COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION
Lessons from post-apartheid South Africa

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The South African post-apartheid constitution provides for community participation in the construction, implementation and evaluation of integrated development planning at local level. This article reviews and assesses community participation in practice drawing on the findings of a range of research projects conducted in Cape Town since 1994. It is argued that contemporary understanding of community participation in South Africa is informed by the memory of community struggle – a radical form of participation – against the racist apartheid State. This means that communities have a richly-textured history of strategic mobilization against exclusionary and discriminatory government practices at the local level. It is precisely this repertoire of radical strategies that can and should be revisited and adapted, to advance the interests of the materially marginalized communities at the local level. 'People driven' development programmes through Integrated Development Planning (IDP) in post-apartheid South Africa in general, and Cape Town in particular, have thus far been largely rhetorical and not substantive. Hence, the enduring challenge of the perennial question at the grassroots level remains – in whose interest is community participation really driven?

Introduction

Community participation, that is, the direct involvement/engagement of ordinary people in the affairs of planning, governance and overall development programmes at local or grassroots level, has become an integral part of democratic practice in recent years (see Jayal, 2001). In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, community participation has literally become synonymous with legitimate governance. In this regard, for example, the Municipal Structures Act, Chapter 4, subsections g and h state, respectively, that the 'executive mayors annually report on the involvement of community organizations in the affairs of the municipality and ensure that due regard is given to public views and report on the effect of consultation on the decisions of council' (RSA, 1998a). Yet, it would seem that most community participation exercises in post-apartheid South Africa are largely spectator politics, where ordinary people have mostly become endorsees of pre-designed planning programmes, are often the objects of administrative manipulation and a miracle of reconciliation in the international arena of consensus politics whilst state functionaries of both the pre- and post-apartheid eras ensconce themselves as bureaucratic experts summoned to 'ensure a better life for all'. Consequently, the process, visions and missions of a more equitable society operate merely as promissory notes issued every four years during election campaigns. In the course of this endless rhetoric and multiple platitudes, the very concept of community participation has been largely reduced to a cumbersome

ritual – a necessary appendix required by the various laws and policies operating at the local government level.

Informed discussions and rational debates on the merits and demerits of specific planning programmes are literally non-existent, even though 'community participation' features as a key component of planning programmes at the local level. In short, it would seem that the bureaucratic elites of officials and councilors are determined to impose their own truncated version and understanding of 'community participation' on particular communities. This highly atrophied form of 'participation' seems to be working precisely because in the South African version of democracy, the party is everything and the constituency is nothing (except every four years when it is required to vote for a specific party). South Africa has a party-based rather than a constituency-based democracy. Citizens vote for the party and not for specific candidates. Hence, the practice prevails where elected officials can literally 'cross the floor' leaving one party for another without the citizens having much, if any leverage, to stop such floor-crossing. Such a limited form of democracy gives rise to an administered society rather than a democratic society, as the consent for governance is not earned through rigorous policy debates of the advantages and disadvantages of specific social programmes, but political acquiescence is manu-factured through the skilful manipulation of a host of think-tanks, self-styled experts, opinion polls and media pundits. Indeed, community participation is often managed by a host of consulting agencies on behalf of pre-designed, party-directed planning pro-grammes and is quite clearly not fostered to empower local communities. Hence, the largely nebulous forms of community participation in one of the largest municipalities in South Africa, the City of Cape Town. This article reviews the author's research on community participation in Cape Town with the aim of advancing specific strategies to effect more meaningful forms of engagement, dialogue and empowerment at the grassroots level (see Williams, 2003, 2004a,b, 2005a–d).

The remainder of this article is organised around: a brief historical survey of community participation in South Africa; an evaluation of some key theoretical perspectives on community participation; the provision of some illustrations of community participation initiatives in Cape Town between 1994 and 2004; and, finally, the presentation of a set of conclusions and practical recommendations for enhancing community participation.

Community Participation in South Africa – A Historical Snapshot

Based on my earlier research (Williams, 1989, 2000, 2003, 2004a,b) it can be argued that a brief historical excursus of community participation in South Africa can be divided into roughly six interrelated phases.

1. *The pre-1976 period*: a strategically dormant participatory phase where the largely passive dream for liberation amidst unspeakable forms of oppression and exploitation resulted in imaginary spaces of participation.
2. *The 1977–1983 period*: the death of Steve Biko in September 1977 signalled the need not only for community organization and mobilization at the grassroots level, but also

community control. Hence, in subsequent years, the multiple spaces of community organization and mobilization throughout South Africa especially after 1980, eventually culminated in the birth of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The UDF claimed operational spaces against the Apartheid State throughout South Africa, sustaining community forms of liberatory struggles at the street and neighbourhood levels, often in the name of the banned liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC).

3. *The 1984−1989 period*: characterized by an intensifying struggle against the apartheid state from the local to the international arenas, resulting in a range of divestment campaigns and cultural boycotts aimed at any sector connected to the Apartheid State. This period created spaces of ungovernability throughout South Africa.

4. *The 1990−1994 period*: featured by the legitimation of the liberation movements and the beginning of the consensual politics of negotiation leading to the negotiated settlement of a range of promissory spaces of participation such as the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme and the 1996 Constitution of South Africa. The former was the outcome of community participation and the latter established the public right to participate in local government planning programmes.

5. *The 1996−2000 period*: represented the need for visible, experientially significant forms of social change that gave rise to the establishment of various types of 'development' partnerships mediated by socio-historical relations of power and trust resulting in largely truncated spaces of participation as indicated in this article.

6. *The 2000−2004 period and beyond*: interpreting democratic practices based on an experiential index of the past ten years since the birth of democratic South Africa in 1994: from euphoria to disappointment, from generative hope to existential despair: hence the birth of transformative spaces such as the Treatment Action Campaign, Jubilee 2000 and a myriad other local initiatives that seek to democratize the politically liberated spaces in South Africa.

The preceding historical outline of community participation suggests that the nature of community participation depends to a great extent on the nature of organization and mobilization at the grassroots level as well as the programmatic purpose of such participation. Defined in such terms, community participation is quite clearly not an unproblematic engagement of contestatory power relations. On the contrary, community participation is often driven by specific socio-economic goals that seek to ensure a 'better life for all', especially for those who have been historically marginalized during the successive colonial-cum-apartheid regimes in South Africa. Indeed, South Africa, especially as a post-apartheid constitutional state, has adopted a policy nomenclature that is replete with notions of public participation, grassroots-driven development and participatory governance (see, for example, RSA, 1993, 1995, 1996a−c, 1997, 19981b, 1999, 2000). Even so, extant literature suggests that the very notion of participation assumes a wide range of discourses, meanings and applications within and across different contexts. More importantly, perhaps, it would seem that participatory modes of governance and decision-making are profoundly influenced, if not shaped, by the contradictions, tensions,

conflicts and struggles straddling not merely the political relations of power but also the economic and ideological apparatus at local level.

Local government in South Africa had until the early 1990s no constitutional safeguard, as it was perceived as a structural extension of the State and a function of provincial government. In terms of community participation, South African history reflects very little opportunity for community participation. The fact that most of the population had no political rights until 1994 demonstrates the total absence of participation of any sort. Instead the method of government was highly centralised, deeply authoritarian and secretive, which ensured that fundamental public services were not accessible to black people (Williams, 2000). The approach to planning in general was influenced by early planning in Britain, which stressed 'efficiency concerns' and was dominated by scientists such as architects and engineers, who held the view that all planning had technical solutions (McCarthy & Smit, 1984). To a large extent, technically oriented planning frameworks, as borne out by the planning history of South Africa itself, considers humans as objects of planning and not necessarily the creators and shapers of the very tools that are used by planners to structure and give material content to the human experience in time and space (Smit, 1989). It is in this crucial aspect that the post-apartheid Constitution seeks to make a fundamental difference to the lives of ordinary people in particular in that it centres the human being as the provenance and recipient of development planning. Accordingly, insight from the majority of people, especially those who were historically denied political rights, and who, quite clearly have a collective stake in the outcomes of development planning at local level, will, commensurate with the ethos of democratic practice in all spheres of governance, assume critical importance in transforming the unequal power relations in the institutional planning bureaucracies of the new South Africa.

Indeed, in the wake of the abolition of Apartheid in 1990, local government assumed an important role *vis-à-vis* institutional transformation. Hence, public policies were formulated to create 'people centred development' predicated on democratic practices such as equity, transparency, accountability and respect for the rights of citizens, especially ordinary people – the poor, homeless and destitute (RSA, 1995, 1999, 2000).

Accordingly, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the political manifesto of the ANC during their election campaign for the first democratic elections of 27 April 1994, would constitute the overall planning framework for the transition to post apartheid South Africa. The RDP stressed the importance of nation building through improved standards of living and quality of life for all South Africans and by implication the increasing significance of local government *vis-à-vis* development planning at the grassroots level. Appropriately, since 1996 when local government became a sphere of government; it is no longer a function of national or provincial government. On the contrary, it is an integral component of the democratic state. In keeping with Chapter 3 of the South African Constitution, however, all spheres of government, are obliged to observe the principles of co-operative government with the view of giving meaningful effect to the basic rights of all citizens, especially, black people, the historically-neglected and excluded, who, in both absolute and proportional terms still form the overwhelming majority of those citizens who are homeless, unemployed and destitute in the post-1994 democratic order (RSA, 1996a−c).

With a view of ensuring bottom-up, people-centred, IDP at the grassroots level, the South African Constitution, in subsection 152 e) states that '[t]he objective of local government is to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government' (RSA, 1996a). Whilst, as a broad theoretical statement of intent, this constitutional provision for community participation in the affairs of local government, appears to be quite a radical posture insofar as it ensconces the right of citizens to contribute towards the form, substance and overall dimensions of their respective communities, in practice, however, this constitutional right encounters profound structural limitations in the midst of bureaucratic institutions where uneven power relations militate severely against such a constitutionally-driven community participatory model of development planning at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the Constitution does not identify clear measurements of the success and failure of community participation in development planning at the grassroots level. Hence, the implementation of community participation constitutes a veritable problem in planning bureaucratic institutions that hail from the oppressive and exclusionary relations of power of the Apartheid Era. In short, most of the senior officials in these planning bureaucracies were directly responsible for the implementation of Apartheid planning frameworks and by some strange logic, are, in the new South Africa, expected to be directly responsible for participatory development planning practice at the grassroots level. Here a series of interconnected questions naturally arise: have the planning bureaucrats from the Apartheid Era really experienced a mind shift, attitudinal change and epistemological reorientation to allow for adequate and meaningful community participation in the affairs of local government especially by the historically excluded and marginalized black citizens of South Africa? Or are these planning bureaucrats crypto-apartheid planners parading in the guise of 'people-driven development' in keeping with the democratic ethos of the new South Africa? And even if community participation does occur, is such participation considered by planning bureaucracies with the requisite seriousness and respect guaranteed by the post-apartheid Constitution? Or do planning authorities in the new order view community participation as an unfortunate constitutional nuisance? Hence its apparent manipulation and largely symbolic value in the corridors of power at the local level (Williams, 2004a).

Nonetheless this constitutionally entrenched right to participate in development planning in local government is reinforced in related legislative frameworks and policy documents, making it mandatory for people-driven development to be implemented at the grassroots level. Thus, for example, the White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998) as well as the Local Government Municipal Systems Act, No 32, of 2000 [LGSMA] highlight a number of interrelated development oriented goals, such as meeting the social, economic and material needs of all citizens, especially the historically neglected, marginalized black communities. With the view of bringing together as many stakeholders as possible to delineate, define and promote their common interests, the LGMSA makes IDP mandatory at the local level. Theoretically, this means that the IDP is a process in which a municipality can establish a development plan for the short, medium and long term, through which it can enable communities to define their goals, needs, and related priorities. But as the ensuing literature review suggests, such community oriented

development plans presuppose the existence of community forums and related contractual relations through which communities can express their specific concerns and priorities to a particular local authority. This also means that communities are sufficiently conscious of their rights and obligations as citizens at the grassroots level *vis-à-vis* a specific municipality such as effective municipal governance at the local level. This is often the outcome of the quality of deliberative skills and civic commitment in local communities, ensuring that tensions and contradictions in development plans are resolved through the rigorous interaction between municipal councillors, officials and community organizations as borne out by the ensuing literature review.

Community Participation in Theoretical Perspective

The literature review below indicates that public participation in local government institutions [LIGs] comprises various perspectives on the origin, need, substance and outcome of such participation. Some of these perspectives emphasize the constitutional nature of such participation whilst others refer to it as a democratic imperative at the local level. There are those perspectives which emphasize the experiential knowledge of the participants in such participatory spaces, seemingly influencing both the expectations and substance of the resultant participatory processes in LIGs. According to some authors, the fear of co-optation into the dominant existing power relations in LIGs seems to be a general concern among some participants. Yet other participants embrace the possibilities for transforming LIGs by using such spaces for resistance, empowerment and transformation. The ensuing literature review is organised around a discussion of: participatory spaces as forms of decentralized governance; participants as agents of democratic governance; experience as the reflexive lens of participation; the empowering/dis-empowering interface and the fear of co-optation; participatory spaces as living community networks; participatory spaces of resistance; spaces for alternative knowledge formations and institutional change; the problem of transforming dominant relations of power in participatory spaces; the problem of non-participation and public distrust in regulatory spaces; and, participatory democracy and its discontents. This broad ranging discussion reflects the multi-faceted character of community participation.

Participatory Spaces as Forms of Decentralized Governance

The space for participation emerges from a legal construction, hence the notion of 'rights-based' approach to development (Barya, 2000). Local authorities or municipalities are part of decentralized governance as they have decision-making units based on loyalty networks to a range of stakeholders at local level (Boschi, 1999). Often, though central government must challenge local elites to respond to the interests of ordinary people. Effective participation by ordinary people in local government programmes, however, can counter the elite (Crook & Sverrison, 2001). The presence of ordinary people in local government structures presupposes the existence of the requisite political space to challenge the uneven relations of power at local level and even elsewhere (Kanyinga, 1998). However, individualistic notions of participation can override and undermine such

counter-elite strategies (MacKian, 1998). This tension between individual ambitions and collective goals on governing institutions is often mediated by party notions of accountability (Munro, 1996). Whatever their operational defects, grassroots-based forums such as ward committees or sub-councils often exist to gain acceptance from citizens for local forms of decentralized governance where the notion of 'public participation' fulfils such a legitimation role (Robinson, 1998).

In reference to the experiences in specific public sectors in Europe and the USA, Bossert (2000) states that the public participatory process seeks to establish a balance of interests to avoid being captured by special interests (see Gargarella, 1998). In his assessment this requires institutional flexibility and a willingness to be responsive to change. This institutional stance involves strengthening the capacities of interest groups (and potential interest groups); being aware of health issues; articulating specific interests; engaging in consensus building activities; negotiating and lobbying different decision-making arenas, and participating in the implementation and monitoring of health sector reforms (see Sunstein, 1998). Even so, in his judgement, some interest groups are usually more likely than others to organize themselves and to articulate their interests effectively. Bossert argues that interest groups which are concentrated, with significant investment in particular sectors, such as health, have continual long-term stakes in the policy process. Accordingly, people like physicians, hospital management, and insurance companies bring their substantial financial and status resources to bear on the policy process, effectively promoting their interests. In contradistinction, diffuse interest groups without significant investments and low resources such as the poor and general taxpayers, are often unable promote their interests, effectively. Nonetheless, in Bossert's view, promoting civic networks and broader interest in local concerns strengthen the basis for democratic life (see Mackie, 1998).

Participants as Agents of Democratic Governance

Bucek and Smith (2000) argue that public participation in institutions of local governance allows for the possibility of revitalizing democracy (Dallmayr, 1996). Such participation in Lister's (1997) view imparts a belief in agency and a conscious capacity in a particular participant, thereby investing the concept of 'citizen' with existential signifi-cance. This ontological refinement of citizenship is linked to the idea of performing one's duties as a citizen and also serves as an instantiation of the individual as an integral member of a specific community and society at large. Hence, the apparent import of regulated forms of participation in such local forms of governance (Shaw & Martin, 2000). Here it is, perhaps, important to point out that participation *per se* does not result in visible or desirable results as it so often can be reduced to a mere ceremonial presence of participants in local institutions. It is only when people claim or demand power to achieve specific concrete goals (such as implementing a specific plan, project or programme, that presence, participation and voice assume experiential significance at local level. This means that participants must be aware of their abilities to make judgments, how to effect meaningful change and how to play political roles as a citizen. For such a change-inducing scenario to come to pass citizens must act in a well-structured process (Wondolleck &

Manring, 1996). Indeed, in the view of Yeich and Levine (1994), such joint cooperation improves collective political efficacy.

Experience as the Reflexive Lens of Participation

Institutional participatory practices are often informed by the experiential knowledge of self-interested pressure groups (Barnes, 1999). Indeed, people often participate as a result of previous experiences in decision-making processes in local institutions partly as a result of the civil, political and social status and feeling of connectedness (Elster, 1998; Higgins-Wharf, 1999). This range of subjective indicators suggests the need for a multi-perspective approach to the reasons as to why people participate in LIGs. There are also those people who do not participate in LIGs mostly as a result of negative perceptions or experiences such as language barriers, lack of funding, fear of government and its agents, feelings of betrayal and the idea that participation will not produce any meaningful results (Hollar, 2002). Participation in LIGs is also influenced by other factors such as legal constraints, agency competition, geographic location and job mobility (Koontz, 1999). According to Patterson (1999) the differential outcome of participatory democracy arises in part from a complexity of uneven power relations, trust and a lack of belief in having a long-term impact on the status quo. Often people do not trust their representatives in LIGs as they are frequently being co-opted by the system and are thus perceived as not being caring about the constituencies whom they are supposed to represent. Nonetheless, as Chapman and Wameyo (2001) indicate there is evidence to suggest that some participants do act as advocates of the interests of the poor and marginalized. Participation, especially in informal networks has positive results in LIGs for ordinary marginalized people.

The Empowerment/Dis-empowerment Interface and the Fear of Co-optation

Participation often allows ordinary people to gain access to vital information with regard to the methods used to compile, verify and audit expenditure data at local level (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). This exposure to vital information then serves to generate a radical consciousness amongst ordinary people with regard to the possibilities for transformative budgetary allocations at grassroots level. At the same time, though, through their active participation in LIGs, ordinary people become conscious of the possibility of co-option by status quo-oriented officials and politicians. This danger of being politically assimilated then also raises the issue of developing negotiating skills that would advance the interests of the marginalized in society (Schonwalder, 1997). Such negotiating skills should be accompanied by the development of specific practical mechanisms to promote the interests of ordinary people. Specific interests are usually only safeguarded through active participation in specific spaces of opportunity (Berberton & Blake, 1998). It is only where a sense of dignity, vision, independence characterizes participation that the notion of 'citizenship' assumes experiential substance and significance in the lives of ordinary people (Evans & Boyte, 1986).

Participatory Spaces as Living Community Networks

According to Escobar *et al.* (2002) such issues of dignity and vision are profoundly influenced by the sense of connection that ordinary people feel and indeed have to specific places on the ground, at home, in their communities as a living habitat. Such shared spaces then contain the possibility for the democratization of everyday life as they connect actual people in existing spaces and places (Frederiksen, 2000). People in these living environments are linked to each other through multiple networks and alliances, thereby not merely validating the existence of one another but also in such social interrelations redefining and contesting the dominant relations of socio-cultural relations of power in a particular community (Gambetta, 1998). Thus, particular community groups can act as a countervailing force to corporations in specific areas. In this sense 'counter-spaces' and 'counter-publics' come into being where marginal groups claim, restructure and transform lived spaces as places of specific interests and representation (McCann, 1999). Such countervailing presence occurs not merely in a territorial space as an amorphous presence, but as an institutional challenge in policy-making forums (McEwan, 2000). In such instances, the policy problematic focuses on the idea of representing and ensuring that the interests of institutional decision-makers are equal constituent elements in the democratic process of interaction and deliberation (Mouffe, 1992). In this sense, space as a social construct, and not as an immutable given, is being shaped by particular decision-makers representing the interests of a plurality of allegiances. This is the micro-politics of local action where spaces are opened, closed, created or destroyed (Barker, 1999).

Participatory Spaces of Resistance

Particular participatory spaces can also become the sites of resistance both conceptually and materially (Williams, 1999b). The purpose for which particular spaces are used is, however, profoundly shaped by the prevailing traditions, mores and knowledge of the participating groups and the dominant power relations. Such relations of power would be connected to both the local places and spaces and the wider socio-political processes. To the extent that ordinary people, the subaltern, can enter such wider socio-political processes, to that extent they can seek to overcome their isolation and marginalization. Networking thus pursued, would be a counter to status quo enhancing policies (Atkinson, 1999). Networking also implies the shifting of influence beyond a particular place, as a territorially bounded jurisdiction, but also shifting power relations – i.e. governmentality – beyond a particular institution to other institutions in the same place.

Spaces for Alternative Knowledge Formations and Institutional Change

Fischer (2002) observes that notions of knowledge and expertise do not merely influence the manner in which people articulate their concerns, but they often determine the extent to which people are heard, and the extent to which their views are taken

seriously. Thus, institutional conditions can either assist or intimidate people in giving voice to their concerns. This means that the knowledge of so-called 'non-experts' can indeed influence both the form and substance of policy frameworks and related programmatic outcomes. In this regard, it is, therefore, necessary to investigate how people frame their arguments, and more specifically, the knowledge basis from which they draw their specific propositions. However, as Geibel (2002) observes, the incorporation of local knowledge in policy frameworks is often contingent on pressures applied at grassroots level from international bodies. For example, often the ideas of fairness, justice and equity expressed in public pronouncements are only legitimate if they are accepted collectively, thus frequently necessitating a renegotiation of specific claims (Vira, 2001). This also means that public participation is often about who is included and not so much who is represented, thereby problematizing the very means and styles of communication in policy forums.

Transforming Dominant Relations of Power in Participatory Spaces

Framing issues in new ways can be a transformative strategy, challenging existing perspectives on existing social reality (Bohman, 1996). Consciousness raising, fundraising and festivals can serve to engage excluded sections in public participatory processes (Fraser, 1992). Power relations in institutions impact on participatory processes. Hierarchical relations of power are embedded in language and serve to instantiate and symbolize differentiated access to the participatory process (Kohn, 2000). Deliberation often does not necessarily produce better decisions, but merely democratically valid decisions (Miller, 2001). This means participatory processes legitimate the decision-making processes to the extent that divergent and often competing claims have been considered through debate, engagement and judgement (Johnson, 1998). A critical, reflexive discourse comes into being where key democratic notions such as 'justice', 'rationality' and 'political will' underpin the deliberative process. Where individuals change their perspectives through rational debates, the politics of presence exercise significant influence.

Non-participation – Public Distrust in Regulatory Spaces

Patterson (2000) argues that non-participation in community representative spaces does not necessarily mean apathy towards the democratic process. On the contrary, entering space as a subordinate, unfamiliar with the forms and meanings of deliberative discourse and hidden transcripts, undermines participation as a rational, open and empowering democratic practice as the participants do not trust government and its institutions. Experiential relations, however, between the represented and representatives serve to improve trust in the process of public participation and government (Stokes, 1998). Usually, the most organized sections of the community, with the time and money participate in public forums (Smith & Wales, 2000). State actors, however, often mobilize people to participate in community forums. Moreover, advocacy groups, in solidarity with poor communities, can be effective vehicles to usher in substantial representation and

empowerment of the marginalized in society (Baker, 2000). In poor communities, informal communication strategies such as street theatre can serve to conscientize and inform the marginalized about community issues and their rights *vis-à-vis* public institutions (Bratton & Alderfer, 1999). The amount of power and influence wielded by state officials close to the community participants often determines the relative successful outcome of the resultant public participation processes with regard to existing problems at grassroots level.

In a recent article on community participation in Brazil, Lavalle *et al.* (2005) report that ties to political parties and contractual relations often increases the ability of civil organizations to represent the poor in public participatory processes. Even so, competing power relations in the community, the political system as a whole and the state and its bureaucracies still seem to exercise a determining role in the outcome of a particular public participation process (Goetz & Gaventa, 2001). Often, though, the old-fashioned Freirian approach of awareness, competence, assertiveness of people and their leadership continue to be the tested and trying factors that determine whether or not ordinary people are empowered at grassroots level. Extant literature does not seem to be clear about the place and role of public deliberation in policy formulation as it rather vaguely refers to the institutional, structural and procedural issues underlying deliberative decision-making (Michels *et al.*, 2001). When constitutional rights are taken seriously they, indeed, do tend to introduce new relations and discursive issues into specific policy agenda and frameworks. Nonetheless, it still has to be remembered that existing social relations exercise a powerful influence on how local knowledge is constructed and presented. In some cases where the right to participate in local debates is ubiquitous, contradictory understandings and visions of the existing and future social realities may indeed exist. It is under such circumstances of ambivalent realities and contestations around specific socio-economic agenda that the ideological construct of 'national interest' appears to exercise a cohesive role in the public domain of competing policy frameworks.

Participatory Democracy and its Discontents

Civil society formations, such as urban social movements, can serve to construct both the anticipatory and receptive modes of dialogical relations and deliberative arenas for reflexive discourse of understanding, sympathy, encouragement and challenge in constructing alternative visions of society (Oommen, 2004). Redefining mainstream notions such as 'ability' may allow marginalized sectors of society such as the 'disabled' to enter deliberative politics and reshape the discourse and substance of actual lived citizenship. Contextual realities shape how people feel about public participation and the extent to which it contributes to or detracts from their experiential frame of citizenship (Hollar, 2002). Democratic participation is not a pre-existing text of social harmony, interaction and co-existence; on the contrary, it is only through participatory practices in the realm of conflictive power relations, that democracy as a political frame of reference assumes experiential reality (Jayal, 2001). In the end, though, it would seem that prevailing ideas of public participation as a rational imperative vitiated by language as a contextual

game, often shaping and reinforcing dominant relations of power, influence both the experience and results of public participation.

The preceding literature review suggests that there are various factors that contribute towards meaningful community participation at the grassroots level *vis-à-vis* a particular local authority (municipality), such as the existence of community fora to (re)present the concerns and interests of a specific community to a specific planning authority, reliable and reciprocal contractual relations between the voters and their elected representatives and the political will (commitment) from councillors and officials in a specific municipality to ensure effective, efficient and sustainable community participation in development planning programmes. Since 12 years of democratic rule has just been celebrated in South Africa, the question arises: what is the status of these theoretical assumptions and experiential insights on community participation at local level in South Africa? With a view to reflect on the veracity of these theoretical perspectives, the ensuing section considers briefly some examples of community participation in one of the biggest municipalities in South Africa, the much-vaunted and self-avowed liberal City of Cape Town during the period 1994−2004.

Community Participation in Cape Town, 1994−2004

In the City of Cape Town, where the author worked from 1990 to 2004 as a Principal Urban and Regional Planner (Policy & Research), there were various attempts at encouraging community participation in the development programmes of Local Government, ranging from critiquing local area planning in 1989, defining a metropolitan spatial development framework in 1991 to the revision and elaboration of various drafts of service delivery programmes, eventually resulting in a number of IDPs for the City of Cape Town.

Williams (2003, 2004a,b) examined Area Co-ordinating Teams (ACTS) as a mode of engagement by the City of Cape Town to 'foster' community participation in development planning at the grassroots level in the historically neglected areas of Hanover Park, Heideveld, Manenberg, Langa and Guguletu. He used both open-ended interviews and structured questionnaires to ascertain the levels of understanding, co-operation and commitment to community participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of IDP projects and programmes in Metropolitan Cape Town.

Theoretically, any public policy which encourages transparency, constructively engages and involve citizens in the functions of a local government and which seeks to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives is good public policy. In this regard, ACTs constitute good public policy. By creating institutional spaces and opportunities where individuals, community organizations, Council administration and elected representatives can sit and discuss issues affecting their lives, whether it be improvement of infrastructure, housing, health, or any other service which are provided by local government. In practice, though, ACTs are a structural failure. Not only are the issues raised at the ACTs completely non-binding, as the Council is not obliged to follow through on any issue raised through ACTs but often individual officials and Councillors who are supposed to be participating in ACTs are not obligated to attend the scheduled meetings. Thus, for ACTs to become effective instruments of fundamental social

change Councils must actively support ACTs, both by passing appropriate by-laws to institutionalize them officially and to draw up a code of conduct that compel officials and councillors to attend and take seriously scheduled meetings and related development planning initiatives.

In their present format, therefore, it can be concluded that ACTs have been implemented mostly for their symbolic value rather than to empower communities and to transform the unequal relations of socio-economic power in the City of Cape Town. This means that it is not so much the presence or absence of community organizations at grassroots level that determines the nature and impact of community participation on local government development programmes, but whether or not their ideas and proposals with regard to development strategies are taken seriously by a specific local authority and incorporated into their specific IDPs. For example, in the case of Cape Town, Mackay (2004) indicates that whilst community organizations, in the form of Development Forums, are well organized in the Khayelitsha Sub-councils and in the Mitchell's Plain Sub-council areas, this does not mean that their development proposals enjoy the necessary consideration by the Planning Department of Cape Town. Here one can readily refer to the various clusters of meetings held in these areas during the period 2004/2005 to allow community representatives to influence the annual budgetary process by making specific recommendations on particular service delivery programmes to the planning authorities. Yet, institutionally, the City of Cape Town does not seem to have the necessary structural and logistical support base in place to collate, analyze and integrate the various proposals into their planning programmes as community participation is not driven or facilitated by the IDP Directorate but by the largely dysfunctional Transformation Directorate, the nebulous Social Development Directorate and the nominal Sub-Councils Directorate.

Whilst the IDP Directorate, in terms of the 2000 Municipal Systems Act is supposed to ensure effective community participation in the Planning Programme of a particular municipality in the case of Cape Town, the specific directorate in question, does not have either the logistical capacity or the human resources to comply with this statutory requirement. Consequently, community participation in relation to the IDP is largely a ceremonial exercise and not a systematic engagement of communities that is structurally aligned to the development and service delivery programmes of the City of Cape Town. Moreover, there are no real institutional structures to coordinate, evaluate and monitor community participation in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of IDPs. This exacerbates the potential for institutional conflict in community participation. In this regard, MacKay's research (2004, pp. 60–108) is quite revealing. In Cape Town, the Transformation Office claims responsibility and accountability for community participation, yet it lacks the requisite facilitation or co-ordination infrastructure and skills to execute this statutory task. In practice the two public participation practitioners are unskilled, lacking the required training and knowledge base in public and development management methodologies to function optimally and this skills gap was exposed in the poor communication and co-ordination of logistics during the IDP's participation sessions from 2001 until 2004.

Community participation processes, for example, were arranged at the Mayoral Office, yet, not a single community organization or individual member of the community

was actively involved in arranging meetings or making input into how the IDP should be conducted. Moreover not a single community organization or NGO participated in the assessment of the form of public participation, the community needs analysis or the way forward regarding budgetary alignments. Whilst popular participation was supposed to be the main planning approach deployed, the City of Cape Town simply expected communities to support pre-designed IDP programmes without explaining the substantive processes informing such programmes to the citizenry. For example, from the inception of the post-apartheid municipal government in Cape Town after December 2000 and especially during the Mayor's Listening Campaigns in historically neglected areas, Councillors and officials failed to explain: the current state of service delivery to communities; the purpose of the IDP; how the IDP would evolve; the benefits of the IDP to communities and the consequences if they did not to participate in the statutory planning process. Consequently, communities attend these supposedly participatory meetings (Mayor's Listening Campaigns) as ill-informed or non-informed spectators. Hence, there has been a notable decrease in community attendance in public participation meetings since 2001.

It would also appear that the Council does not have an adequate database of community organizations, hence the limited number of scheduled community meetings. There is often a lack of public transport to and from public participation venues, making it difficult for communities to attend Council-scheduled meetings. For example, the IDP process for the 2004/2005 budgetary year was largely a ritualistic exercise. It could also be that the decreasing number of community representatives at such IDP meetings suggests that communities do not trust the Council. Such distrust could very well be related to the fact that, institutionally, the public participation process does not seem to receive the necessary co-operation from the City of Cape Town Financial Directorate, as it was not prepared to explain the Draft IDP Budget to communities during the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 budgetary periods. Furthermore, the Directorate did not change its traditional management style to the new participatory style of budgetary planning for the budgetary periods 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. In the case of the communities of Mitchell's Plain and Kraaifontein serious questions were raised about the scrapping of rent arrears and problems pertaining to service payments, yet these questions were not answered by the Finance Department. This means distrust arises as a result of empty promises and the fact that the priorities which are listed by communities at the meetings are not addressed by the Council. Indeed very few community expectations have been met during their participation in the IDP processes. This problem is compounded by the absence of community feedback after the workshops such as the Mayor's Listening Campaign of June 2003.

Other factors detracting from effective community participation in Cape Town relate to the fact that local communities are not well organized or are simply non-existent and, as a consequence, are often represented by so-called leaders without community consent. Communities are not often aware of the fact that they have to be present at sub-council meetings nor are they aware of the existence of Sub-council meetings as participatory instruments. More importantly, perhaps, Council members are not actively engaged in

community issues as complaints about their non-performance are often raised at community meetings.

It is evident that there is a great deal of disunity amongst the communities of the City of Cape Town as they generally lack an understanding of the IDP and its interrelated dimensions and institutional processes, rendering them profoundly vulnerable during the formal community participation meetings scheduled by the Council. Council members do not lead development processes in their constituencies and very seldom provide any feedback on development issues to resident communities. Consequently, IDP processes frequently lack transparency as council members too readily act as 'gate-keepers' by not sharing pertinent information with their particular communities, often for personal political gain. This is reflected in the fact that in 2004, ten years after the birth of democracy in South Africa, communities still do not receive equal electricity services (Williams, 1998, 1999a). Communities with mainly black populations residing in areas maintained by ESKOM, do not receive the minimum government contribution of 60 kilowatts. This is in striking contrast to white communities in municipal areas. Indeed, in general, services are still delivered on the same racial basis as they were delivered prior to the birth of the non-racial Uni-city in December 2000.

In practice, racial boundaries in service delivery still exist and traditional public management attitudes remain (Williams, 2000). A compelling example of inequity can be found in the prevailing method of waste removal. In white areas solid waste, trashed in standard black bins on wheels is removed on a weekly basis while in black areas such as Wallacedene and Scottsdene large dumping waste bins (a hygiene threat) are only removed when the need arises. In plain language, this means that whites are still the privileged group in post-apartheid Cape Town in terms of public service provision. In view of this skewed form of service delivery, the Mayor's so-called Listening Campaign remains largely an expedient, public relations exercise, and cannot be considered as an appropriate conduit for effective community participation in the development and service delivery programmes of Cape Town.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on the empirical evidence presented in the preceding section on community participation in Cape Town, it is evident that the absence of community organizations undermines community participation. It is therefore necessary that communities organize themselves into civic bodies that can represent their interests at local government level. More importantly, perhaps, in historically marginalized sections of society, communities should revisit their richly-textured experiences of organization and mobilization against the apartheid state, and adapt such strategic forms of engagement and dialogue to empower citizens at the grassroots level. In short, the birth of democratic South Africa has not manifested itself in the realization of a more equitable socio-economic dispensation. This specifically means that communities should not cease to engage in social mobilization, on the contrary, they should refocus their organizational and mobilization energies and goals to ensure socio-economic develop-ment programmes commensurable with their enshrined constitutional rights, such as the

right to life and overall human dignity (Williams, 1999b, 2000). Local government planning programmes can only contribute towards these citizen rights if communities are aware of their rights and specifically their right to participate in local government planning programmes.

Hence, in this regard, it would be useful to adapt those community mobilization models that helped to plunge the Apartheid State into the systemic crisis which gave rise to the birth of a democratic South Africa on 27 April 2004 (Williams, 1989). These community forms of struggle include, but are not limited to, issue-based protests and mass demonstrations such as: the confrontational model, exposing existing contradictions, tensions and conflicts inherent in specific planning programmes *vis-à-vis* basic human rights; the engagement/consensual model by trying to reach harmonious equitable planning programmes especially in relation to those sections of society that have been historically marginalized; and, the transformative model by exposing the dominant and uneven relations of power in planning bureaucracies and institutional networks with the view to ensure both the physical and programmatic presence of historically marginalized communities in all planning departments.

At the same time communities need to realize that it is only when they have achieved the position of an informed citizenry with the capacity to enjoy constitutional rights through effective community participation in local planning programmes that they can ensure a more equitable socio-economic status for historically marginalized sections of post-apartheid society (Williams, 2003, 2004a,b). Relying on the good intentions of the bureaucratic elite of local government will not lead them to the Promised Land of 'a better life for all'. This does not mean that members of the bureaucratic elite have no role to play. On the contrary, they can make a very important contribution to effective community participation by acquiring the requisite skills and knowledge of public participation, civil society capacity development and local government. Such knowledge would help to establish a technocratic élan capable of informed decision-making with regard to community-based planning issues. However, to ensure effective grassroots participation in community-based planning programmes local governments must promote education and literacy skills in historically neglected communities. Most importantly, perhaps, wherever possible, local government must facilitate social and political mobilization in historically deprived communities and seek to understand community views on participation and how the principles and practices of participatory planning can enhance organizational and staff capacity and the requisite institutional changes that can effectively transform social relations of power and decision-making in the planning bureaucracy at large.

With the view of encouraging meaningful dialogue, engagement and empower-ment at the grassroots level, it is important that local government leaders continually evaluate the public value of their initiatives. In practice this means ensuring that the voices of ordinary people are heard and valued during community participation sessions and that these views resonate in public policy-making that is made in the interests of the community rather than the technocratic elite.

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