review, and while this characteristic has its advantages, it presents significant challenges. These

challenges are particularly experienced through the work of the GGLN Secretariat. In early 2018, the GGLN Secretariat partook in a strategic planning exercise with its host organisation (the Isandla Institute) where challenges and associated lessons related to the implementation of the GGLN emerged. These are discussed below.

The Network's success is dependent on the commitment and the available skills and capacity of Network members as well as the Secretariat (and by default the host organisation) and governance structures. Limited internal member capacity to effectively and efficiently engage, including their ability to take ownership and run aspects of it, and limited Secretariat capacity, has in the past hindered programme implementation. Capacity constraints present a real risk to all aspects of the programme, affecting strategic and operational processes at the programmatic level, including the quality and efficacy of deliverables.

Learning and networking activities are subject to a process of continuous change as the needs and wants of members differ and change, requiring openness, patience, flexibility and adaptability from members but also from the Secretariat and GGLN governance structures – this can be difficult to attain when a Network is comprised of autonomous actors each with different interests.

Not all members are satisfied with or willing to engage with all aspects of the Network at any particular point in time. Managing all their wants, needs and expectations with what is pragmatic and realistic is challenging. Sufficient and continual member consultation is necessary to keep the momentum going.

The GGLN is complex programme to implement in terms of its offerings, and management and governance structures. The Network is resource-heavy, requiring sustained external funding, which is challenging to attain in the current CSO funding climate and given the inherent nature of the programme.

The challenges and lessons from the GGLN experience offer useful insights for others wishing to initiate similar networks.

THE FUTURE OF THE GGLN

As part of the 2017 independent strategic review, members expressed a desire to keep the GGLN going past 2018, with a rejuvenated mandate to enable networking and learning, knowledge production, collaboration and network promotion. The future of the GGLN was further discussed and confirmed at strategic discussions held in early 2018. Given the continued challenges faced by local government in South Africa and by South African CSOs working in local governance, the importance and value of an intervention like the GGLN cannot be overemphasised.

The GGLN's work from 2019 onwards will focus on continuing and deepening learning. The nature of the Network's offerings will, however, be somewhat of a departure from previous interventions and in some ways innovative in comparison to other similar networks. The Network will aim to offer dual (face-to-face and virtual) networking and learning interfaces as well as a range of learning opportunities, spanning thematic, technical, strategic and operational learning. It will also aim to be more responsive to the varying degrees of capacity across member organisational hierarchies and the need for more active learning interventions. Furthermore, there will be a push toward decentralised networking and learning, with member organisations (rather than, and/or in addition to, the Secretariat) taking the lead with implementing virtual thematic learning interventions. A critical mechanism to attain these objectives will be the establishment of thematic learning groups.

The purpose of learning, in the context of the GGLN, will be multi-fold and learning processes will be structured accordingly. Learning will therefore be focused on outputs related to learning for knowledge and skills enhancement, learning for practice, learning for policy and learning for action. The latter will enable formation and action processes, which could take the form of an advocacy intervention or a joint project. Thus, while the thematic learning groups will act primarily as learning mechanisms, it is also envisaged that these can act as platforms supporting formation and action by members of the learning group and other GGLN members around a particular issue or theme. In this way, the GGLN will, through its networking and learning activities, indirectly support member advocacy, joint projects and other actions. The work of the learning groups will also thematically inform concurrent activities of the GGLN from 2019 onwards, particularly knowledge production, communications and face-to-face networking and learning activities.

The GGLN's ambitious future programme of work will require expanding the capacity and funding of the programme, particularly the Secretariat. It will need increased commitments and involvement from members for it to come to fruition. In the current challenging CSO climate where many organisations face continued capacity and funding constraints, the future work of the GGLN presents a real but exciting challenge for its membership.

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