

The Mass Movement and Public Policy: Discourses of Participatory

Democracy in Post-1994 South Africa*

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ABSTRACT

Despite policy commitments and legislated mechanisms, the system of participatory democracy in post-1994 South Africa is largely considered to have failed. In order to understand how underlying ideas can help to explain weaknesses in practice, this article examines how participatory democracy is understood by the ruling African National Congress (ANC). It shows that the multiple intellectual traditions shaping the participatory model have led to a set of policy initiatives that are not without internal tension. In part, the technocratic creep associated with improving public sector performance has stymied participatory efforts by placing efficiency and delivery over democracy and empowerment. Alongside this, however, the ANC's own conception of 'democracy' remains interwoven with its mass movement history – linking the role of popular participation to the extension of its own hegemony. The intent of policy to deepen democracy through structures of participatory *governance* is thus undermined by a teleological framing of participation as an *intra*-movement activity.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) government has reiterated the value of citizen participation alongside representative democracy. Local government, in particular, has been the focus of this initiative, with a system of participatory democracy being provided for through both constitutional provision and municipal legislation. Yet despite the intent to engage citizens in decision-making processes about issues that affect their lives, participatory democracy in South Africa is largely considered to have failed and has not fulfilled the objectives set out for itself in legislation. In conjunction, South Africans have increasingly resorted to ‘invented spaces’, such as demonstrations and protest, to make their voices heard.¹ The proliferation of extra-institutional protest - exhibited most recently in the #feesmustfall campaign of 2015-16² - has been seen as symptomatic not only of a popular desire to influence policy but of the failure of formal, institutional channels for citizen participation in governance processes (Benit-Gbaffou 2007, 2008).

This article examines the ANC’s conception of ‘participatory democracy’ in order to understand how weaknesses in *practice* might be explained by the *ideas* that inform it. Although valuable scholarly attention has been given to both procedural and substantive weaknesses in participatory mechanisms, there has been limited examination of their *conceptual underpinnings* as an explanatory factor. There has also been no analysis which takes into account the interconnection between the ANC’s very understanding of ‘democracy’ and its own mass movement history. An important, yet under-theorised, strand in participatory discourse is linked to very identity of the ruling party.

Drawing on policy, legislation and guidance, as well as discussion documents, publications and statements of the ANC, this article examines the conceptual roots of participatory democracy

in post-1994 South Africa. It begins by providing an outline of existing legislation and implementation. It then goes on to explore the theories and influences underpinning public policy and the participatory discourse of the ANC itself, linking them where relevant to examples of weakness in practice. In examining the underlying ideas, some conceptual parallels and tensions are drawn. The article identifies that a multiplicity of ideas has shaped participatory democratic policy and that conceptual tension between these currents has played an inhibiting role in its success. However, it also argues that the conceptual construction and realisation of participatory democracy remain entangled in the ANC's organisational history. As such, its effectiveness in practice is also constrained by a participatory discourse rooted in the historic hegemony of the mass movement and its identity as a popular vanguard.

POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

One of the earliest expressions of the ANC's participatory ethos as a governing party can be found in the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (ANC 1994a). Drawing on ideas of 'people-driven' development, in which citizens are not merely recipients but key actors and agents, the RDP emphasised that 'Development is not about the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about active involvement and growing empowerment' (*ibid.*: 5). It also embraced a reading of democracy which encompassed not only periodic elections, but 'a wide range of institutions of participatory democracy in partnership with civil society' (*ibid.*: 120-1).

Local government, in particular, was viewed as the key arena for its realisation (*ibid.*: 129). Having been produced as an ANC policy framework, the RDP eventually came to inform the 1998 White Paper on Local Government (Everatt *et al.* 2010: 224), the central concept of which was 'developmental local government', emphasizing 'the involvement of citizens and community groups in the design and delivery of municipal programmes' (RSA 1998a). The

Municipal Structures Act (RSA 1998b) and Municipal Systems Act (RSA 2000) introduced the mechanisms for participation. The former called for the establishment of ‘ward committees’ as elected forums for communities to ‘raise issues of concern’ with their ward councillor and ‘to have a say in [municipal] decisions, planning and projects’ (DPLG, GTZ & ASALGP 2005: 5). The Municipal Systems Act then introduced a requirement on municipalities to produce an Integrated Development Plan (IDP), providing the opportunity for citizens to shape municipal planning and budgeting through a prioritization of needs in their area. Other sector-specific structures have also been established. The Community Policing Forum (CPF), while not a structure of municipal government, functions at the community level, aiming to improve accountable policing and involve citizens in reducing and preventing crime (RSA 1995).

Although the ward committee system is explicitly seen as providing a participatory democratic function (RSA 1998b; DPLG 2005: 7), existing research has revealed substantial failings in practice, including the inadequate powers delegated to ward committees, insufficient community education, limited representivity, political party dominance and interference, lack of accountability to communities, and unresponsive ward councillors and municipalities (Benit-Gbaffou 2008; Buccus *et al* 2008; Piper & Deacon 2009; Malabela & Ally 2011, Kabane undated).³ Although participation in the IDP process varies across municipalities, survey data has shown low community awareness of the IDP’s existence but a direct correlation between awareness and participation (Everatt *et al* 2010: 234-5).⁴ Examination of the quality of this participation, however, has led the IDP to be regarded as lip service to any real community influence: the ‘canvassing’ of public views carries no guarantee of them being addressed (*ibid.*: 238).

While greater resources, improved training, civic education and enhanced institutional capacity are all issues to be addressed, the conceptual underpinnings of the government’s project – and,

by implication, the ideas that shape practice - may also go some way to explaining the limits to its success.

CURRENTS OF PARTICIPATION IN POLICY DISCOURSE

Participatory traditions and radical democracy

The post-1994 commitment to participatory democracy emerges in part from the traditions of community organisation which flourished in South Africa during the ANC's years in exile. The decade of the 1980s, in particular, gave birth to the phenomenon of 'people's power'. Advanced by the civic movement and the ANC-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF), the term 'people's power' was used to characterize the 1980s era of mass activity and anti-state action that took place under the banner of the ANC. More specifically, it was used to refer to the formation of popular structures (or 'organs of people's power' in ANC-UDF lexicon) which provided functions ranging from welfare services and advice, to *de facto* community self-government. For many UDF and civic activists of the time, people's power presupposed a participatory democratic future.

After 1994, these historic expectations of community participation penetrated local government discussion. Many of those who participated in developing and implementing new local government policy had roots in the UDF, civic, trade union and student movements. Several post-1994 ANC government ministers with a background in the trade unions and civics referred to contemporary structures of participation such as ward committees and CPFs as being akin or having links to the tradition of organs of people's power (Mashatile 2013 int.; Carrim 2013 int.; and Tsenoli 2013 int.).⁵

Ideas about participation also echoed an historic belief in the ANC camp in the inadequacy of representative democracy alone. Andrew Boraine, a UDF member involved in the development

of policy on local government from 1990 remarked that ideas about civic participation were influenced by the whole notion of needing 'to go beyond the formal five-year cycle of elections' (2013 int.). The ANC's RDP also asserted its own foundations in the principle of participatory democracy: '- that people who are affected by decisions must take part in making those decisions' (ANC 1994b).

Part of the people's power discourse was the notion of its empowering potential. Emerging predominantly from civic and community activists and Left student movements, this narrative drew on the idea of people taking control of their own lives (Cherry 2000: 26; Boraine 1987: 8) and on the transformative and developmental role of democracy. Here, the organs of people's power established by those at home constituted grassroots structures of decision-making. Their mode of organisation also reflected traits of the independent trade unions (of which some civic leaders were also members). Several individuals involved in producing the ANC's RDP had backgrounds in the civic and trade union movements and the imprint of their democratic traditions can be seen in document itself (Stewart 1997: 5).

This radical tradition has remained partly visible in contemporary policy in which participatory governance continues to be understood as a necessary supplement to representative democracy. The South African Local Government Association's 2006 handbook for municipal councillors, asserts:

Democracy in South Africa is about more than just voting. It is about people having the right to be informed about what their government is doing, and having the right to participate in decision-making, especially when the decisions directly affect them. This helps create empowered citizens who have the initiative to continue to contribute to the development of their communities (SALGA & GTZ 2006: 45).

The 2005 Draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation also highlights the issue of empowerment by describing the deepening of democracy (DPLG 2005: 1) as involving a

move toward ‘a partnership approach’ in which ‘citizens represented by ward committees ... [have] recognised powers, with delegated responsibilities’ (*ibid.*: 6).

Participatory development

Also inspiring thinking about local government was the idea of ‘participatory development’ (McGee 2002). From the 1980s onwards, a wave of thinking emerged in development discourse that located popular participation not only within discrete ‘projects’ but in the development process as a whole (*ibid.*: 94-5). Such ideas were associated with Brazilian scholar, Paulo Freire (*ibid.*: 94). His writings about the pedagogy of democracy and development, and the idea of people as active agents (Infed undated) were influential on community activists in South Africa (Tsenoli 2013 int.; Coleman 2013 int.; and Cherry 2012 int.). This ethos also fitted nicely with the intellectual heritage and practical experience of the UDF and civics. The Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) - a term that came into being in 1988 to refer to the loose collection of groups aligned to the ANC, including the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the UDF - argued that: ‘- communities should have direct control over the process of development’ (MDM 1990).

With the commencement of local government negotiations after 1990, ideas about bottom-up development transferred. The progressive non-governmental sector in South Africa, involved in issues surrounding urban citizenship and planning, were also strongly influenced by ideas of community participation in development. Several of these organisations were involved in early policy formulation in the 1990s, and played a key role in providing technical advice and support in local government negotiations. Ideas emphasized in recent municipal guidance, including human agency, meaningful participation and community ownership of development planning (SALGA & GTZ 2006: 64, 70), echo the principles of grassroots organising prevalent in people’s power.

Governance

The shaping of the new democratic state also introduced international experience to policy discussion on local government. Gaining popularity in development discourse internationally in the 1990s was the notion of ‘governance’. A response to the failure of state-heavy, top-down approaches to development, and widely encouraged by international financial institutions and donors, governance has been defined as ‘the entire set of relationships between the state, the market and society’ (Minogue 2002: 117). It is concerned not only with the state but with the relationship *between* state and citizen, incorporating the idea of citizens as important players in the realisation of effective policies: ‘good governance’ itself requires ‘good citizenship’ (Cloete 1999: 12).

The general features of governance discourse such as political accountability, legitimacy and human rights (Minogue 2002: 118-121) complemented simultaneous shifts in the ANC itself toward an embrace of liberal democratic principles and its values are assumed in policy documents on public participation in local governance (DPLG 2007; DPLG & LGSETA undated). This describes democratic governance as requiring ‘democratic participation through the voice of all civil society actors in policy and governance processes’ and emphasises the requirements of ‘open decision-making’ and ‘accountability’ (DPLG & LGSETA undated).⁶ International governance standards have also informed strategies used in the application of the IDP – a process through which residents can participate in the preparation, adoption, implementation and review of their municipality’s development vision (RSA 1998a; RSA 2000). Based on the ‘core values’ of the International Association for Public Participation (Theron and Ceasar 2008: 112-13), this includes the principle that ‘the public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives’ (*ibid.*: 117).

It has been argued, however, that the ‘say’ given to beneficiaries in such governance processes correlates more to ‘informing’ or ‘consulting’ than to ‘collaboration’ or ‘empowerment’ (*ibid.*). Research on the IDP by Buccus (c.2005) suggests that, despite positive perceptions amongst policy makers about the value of participation, the planning process still only involved community input *after* major policy decisions had been taken. In this case it serves more to legitimate existing government plans (Everatt *et al* 2010: 237-8) than to incorporate community input. The ward committee, not dissimilarly, provides a mode of communication between council and community rather than any real mechanism for influence: councils are under no obligation to act on their recommendations.

Performance management

The usurping of participatory democracy’s empowering features is also attributable to shifts in South Africa’s macro-economic approach. In 1996, the RDP was effectively replaced as a socio-economic policy framework by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). Focused on a market-oriented, growth-led model of development, GEAR has been interpreted by the Left as not only removing macro-economic policy from the sphere of democratic contestation, but as marking a break with participatory traditions. The closure of the central government RDP office correspondingly relocated the vision of development planning to the local terrain of governance (Harrison 2001: 186).

Although this side-lining of the RDP arguably enabled a veneer of participation to remain while severely limiting popular control over the national agenda, *local* government policy *has* continued to draw on the need for communities to drive development. The participatory endeavours of municipalities, however, have also been accompanied by a technocratic and managerial approach to public sector organisation. Driven by principles of improved efficiency and tight fiscal control, this trend has constricted popular influence on municipal development

planning. The discourse of ‘new public management’, associated with the approach of good governance, is concerned not only with state-society relations but with improving the ‘performance’ of the public sector (*ibid.*: 178-9). Through cost-recovery, outsourcing and a rolling-back of the state, local government has been encouraged to operate in a more business-like fashion in which citizens become customers not partners.

As such, although shifts toward participatory development have been spurred partly by the failure of top-down approaches (McGee 2002: 95), the costs of bottom-up development to efficiency and delivery are also inevitably weighed up (Pieterse 2002: 12; see also Heller 2001: 146). Decentralisation trends in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, have also not necessarily meant that control of policy design is relinquished by the centre (Harrison 2006: 190).

South Africa’s IDP embodies just this conundrum, trying to ensure fiscal responsibility, efficiency and effectivity as well as providing space for citizens to influence development priorities.⁷ The failure of the IDP accordingly results from what Heller describes as its ‘prescriptive and state-led’ character (2001: 146) in which the development efforts of local government are hamstrung by a lack of local budgetary autonomy (*ibid.*: 147) and what Everatt (*et al*) describe as the state’s ‘death-grip on decision-making and budget allocation’ (2010: 225). Mechanisms for citizens to influence planning in South Africa are thus circumscribed even at the most local level, closing off from popular democratic debate any real control over policy and expenditure. In this regard, Smith interestingly points to conceptual weaknesses in the original Local Government White Paper, contending that it ‘under-theorised’ the notion of participatory governance, giving little elaboration to aspects such as empowerment and participation (2007: 8). As such, citizen participation has been ‘confined to a narrowly prescribed set of structures and processes, to the exclusion of a more open and inclusionary practice’ (*ibid.*: 3).

PARTICIPATION IN MASS MOVEMENT DISCOURSE

It was stated in the introduction to this paper that the ANC's conception of democracy is interwoven with its mass movement history. The theory and practice of the participatory democratic project must therefore take into account the ruling party's own influence, not only in the formal channels of policy development but in its role as a mass movement.

Hegemony and the movement tradition

Into the post-1994 period the ANC has continued to reiterate its role as not only a political party but also a mass movement. Its 1997 document on the 'Character of the ANC', linked this movement identity to three historic factors: its desire to be 'a movement of mass participation'; its tradition as a 'broad church' and 'hegemonic' organisation; and the 'style' in which it has functioned, '[attempting] to be a force for cohesion in the centre of a broad range of allied organisations, mass democratic and community based structures' (ANC 1997a). It is this movement tradition that the ANC sees as having informed the institutions of democratic governance that facilitate citizen participation:

This movement tradition, which can be referred to as the masses in movement, is continued in our present commitment to a people-driven RDP. It is found in our attempts to develop, in the new conditions of our country, many *new forms of popular activism and governance* (ranging from community policing forums, to participatory local government budgeting, to work-place forums) [emphasis added] (*ibid.*).

The longstanding belief in the ANC that democracy cannot be limited to features of procedural and electoral democracy alone, emerges from this tradition in which the people are not passive bystanders but active participants – the 'masses in movement'. Wary that the people do not become mere 'spectators' of governance (ANC 2012: 3, 44), the ANC in the present has retained a keen movement discourse promoting the principle of popular participation. Its ability

to claim such a 'movement tradition' owes itself to the existence of a mass support base, comprised historically of organisations politically aligned with the liberation movement but unable under the conditions of the time to legally constitute membership. The very status of mass movement was contingent upon the ANC's hegemony over what essentially constituted a broader 'camp' or, in the terminology of the 1980s, the 'Mass Democratic Movement' (MDM). These structures and organisations, in turn, recognised the ANC's status as the 'vanguard' of the struggle – a term to which I return later.

It is evident from the preceding discussion that those sections of the ANC camp from which the participatory tradition derived were located primarily (though not exclusively) in the domestic movement – in the UDF, the civic organisations and the independent trade unions. The traditions and impetus of 1980s mobilisation were certainly part and parcel of the ANC camp. The ANC underground integrated into popular structures and domestic activists and organisations soaked up the liberation movement's narrative. Many individuals within the MDM considered themselves as much a part of the 'ANC' as those in exile (Mufamadi 2012 int.; Moosa 2013 int.). It was amongst the contingent at home, however, that 'people's power' was born.

After 1990 as the ANC began to reconstitute itself from an exiled struggle movement to a dominant governing movement, its relationship with popular structures became far less clear. The MDM represented both a part of the new 'civil society' *and* of the ANC historically. The ANC's Commission on Organisation Building in 1991 acknowledged the strain on its relations with the civic movement in particular. While emphasizing that its own unbanning did not make the civics 'redundant', it continued to characterise their role as one of allegiance. Despite emphasising that civics should help to unite people 'across the political spectrum', it also stated that '[We] need to provide discussion around the role of ANC members in civic structures in order to see that the civics are part of the broader democratic movement - otherwise they can

and will be used by other forces against the interests of the people' (ANC 1991: 5). What the ANC appears to have sought was an independent civil society that remained committed to the 'interests of the people'.

Some in the ANC went further, arguing that civics could effectively be collapsed into the ANC and their interests represented by the overarching movement (Nzimande & Sikhosana 1992: 26; Mayekiso 1993: 27). Indeed, the creation of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) as an essentially co-opted structure of the ANC has left it with little autonomous influence. The presence of a strong Marxist-Leninist influence, originating with many ANC cadres' dual membership of the South African Communist Party (SACP), was also exemplified amongst those who viewed the idea of 'civil society' as an institution of bourgeois rule (Nzimande and Sikhosana 1992: 27). Even Mandela chastised civil society structures in 1997 for assuming the role of a "“watchdog” over our movement' (Mandela 1997).

Renewal of the vanguard

Since 1990, the implications of this altered terrain alongside the ANC's continued claim to mass movement status, can be seen in its co-option of key sections of the MDM. In more recent years, it has manifested in the gradual unravelling of the ANC camp itself with the breakaway of individuals, groups and organisations historically loyal to the movement. The splinter formation of the Congress of the People (COPE), the fracturing of COSATU, and the challenge posed by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) provide but a few examples.⁸ Yet it also manifests in the playing out of participatory democracy. Expectations and demands for popular control now come increasingly from without: from the arena of civil society and opposition rather than the ranks of the movement itself. With this shift, the discourse of participatory democracy has separated out into more distinct currents. On the one hand, it is framed as a function of civil society – demonstrated in the rise of social movements and the organised

lobbying of government. On the other, it is located in invited spaces: in the institutionalised and legislated mechanisms provided by the state. Accompanying this, however, is a discourse of the ANC itself which associates participatory democracy with a reclamation of its own hegemony. In other words, a linking of popular participation with its history as a *vanguard of the people*.

It is not insignificant that as a movement of mass struggle, the ANC has historically understood its role as being that of a ‘vanguard’ (Nzo 1991) – an organisation able to provide the required leadership and sustain mass political consciousness toward identified revolutionary ends. As a *governing* mass movement, the ANC has sought to retain this identity, making reference to itself directly as ‘a vanguard movement’ (ANC 2012: 12); ‘the vanguard of the NDR’ (meaning the National Democratic Revolution) (ANC 1997b); and ‘a vanguard movement for transformation’ (ANC 2012: 7). The notion of NDR in the ANC camp historically is that it would constitute the achievement of national liberation with the feature of a mixed economy - considered by both the ANC and its SACP ally as a necessary prelude to a transition to socialism. In the post-1994 era the NDR carries little conceptual relevance and has rather been retained by the ANC as a veneer of revolutionary language in a predominantly neo-liberal era. Yet no matter how irrelevant it may be to policy content in reality, both the NDR and *vanguardism* continue to be utilised by the movement to renew its historic claims.⁹ The relevance of this for participatory democracy lies in the relationship with the people it implies.

In its reflection on the movement-mass relationship, the ANC has resurrected in recent years a language of ‘people’s power’. A discussion document on ‘organisational renewal’, presented at the ANC’s most recent national policy conference in 2012, included a section on ‘participatory democracy’ which it described as ‘organising and mobilising our people for active participation in local transformation and development initiatives, including the creation of *organs of people’s power*’ [emphasis added] (ANC 2012: 55). As noted earlier, people’s

power in the 1980s was associated by many of its protagonists with empowerment and self-organisation and was credited with providing inspiration for the building of a participatory democratic culture. Indeed, its contemporary usage in ANC lexicon is perhaps a not unconscious reminder of the ANC's leadership role in the gains of popular struggle. Yet alongside the empowering current of people's power, its structures were marred by democratic deficit. They were, in general, aligned to the ANC, and accounts of the period have highlighted their sometimes coercive nature and political intolerance of other organisations (Mufson 1990: 129-30).

It is not clear in the present what the ANC envisages for a resurrected 'people's power', particularly as a form of participatory democracy. However, it has made similar proposals elsewhere for the resurrection of such structures. A resolution of the ANC's 2007 policy conference included a call by President Jacob Zuma to re-establish 'street committees' as a way for communities to support local police in the fight against crime (ANC 2013: 36; Mthetwa 2008). As organs of people's power in the 1980s, 'street committees' were formed at the most local level and brought material and psychological benefits to communities, including a reduction in crime. Their resurrection in the present-day understandably draws on some of these successes.¹⁰

ANC government minister and general secretary of the SACP, Blade Nzimande in an article in 2008, suggested that the re-established street committees should not be party political, but should 'seek to organise our people irrespective of political affiliations' (2008). Yet he also made clear their link to the ANC's identity, commenting that 'By taking a lead in re-building such structures, the ANC will be affirming its "dual", but necessary, roles as both a ruling party and a mass mobilizer of the people' (*ibid.*). It is not incidental that Nzimande was among those in the early 1990s who saw the civics' role as effectively nullified by the ANC's return (Nzimande & Sikhosana 1992: 26). In the same 2008 article he goes on to assert that 'there is

no inherent contradiction between governing and mobilising the people at the same time’, and I would agree that there is not. Yet this duality becomes problematic when mechanisms of governance stand in tension with structures of the movement; when street committees constitute ‘the revolutionary nucleus’ of CPFs (Nzimande 2008). While they may not be conceptualised as structures of the ANC, they are still envisaged as ‘a new platform to intensify the struggle for the renewal of the revolutionary values of our movement’ (*ibid.*).

Of particular note is the ANC’s lasting reference to the ‘MDM’ – now used as an ambiguous, catch-all phrase in ANC parlance for ‘progressive’ civil society (ANC 2013). In an interview with the author of this article in 2013, Yunus Carrim (then Deputy Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs - CoGTA) highlighted the importance to local government of a strong civil society, remarking: ‘even if you actually have popular power at local government level via the state structures, you also have to have a strong civil society movement as well ... If you have a strong civil society it empowers the municipality and if you have a strong municipality, it should I believe empower civil society too’ (2013 telephone int.). However, he went on to define civil society as those who fall within the MDM:

Of course, *the term civil society is being increasingly contested in our movement* ... because of the nature of some of the organisations, individuals and other actors that occupy this space in recent years, and the crude juxtaposition of some of them that civil society is all good and the state is all bad ... [I]ncreasingly some of us speak of *progressive civil society* as important. *Or we might, in a more limited way, speak of the mass democratic movement when we speak of progressive actors that engage in civil society* [emphasis added] (*ibid.*).

Accordingly, local government can only be strengthened by those within civil society who are identified by *the ANC* as ‘progressive’. While reiterating the active role of the people in the process of development, the ANC also stated that “communities can shape the kind of development they want *if led by an agent for change*’ [emphasis added] (2012: 44). As the

ANC understands itself to be that ‘agent for change’ (*ibid.*: 7, 23, 29), then ‘the participation of communities in shaping development’ would seem to be ‘bound by their allegiance to the movement’ (Brooks Yung 2014: 147). The subsequent remark that ‘[communities] can also be misled by other forces contesting the space to turn against the ANC’ (2012: 44) infers the illegitimacy of those views channelled through other organisations and structures.

While perceiving itself as having allowed the structures of the broader movement to maintain ‘ideological and organisational independence’, the ANC still asserts that it has sought to ‘fuse or combine their energies, constituencies and diverse capacities into a common national democratic purpose’ (1997a). The movement’s discourse of participation, in contrast to published policy, does not promote the cultivation of an empowered and informed citizenry but rather the renewal of the role of vanguard and maintenance of an active but loyal people.

CONCEPTUAL TENSIONS AND PARALLELS

Examination of the theoretical currents shaping participatory democracy has sought to bring to the fore the critical role of ideas, showing that the conceptual composition of participation as it has emerged in South Africa, has generated conceptual weaknesses that have yielded failure in practice.

Restricted participation through policy and movement

Although these various influences have led to conceptual tensions, failure can in part be explained by some mutually reinforcing imperatives. Despite starkly different ideological origins, both the discourse of public management and of the mass movement have contributed to a narrowing of the field of popular influence. One of the most contentious points in policy evolution is the ANC’s shift toward economic liberalism. While preserving a discourse of NDR, its ideological contender is the elephant in the room. The eclipsing of the RDP with the

programme of GEAR rests on the neo-liberal assumption that market growth will facilitate development. At the same time, the RDP's principles and values of people-driven development remain apparent in legislation. While perhaps toned down from the more radical mechanisms envisaged by some on the Left, municipal guidance does nonetheless advance the importance of cultivating informed citizens who are empowered to shape development. The realisation of this objective, however, is undercut from both sides.

The strand of good governance promoting new public management prioritises the need for efficiency and delivery over bottom-up control. This performance-driven, technocratic approach has been key in narrowing the agenda for participation and circumscribing the degree of popular influence. As such, South Africans have forums for participation but on a limited range of issues, carefully controlled by budgetary prescriptions and public sector performance priorities. In parallel, this restricted understanding of participation, 'stripped of the political volatility of direct popular involvement' (De Beer 1996: 67), has for the ANC sustained its vanguard tradition by enabling a top-down mode of development to continue. A void and ambiguous promise of NDR simultaneously enables the governing movement to mask where power really lies.¹¹

It is with some irony that in the participatory project the ANC draws not on its own people-driven RDP, which originally informed public policy, but on the vacuous notion of NDR and the historic 'movement tradition'. Worlds apart from its formal commitments to a neo-liberal framework, the ANC's failure to critically review the NDR's applicability has confined it largely to political rhetoric. Yet it is possible to see that the centralisation of control and 'technocratic creep' as described by Heller (2001: 146) and have enabled the ANC to simultaneously remove from popular contestation its own policy programme. Despite starkly different ideological origins - one seeking efficiency and cost-recovery and the other a hegemonic unity - the simultaneous usage of managerial and mass movement discourses have

been mutually reinforcing. What Heller describes as the emergence of a ‘bureaucratic and commandist logic’ of local government is both in fitting with the ANC’s vanguard legacy, but has also been enabled by the extent of its hegemony (*ibid.*: 134).

Participation as teleological

From this ironic parallel is also an identifiable tension. In the ANC’s own framing of participation, it is notable that influences of democratic and development theory are far less discernible. The revolutionary rhetoric espoused in discussion documents, publications and speeches of the ANC does not draw on the empowering potential of participation found in public policy. The movement’s recent commentary even contrasts to that contained in its own RDP. Those aspects of policy advancing an understanding of democracy in which citizens ‘exercise judgement [and] contribute to debate and discussion’ (DPLG & LGSETA undated, module 3, part B: 18), are undermined by a teleological discourse that links participation to the extension of ANC hegemony.

The dissipation of the wider ANC camp has certainly had some bearing. Those voices pushing for a retention of participatory traditions are now increasingly to be found outside of the movement – a trend that has escalated notably in the 2000s as those with a history of civic and trade union activism have passed through government or left party politics altogether. It is also attributable to what the ANC itself acknowledges as the space of mass mobilisation being left open to alternative forces (ANC 2012:18). The rise of so-called ‘service delivery’ protests points to a diminishing of its vanguard claims. Yet it is also, I argue, attributable to the movement’s dominant discourse of democracy.

As noted earlier, the ANC has always constituted a ‘broad church’, encompassing a range of organisations and structures as part of its wider camp. Yet with dominant ideological traditions in both African Nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, it also in many respects bears

resemblance to a vanguard-style party.¹² The popular mobilisation this role demands constitutes an important and legitimate activity. The revolutionary theory by which the ANC in exile was guided required the active participation of the masses. It is problematic, however, when such mobilisation is conflated with the process of *governance* – when public policy is paired with an understanding of citizen participation as an *intra*-movement activity.

Not long after the publication of the Municipal Systems Act (2000), a 2001 article in ANC journal *Umrabulo* by Yunus Carrim, who at the time Chaired the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Local Government, made a direct correlation between the structures of local government and advancement of revolutionary objectives. Carrim recommended that “the national framework [on the local government system] be given more political detail and be linked closely to our national democratic tasks”. He added, ‘We are not just seeking to effect a new system of local government. We are also seeking *to use this new system to significantly advance the national democratic transition*’ [emphasis added] (2001). He gave political inflection, in particular, to ward committees, noting that ‘Ideally, the ward committee should be used to mobilise the broadest range of interests in the community behind progressive goals as part of the overall national democratic transition’ (*ibid.*). Later, at its 2007 policy conference, the ANC branch was also linked to the ward committee. Amongst branch responsibilities, the ANC listed ‘to give leadership to the developmental agenda of each community by spearheading community participation in the IDP process and strengthening the ward committee’ (ANC 2007: 13).

The paucity of any substantive content in the application of the term ‘national democracy’ does not prevent its use as a euphemism for the maintenance of hegemony, nor or as an historic justification of the ANC’s right to govern. The consequence of encouraging the use of ward committees for advancement of ‘national democracy’ is the undermining of simultaneous efforts to reduce party political control of ward committees. As Deputy Minister of CoGTA in

2013, Carrim himself stated: ‘We are considering reviewing the legislation to explore the possibility of reducing the prospects of ... party-political activists dominating the ward committee’ (2013 telephone int.). The DPLG’s ward committee resource book also emphasised the risks to democracy of party influence on ward committee nomination processes, warning that it ‘brings a high degree of party influence into what, in policy terms, is intended to be a civil society function’ (DPLG & GTZ 2005: 31). The suggestion that they be utilised to mobilise communities behind progressive (read ‘ANC’) goals thus undermines their role set out by the DPLG as ‘a function of civic society’ which should operate ‘independently of the structures imposed by party alliances’ (*ibid.*: 34).

As suggested earlier, democratic deficit in the ANC’s understanding of participation is linked to traditions in its own camp historically. The structures of people’s power met democratic criteria in so far as they incorporated community members, elected their representatives, and involved active participation. However, they were not multi-interest forums or politically pluralistic structures. Mechanisms of participatory *governance*, in contrast, must be characterised not only by the involvement of citizens in decision-making, but by the openness and uncertainty of outcome that we expect of democracy generally. They cannot act as vehicles for predetermined political ends.

The ANC’s recent resurrection of street committees flags this very problem. Under apartheid, organs of people’s power filled a crucial gap: their activists and proponents developed alternative ways of organising society in the face of state neglect and an absence of political and civil rights. Today, South Africans live in a formal democratic state, in which people’s rights have constitutional protection and they are able to vote for the structures of government. Mechanisms and programmes designed to advance development and foster the realisation of such rights must therefore operate within the bounds of accountable institutions. What the street committee initiative leaves unclear is how it will relate to such institutions. The most obvious

example in this regard is the relationship with CPFs, structures established under the South African Police Service Act of 1995 to improve community-police relations and to mobilise communities to assist in crime prevention.

The role of the street committee in 2008 was set out by the ANC's Nathi Mthetwa as being supplementary 'to the work of the other civil society and governance organs and institutions' (Mthetwa 2008).¹³ While not officially structures of the party, however, the implication is that they be imbued with ideological purpose – addressing the potential for vigilantism through 'ideological training' to prevent them being exploited by 'counter-revolutionaries' (*ibid.*). Rather than address existing weaknesses in the community policing system, such as the lack of community representivity, the solution proposed is that street committees play a leading role instead (Nzimande 2008). Yet there is no guarantee that they, too, will not become dominated by the same voices. If subject to ideological direction, we can only assume that they will be structures aligned to the ANC.

Caution about their resurrection is not to dismiss the potential of street committees in either crime prevention or community development. However, the *solution to challenges of participatory governance should not be the introduction of seemingly partisan structures which fall outside of legislation*. There is nothing to stop the ANC from introducing street committees as party political structures, perhaps intended to link residents at street-level with the local ANC branch. However, the problem arises when they are created under the pretence of political neutrality, or at the expense of improvements to existing mechanisms for participatory governance.

Attempts to increase party influence over multi-interest structures might justifiably be interpreted as a response to declining hegemony. The revival of struggle-era terminology and the notion of 'people's power' has certainly overlapped with both a rise in social protest and

the surfacing of internal threats to the ANC's political stability. Yet currents of hegemony and vanguardism in the movement's participatory discourse represent *consistencies* rather than deviations. Popular protest has drawn attention to a weakening of its mass movement status, and the idea of extending its hegemony across both civil society and structures of governance may well be the chosen solution. The ANC's teleological view of participatory democracy, however, represents not a post-1994 shift, nor a reneging on its policy commitments, but lies at the core of the ANC's conception of popular participation itself.

The conflation of structures of democracy with those of the mass movement can be located in the organisational history of the ANC camp, in which its own claim to the status of *mass movement* derived from the very structures and organisations now a part of civil society. The tension between the ANC's role as mass *governing* movement and its history as a mass *struggle* movement is played out in intertwining of participatory democracy with the extension of its own hegemony.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the ANC's understanding of participatory democracy in order to show how weaknesses in practice might be explained by the underlying theory. A number of theoretical disciplines and intellectual traditions have fed into the formulation of policy. Participatory traditions in the ANC camp itself, and the experience of 'people's power' in particular, gave impetus and shape to the establishment after 1994 of popular forums to involve ordinary people in municipal-level planning. These traditions, in turn, spoke to trends in development discourse internationally which gave increasing emphasis to the active participation and agency of beneficiaries in the development process itself. 1990s policy mainstreaming of the idea of 'good governance' also stressed the importance of the relationship

between citizen and state and, in South Africa, became influential on the model of local government.

At the same time, this assorted heritage has created a tension in policy objectives. The model of new public management associated with governance discourse has had the effect of curbing popular influence by prioritising fiscal constraints and efficiency over democracy and empowerment. The ideas contained in policy make-up – and conflicting imperatives of the macro-economic framework – can thus help to account for impediments in practice. Yet neo-liberalism has not been alone in facilitating a narrow form of participation. This paper has also sought to argue that the ANC's conception of democracy is entwined with its mass movement heritage – a status earned by virtue of its mass support base and establishment of hegemony over a range of popular organisations and structures. As a mass movement, with a range of constituent parts, the radical democratic heritage of contemporary policy can be found within the ANC's ranks. Yet these participatory traditions before 1994 were an intra-movement and self-sustaining activity. Participants were united by a common goal – working with the movement not against it – and it is to this organisational history that the ANC's discourse of participation is tied.

In the post-1994 context, the sections of its broader camp are a part of civil society and are amongst the very citizens for whom participatory governance forums are intended. A discourse of democracy in which participation is seen *teleologically* – as a means of extending ANC hegemony – thus undermines the very function of these mechanisms as multi-interest structures for the influence of citizens. The conceptual intertwining of mass movement and democracy, and mutual reinforcement of the ascendance of technocracy, have contributed in South Africa to the failure of participatory democracy to realise its objectives in practice. The shielding of the policy agenda from the arena of popular influence, and conflation of the ANC's programme with the democratic will of citizens, does not aspire to the degree of popular agency required

in public policy. Indeed, a reassertion of the role of vanguard takes us further away, not closer, to real citizen control.

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Boraine Andrew, UDF activist and policy advisor, telephone interview, 21.5.2013

Carrim Yunus, former UDF activist and Deputy Minister of CoGTA, Pretoria, 16.1.2013

Carrim Yunus, former UDF activist and Deputy Minister of CoGTA, telephone interview, 12.3.2013.

Cherry Janet, researcher and former UDF activist, Port Elizabeth, 3.10.2012.

Coleman Neil, former UDF activist and theorist, Cape Town, 20.2.2013.

Mashatile Paul, former activist in Alexandra, Pretoria, 21.2.2013.

Moosa Valli, former UDF activist, Johannesburg, 31.4.2013.

Tsenoli Lechesa, former UDF and civic activist, Johannesburg, 11.3.2013.

Wooldridge Dominique, editor of local government white paper, Johannesburg, 12.3.2013.

NOTES

¹. The notion of 'invented' spaces was coined by Miraftab (2004) to refer to grassroots spaces of collective action which push for change, as supposed to institutionalised spaces, described by Cornwall (2002), in which citizens are 'invited' to participate.

². #Feesmustfall was a campaign initiated in October 2015 by students at South Africa's public universities demanding a zero per cent increase in tuition fees. The campaign has since spread through university campuses across the country, extending to both solidarity with workers for an end to university outsourcing, as well as to ongoing demands for free higher education.

³. See articles by these authors on weaknesses in the ward committee system generally, as well as in particular locales. The report produced by Kabane (undated) for Afesis-Corplan looks to have been published c.2012.

⁴. Everatt *et al* (2010) refer to surveys commissioned in 2006 and 2007 by the Department for Social Development.

⁵. Yunus Carrim was a UDF activist and, between 2009 and 2013, was Deputy Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs. Lechesa Tsenoli was a UDF and civic activist, a former President of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) and Deputy Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform from 2011 and 2013. Paul Mashatile, a former Gauteng MEC and, between 2010 and 2014, the Minister of Arts and Culture, has a background in the UDF and in youth organisation in Alexandra.

⁶. The workbook constitutes certified course material produced by the DPLG and LGSETA and is therefore undated. The acknowledgements listed in the document, however, suggest that it was published after 2007.

⁷. Pieterse, for example, describes the IDP as combining 'democratic governance, participatory planning and efficient, modern managerial practice' (2002: 5).

⁸. In the run up to the 2009 national elections, a breakaway of individuals supportive of former ANC President Thabo Mbeki assembled to form COPE as a political party to challenge the ANC. In 2013, the EFF formed as a far Left alternative to the ANC following the expelling of Julius Malema as President of the ANC Youth League. The EFF, headed by Malema, is currently the third largest party in the national parliament.

⁹. For a discussion of the ANC's use of nostalgia and historic claims to renew itself in the present, see Brooks Yung (2014).

¹⁰. On the role and functions of some recently established street committees, see IRIN (24.9.2008); Mail and Guardian (08.11.2013); and Marks & Wood (2010).

¹¹. Thanks are due to Shireen Hassim for her assistance in this formulation.

¹². For a broader discussion of the nature of the ANC as a mass party, with roots in both Marxist-Leninist and united front traditions, see Brooks Yung (2014).

¹³. Mthetwa subsequently became Minister of Safety and Security.