Conclusion

The dramatic political changes in South Africa in the 1990's created possibilities for a metamorphosis of its existing local government system. This work reinforces the fact that local government system is highly reflective of the specific political circumstances it develops in. The local government process in South Africa was unique since it was negotiated as part of the larger political reforms undertaken in that country under President DeKlerk and consequently as a part of the national reconciliation under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela. The establishment of new local structures has resulted from a phased and steady negotiating process. Political maneuverings and 'concessions' have led to the establishment of a system that has been mutually agreeable to all parties. Instead of being a reactionary process, local government reform is reflective of the spirit of dialogue and reconciliation that has marked the larger political changes in South Africa.

The uniqueness of the South African local reform has also been its success to involve a range of role players, political parties, civic and interest groups, traditional leaders, local government bodies at both the local and national level. The development of local government in post-apartheid South Africa has the distinction of being a highly consultative, interactive, and transparent process. The involvement of local government stakeholders was sought at every step of negotiating a transition, establishing a concrete policy on local government, finalizing the boundaries of the municipalities and their internal structures. Although this participatory nature of local reform has been questioned in South Africa due to it being dominated by political party interests, it nevertheless opened a range of issues to open debate on local government transformation.

The development of new local structures was therefore highly reflective of the specific political exigencies and economic needs facing South Africa in the post-apartheid era. These debates revolved specifically around establishing the objectives of local government. These objectives in turn determined the nature and function of the local government structures. The three basic ‘objects’ of local
government that determined local structures in post apartheid South Africa were—Deracialization, Development, and Democracy (The 3 ‘Ds’).

The foremost objective that took the political negotiations right to the local level was reflected in the general political will to deracialize the apartheid city and deracialize its political and spatial set-up. As reflected in our area study of the Durban Metropolitan Region, local reforms have successfully transformed the old apartheid structures and boundaries. The local reform effort from the legislation of the Interim Measures Act by the National Party government, to the Local Government Transition Act and right to the final constitution was directed towards the objective of deracializing local government. Within a span of less than ten years, the reform process desegregated old apartheid structures. The case of Durban reflects a complete political transformation from the previously existing 66 different racial authorities into a single metropolitan council.

However, there are many obstacles towards achieving deracialization. Many of the ward boundaries in the newly established municipalities still conform to the racially demarcated areas. The elaborate demarcation process may have deracialized the boundaries but racial divisions will continue to be played out within party politics and within the functioning of the new local government system. The socio-economic factors would continue to come in the way of establishing a non-racial polity. Since the end of apartheid there has been some deracialization of settlements in Durban. But this has been limited to the more prosperous areas of the city. The spatial setup of the city seems to be entrenched more on economic lines and there have been references of race-based apartheid being replaced by economic apartheid. Only a very gradual economic transformation would be able to check this segregation.

The second important objective that local government was designed to achieve in the South African reforms was establishing ‘democracy at the grassroots’- a form of governing unanimously agreed and endorsed by both ‘those who were denied it’ and those who ‘selectively applied it’. For the former it meant the establishment of a system that would finally replace the highly authoritarian, de-legitimized, and centralized system of government that the prolonged anti-
apartheid movement in the townships had emerged to destroy. For the latter, democracy at the local level implied a safeguard against any authoritarian corrective action - a system that would allow a stronger representation of their needs and a greater sensitivity to their fears. In fact, it is the strong lobby for an 'autonomous' local government that gave the process of decentralizing local systems its initial momentum.

The local reform was thus directed towards preventing the 'rule of the majority'. The local electoral processes ensured a fair share of the minority representation and establishment of party politics at the local level. A democratic and accountable local council was instituted not just by instituting political and electoral reforms but also through instituting participatory mechanisms as described in the previous last chapter.

Another objective of local government that became the center of a highly politicized debate in South Africa was that of 'Development'. In the context of South Africa, the objective of development is further made complex due to a need to undertake 'redistribution'. However, despite the rhetoric to 'redistribute development', local government was not reformed to address this objective for a major part of the local reform process in South Africa. Local government was not expected to overcome the challenge of redistribution or alleviation of poverty.

International experience in local government too endorses the belief that poverty and social inequality are wider problems and there is little direct evidence of these problems being tackled at the local government level. Yet, redistribution has been one of the strongest issues that proved to be the prime factor in influencing the course of local government reform in South Africa.

For the initial part of the transition process, local government reforms under the ANC government were designed as the "arms and legs" or performed the role of "implementing agencies" of the policies formulated at the national level. This was primarily because no other government could have been more under pressure to deliver than in the case of the ANC government in post apartheid South Africa. In a country that witnessed centuries of gross inequalities perpetrated by a deliberate and aggressive state policy, the election of a majority government increased the
expectation of the people for a forceful corrective action. Undertaking redistribution through administratively and fiscally strengthening local government, creating a culture of participation, strengthening the systems for undertaking ‘grassroots’ development, establishing effective public feed-back mechanisms, etc. was a much longer route to development. Moreover, it also involved the risk of letting the ‘minority’ seize the opportunity to dominate the local agenda and impede the delivery process.

It was only in the latter part of the local transformation process that a definite attempt was made to shift the responsibility of redistribution to local government structures. This is reflected in the marked structural changes in the increased status and design of the local government structures. Definitive steps have been undertaken to strengthen the influence of local government structures corresponding with the new developmental/redistributive role. Increased autonomy of local governments was therefore accompanied by greater centralization of municipal councils (specifically the metropolitan municipal councils) and extension of local government boundaries to incorporate the under resourced peripheries. These measures may be politically motivated decisions but may prove to be a more effective arrangement to ensure equal distribution of resources among highly differential economic areas. Similarly, the ANC may continue to reap the advantages of ensuring minimum interference in municipal governance from the provincial governments ruled by other political parties. However, in the longer run even with the change in the political equations at the national level, local structures are likely to continue to be largely independent in their functioning and secured from provincial interference.

The White paper on local government and the legislations that followed it, also clearly reflects this change in the role of local government. Such a policy framework not only increased the local government portfolio, it sought to establish a ‘developmental local government’. Legislations pertaining to local government such as the Municipal Systems Act set out ‘core principles, mechanisms and processes that gave a definite meaning to developmental local government and empower municipalities to move progressively towards, the social and economic upliftment of communities and the provision of basic
services to all especially the poor and the disadvantaged.' These measures have been laid based on an ambitious role of local government to "maximize social development and economic growth". The impact of a democratic local government on 'redistribution' in practical terms may be limited to redistributing basic service delivery and infrastructure.

Redistribution, even in this context, requires strong political decisions to be taken. It is a difficult concept to be sold especially to the affluent minority. When it comes to governing post apartheid cities, it is not only the Whites who are insecure about the 'grass to be trimmed regularly'. The urban middle class African and Indians too seemed to have become used to living in the first worldly settings. Thus despite there being a mood for 'reconciliation' and a general agreement to focus developmental effort for the improvement in the historically disadvantaged areas, it might be a jolt for those who are comfortable in the urban core areas and who are also the major tax-payers. Further, with the financial unification of the cities, there may be a little scope left for resistance to 'single tax base'. However, with greater emphasis on self-sufficiency of local institutions and minimum dependence on intergovernmental transfers, there is likely to be a great deal of dissatisfaction among the communities in the affluent areas.

Innovative mechanisms instituted at local government level under the Integrated Development Program such as the 'people's budget', 'needs-assessment', and the practice of distinguishing between 'maintenance wards' and the 'previously disadvantaged wards, attempted to allocate the developmental resources and effort to where it was most needed. It would create arenas where diverse communities would be able to make concessions for each other. Further, this strategy has been based on the understanding that, even though a participatory and democratic local government cannot directly address 'redistribution' it would at least prevent communities from feeling marginalized, and build confidence among the people to manage their affairs. This strategy would not help to level gross economic and social inequalities or eradicate poverty. But it may help in bridging the stark differences between the affluent parts of the city and its underdeveloped peripheries.
The transformation of local government in this context has been more than just structural change. Accordingly, there has been an obvious shift from local 'government' to 'governance'. This has resulted in a consistent approach on the part of local governments to involve the communities in governance, establishing relationships and partnerships with community organizations, and a focus to a more service oriented approach. The Durban experience reflects that the municipal council is not only orienting itself to undertake service delivery and development, but also creating an enabling environment for the NGO's, community organization and in some cases even the private sector to share the task. This has not proved to be the most effective tool to undertake development at least yet in the international experience on democratic and decentralized local government but it may prove to be a sustainable one. Local Government institutions in South Africa are set to create conditions for local solutions to development and ensure political empowerment to steer this development.