Summary of Interviewee Transcript

Ward Councillor

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Contents

1. Role

In the interview, a Councillor from Cape Town discusses their role and the structure of local government. The local council, elected by the community, holds the authority to make decisions on various matters such as transport business plans and performance management. However, due to the vast scope of responsibilities, the Council divides tasks among different portfolio committees.

The Councillor elaborates on the role of these committees in setting performance metrics, approving budgets, and ensuring accountability in government operations, such as assessing the purchase and implementation of electric buses. They express satisfaction with their position, highlighting it as a pure form of government where policy and oversight merge to shape effective governance.

2. Councillor's relation to stakeholders

The Councillor outlines the structure and functioning of the council system in Cape Town. The voter elects councillors who form the council and also contribute to the ward committee, which involves civic bodies made up of voters. The Council appoints the mayor, who then selects an Executive Committee, referred to as the Mayoral Executive Committee. Additionally, the Council appoints chairpersons for various portfolio committees.

The Mayor and the Executive committee work with government officials, managing administrative tasks, while the Portfolio committees ensure both the executive committee and the administration are held accountable. A distinct separation between political decisions and administrative functions is maintained to prevent bias, such as in road maintenance decisions, which are made based on objective assessments by appointed officials rather than elected Councillors.

The Councillor shares an example from their experience involving budget allocation for trimming trees to prevent power outages in areas with overhead cables. The Councillor illustrates how they must build a case to secure budget approval from operational officials and the executive committee, highlighting the challenges and responsibilities of influencing administrative actions without direct authority.

3. Councillor's relationship to transport industry

The Councillor discusses the complexities of transportation governance in South Africa, particularly highlighting the historical and political influences shaping it. Post-apartheid in 1994, transportation was fragmented with different modes (taxis, trains, buses) held in varying esteem and managed separately, reflecting the apartheid government's policies and political ideologies. This separation continued as different government levels controlled various transport modes: national government managed trains, provincial governments oversaw conventional buses and issued taxi licenses, though taxis operated semi-independently.

The narrative shifted around 2014 with the introduction of bus transit systems aimed at integrating taxis into City-managed operations, thereby reducing their autonomy and influence over national policies. This change was facilitated by national government grants provided on the condition that cities integrate taxis into the formal bus system. Consequently, taxi operators lost some bargaining power and became contractors under City governance, leading to a more localized management of public transportation.

The Councillor illustrates these dynamics using examples from their City, where three main operating companies manage public transit, showing a gradual but significant shift towards local governance of public transportation, aligning with broader political and constitutional goals. The aim is to fully localize transportation management, which they anticipate could take 20 to 30 years, as it aligns with City responsibilities like zoning for homes and businesses and the construction of infrastructure. The Councillor believes this localisation is both necessary and inevitable for efficient urban planning

4. Cape Town's approach to urban planning

The Councillor, discussing urban planning and praises Cape Town's innovative approaches to accessibility and planning for uncertainty. They highlight a particular example where a PhD student developed a cutting-edge concept that was fully incorporated into the City's policy, demonstrating the City's progressive stance in integrating academic research into practical governance.

Despite these advances in planning and policy formulation, the Councillor identifies a significant gap between these plans and their operational execution. There's a disconnect between what is ideally planned and the reality of implementation, influenced by unpredictable factors like funding and infrastructure breakdowns.

Further complicating the City's ability to execute plans is the uncertainty of national grant funding, which has already been reduced, affecting projects like the MyCiti bus service. The City also faces challenges due to political instability, affecting their ability to predict and prepare for future developments in transport infrastructure. The Councillor expresses concern that even if responsibilities such as railway management were transferred to the City, they currently lack the resources and expertise to effectively manage them. This dialogue reflects the broader difficulties faced in aligning visionary urban planning with practical, on-the-ground execution and adapting to financial and political uncertainties.

The Councillor highlights the complex dynamics of managing transport and government finances in Cape Town, addressing the intertwining of governmental and transport politics, which are influenced by frequent and significant incidents like targeted violence within the taxi industry. This ongoing violence exacerbates the already challenging environment for governance and policy implementation.

Moreover, they discuss the financial constraints facing the City, particularly the inability to increase rates or extract more money from residents, who need to sustain their businesses. The challenge of funding public transport is emphasized, noting it as a consistently subsidized venture in a context of spatial inequality and economic strain. Public transport, as a fundamental service, requires continual investment, which becomes a long-term financial burden.

The Councillor also contemplates the fiscal prudence of large-scale investments in public infrastructure, using the example of a proposed 8 billion Rand investment in the MyCiti bus network, and weighs it against other potential investments like building cycle lanes and sidewalks. They express a nuanced view that while planning may be robust and forward-thinking, the real challenge lies in the practical constraints and decisions about where and how to allocate limited resources. This results in a difficult balancing act between ambitious projects that could transform the cityscape and more modest, yet sustainable initiatives.

5. Minibus Taxis

The Councillor discusses the challenges and strategic changes in handling taxi operations within Cape Town. Initially, the City followed a national directive to transform taxi associations into companies by buying out their licenses, which proved financially unsustainable due to the increasing costs imposed by the taxi associations using their leverage in negotiations.

The City has since shifted its approach to a more sustainable model. Instead of buying out taxi licenses, they now support the taxi operators in starting their own companies. These companies can keep their existing licenses and are granted tenders to operate for a set period, allowing them to potentially earn more than before through their existing licenses and the new contract.

Furthermore, the City aims to integrate taxis into the broader transport ecosystem more seamlessly with integrated schedules. This includes implementing systems like tap-in, tap-out payments similar to those used in buses, which would allow for better tracking and compensation based on actual usage. This approach encourages the taxi industry to improve standards such as safety and cleanliness independently, offering subsidies as incentives for better service rather than direct financial buyouts.

The overall goal is to foster a competitive and self-regulating taxi industry that aligns better with the City's public transport strategies, avoiding the pitfalls of previous plans that were not financially or politically viable.

6. Urban governance in South Africa

The Councillor in this response discusses the shortcomings of political oversight and management within the public sector, particularly focusing on public transportation in South Africa. They express concern that politicians often view their roles as opportunities for easy money rather than public service, which leads to minimal

engagement and effort. The system is criticized for incentivizing minimal involvement, such as merely attending meetings without genuine engagement in meaningful work.

The Councillor notes the haphazard approach to addressing issues as they arise, often prompted only by vocal demands from the public. This reactive rather than proactive strategy results in inconsistent oversight and underperformance in maintaining and improving services like transportation.

Despite existing metrics for evaluating performance, the Councillor points out that these metrics are not comprehensive and often miss the bigger picture of the service quality and system needs. The response underscores a need for a more professional, holistic approach to political oversight to improve the effectiveness of public service delivery, ensure better accountability, and foster a more informed public. The Councillor envisions a system where information about public services is readily accessible and transparent, allowing the public to understand and evaluate how their needs are being met and how public funds are being utilised.