

Policy brief

Knowledge production for marginalised communities: evidence from the Rural Innovation Assessment Tool (RIAT)

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LED Policy Context

The 2014-2019 Framework for Local Economic Development begins from a critical reflection of how economic development fits into the local government sphere, particularly its patchy track-record since the release of the 2008 White Paper on Local Government (DCOG 2015). This Framework document also reiterates the Constitutional obligation of local government to promote social and economic development. However, partly due to apartheid spatial engineering, local government has remained a highly differentiated geo-political terrain as reflected in the structural socio-economic polarisation that characterises the municipal space. In this context, the LED Framework offers a powerful vision grounded in a territorial approach and a commitment to long-term improvements in how heterogeneous municipalities execute their LED mandates.

Situated in a larger context, the Framework draws on the National Development Plan – Vision 2030 and more than a decade of accumulated LED learning from practitioners to reinforce guiding principles for the future. Capable developmental local governments, it underscores, must promote, among other goals, equitable local transformation coupled with ‘learning and skilful local economies’ (DCOG 2015). Furthermore, it acknowledges that LED is a multi-sectoral domain involving various public and private stakeholders that must be

coordinated through an integrated approach and progressive partnerships. In this regard, it mentions the importance of forging links with universities to enhance the capacity of LED staff, among other municipal officials. Universities, as knowledge producers, are indeed well-positioned to fulfil their age-old roles of teaching, capacity building and knowledge diffusion.

But the roles of universities in modernising societies have broadened to emphasise the discovery of new knowledge as well as the use of university produced knowledge for the benefit of marginalised members of society. Resource-poor municipalities, particularly in executing their LED imperatives, can also harness the benefits of these knowledge production activities. How knowledge producers assist resource-poor municipalities to enhance their capacity as champions and brokers of innovation-driven local development thus deserves closer attention.

This policy brief uses evidence from the Rural Innovation Assessment Toolbox (RIAT) initiative to explore the extent to which South African universities partake in science and innovations designed to uplift the living standards of poor rural residents. The brief further unpacks the extent to which these disadvantaged communities not only benefit from knowledge produced within these universities, but participate in the production of the knowledge.

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Municipal-University Networks for Innovation-driven LED

Universities are increasingly encouraged to enhance research utilisation and improve mechanisms of technology transfer to the impoverished communities in South Africa (Esau, 2015; Kruss, 2014). There have been several policies and interventions in recent years by the Department of Science and Technology which seek to connect local universities and the rural marginalised municipalities. In particular, the Innovation for Local Economic Development (ILED) programme of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), among other goals, seeks to increase the participation of the economically marginalised communities in the knowledge economy and ensure that innovation does not worsen the existing societal inequalities (DST, 2015). While the current strategies and interventions have sought to address this disconnect between universities and the poor communities, the extent to which universities produce knowledge for societal benefits, whether or not the communities actually benefit from the knowledge, and the participation of the poor communities in the knowledge production process are largely unknown.

The RIAT project engages community members, municipal officials (including officials from sister departments), university experts and the LED forum in one platform where they discuss issues and innovation opportunities that can be exploited to improve local economic development through innovation. The LED office was targeted as the key link between the universities and communities because it is best placed to support integrated development and promoting local economic development as part of their efforts to enhance inclusive development and social inclusion. The aim of these platforms is to promote cooperation in idea creation, knowledge generation and learning, facilitating the generation of new knowledge and innovations that are suited for the local contexts.

The university experts come from different disciplines within the universities ranging from

agricultural science, geography, development economics and sociology and work together to contribute to innovation and rural development within communities. Knowledge diffusion takes place through regular workshops and seminars where experts, municipal officials and community members share their experience of knowledge exchange/ transfer and progress on efforts implemented to institutionalise RIAT in the different municipalities.

Sixteen municipalities are RIAT users and therefore benefit from its suite of complementary tools. In this case, universities have completed surveys of rural enterprises and thus brought together the first comprehensive database of innovating organisations in each municipality. Two-day workshops, held in a cluster of eight municipalities, gave university facilitators a good idea of the local understandings of innovation and what innovations existed at the time. Municipalities took the lead to identify and invite 25-30 representatives from a cross section of local enterprises to each workshop. Through a learning-by-doing exercise, local representatives were exposed to a systematic framework to map the local innovation landscape. This exercise was repeated in smaller working groups to envision catalytic innovations that can transition the municipality to higher levels of socio-economic development.

As embryonic 'innovation brokers', municipalities are beginning to appreciate the value-addition of the toolbox for the assessment of local innovation activities. Universities now need to help municipalities integrate reports on the status of local innovation in strategic planning documents. While the LED office may be a starting point, given its mandate, it may be necessary to go beyond this office, even to other local non-governmental structures located among the poor communities. The need exists to strengthen and capacitate the local government structures in rural areas so that they can be effective knowledge intermediaries that connect universities and the communities.

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Innovation Champions and Brokers for LED: Policy Actions

University based knowledge producers, especially those at publically funded higher education institutions, form an integral component of national, sector and local systems of innovation. In modern times they are called upon to gear their knowledge transfer, discovery and application towards the benefit of society at large, rather than industries with a limited number of direct beneficiaries. Societies focus on the social benefits of science, technology and innovation. This finds expression in the innovation for inclusive development policy agenda of the Department of Science and Technology, the custodian of South Africa's innovation system. This thrust in STI policy dovetails with developmental mandate and needs of resource-poor local municipality.

Local municipalities are increasingly responsible for 'innovation brokering' as they must harness new ideas to overcome socio-economic deprivation that afflict local residents. This offers a milieu for co-creating new ideas and practices but demands a participatory approach to the production and sharing of new ways of doing things better.

To be more effective and efficient innovation brokers, local municipalities stand to benefit from spearheading the following policy actions:

- Ensure that a university's customised training for LED officials is grounded in leading-edge innovation thinking and practices.
- Use transdisciplinary teams of knowledge producers to assist in the strengthening of the innovation-driven LED frameworks.
- Build resilient networks with knowledge producers at local universities and other research institutions who can help realise the developmental mandate of municipalities.

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