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## **The Politics of Social Change and the Transition to Democratic Governance: Community Participation in Post-apartheid South Africa**

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### **Introduction**

It would seem that, throughout human history, social change is only meaningful for ordinary people when they participate directly in its genesis, form, substance and direction (Loomba et al, 2006), hence the importance of community participation in post-apartheid South Africa (Williams, 2006).

Indeed, community participation, i.e. the direct involvement/engagement of ordinary people in the affairs of planning, governance and overall development programs at the local or grassroots level, has become an integral part of democratic practice in recent years (cfJayal, 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 mayor [should] annually report on the involvement of community organisations 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, 1998c). 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 programs, often the objects of administrative manipulation and a miracle of reconciliation in the international arena of consensus politics, while state functionaries of both the pre- and post-apartheid eras ensconce themselves as bureaucratic experts summonsed 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 five years during election campaigns. In this course of 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 programs are literally non-existent, even though 'community participation' features as a key component of planning programs 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 five years when it is required to vote for a specific party). South Africa has a party-based and not a constituency-based democracy. Citizens vote for the party and not for specific candidates; hence the practice 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, not a democratic one, as the consent for governance is not earned through rigorous policy debates of the merits and demerits of specific social programs, but political acquiescence is manufactured through the skillful manipulation by a host of think-tanks, self-styled experts, opinion polls and media pundits. Indeed, often community participation is managed by a host of consulting agencies on behalf of pre-designed, party-directed planning programs 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 chapter reviews some of this author's research on community participation in Cape Town with the view to advancing specific strategies to effect more meaningful forms of engagement, dialogue and empowerment at the grassroots level (for example, cf Williams, 2003; 2004a, b; 2005a, b, c, d).

The rest of this chapter comprises a brief historical survey of community participation in South Africa, some theoretical perspectives on community participation, some examples of community participation in Cape Town in the period 1994-2004 and recommendations.

#### A brief historical survey of community participation in South Africa

Based on earlier research (Williams, 1989; 2000a, b, c; 2003; 2004a, b), it can be suggested that a brief historical overview of community participation in South Africa can be divided into roughly six interrelated phases:

1. *Pre-1976 period*: this was the strategic dormant participatory phase, where the largely passive dream for liberation amid unspeakable forms of oppression and exploitation resulted in imaginary spaces of participation.
2. *1977-83*: the death of Steve Biko in September 1977 signaled the need not only for community organisation and mobilization at the grassroots level, but also community control.
3. *1984-89*: this was a period of intensifying the 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. The period created spaces of ungovernability throughout South Africa, often affected through the internal struggles led by the United Democratic Front.
4. *1990-94*: this period was characterized by the unbanning of the liberation movements and the beginning of the consensual politics of negotiation. The

negotiated settlement of a range of promissory spaces of participation took place, e.g. the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994.

5. *1996-2000*: the need for visible, experientially significant forms of social change gave rise to the establishment of various types of 'development' programs based on the post-apartheid Constitution, Act 108 of 1996.
6. *2000-04 and beyond*: this period was characterized by the process of interpreting democratic practices based on the experiential index of the past 10 years since the birth of democratic South Africa in 1994. The movement was 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 of other local initiatives that seek to democratize the politically liberated spaces in South Africa.

The preceding historical outline suggests that the nature of community participation depends to a great extent on the nature of organisation 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, it is often driven by specific socioeconomic 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 (for example, cf RSA, 1993; 1995; 1996a, b, c; 1997; 1998b; 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 the 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 this to occur. 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 centralized, deeply authoritarian and secretive, which ensured that fundamental public services were not accessible to black people (Williams, 2000a). 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 with regard to this crucial aspect that the post-apartheid Constitution seeks to make a fundamental difference in the lives of ordinary people in particular in that it centers 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 the local level, will assume critical importance in transforming the unequal relations of power in the institutional planning bureaucracies in the new South Africa.

Indeed, in the wake of the abolition of apartheid in 1990, local government assumed an important role vis-a-vis institutional transformation. Hence public policies were formulated to create 'people-centered development', predicated, among others, on democratic practices such as equity, transparency, accountability and respect for the rights of citizens, especially ordinary people: the poor, homeless and destitute (ANC, 1994; RSA, 1995; 1999; 2000).

Accordingly, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the political manifesto of the African National Congress during its election campaign for the first democratic elections on 27 April 1994, would constitute the overall planning framework for the transition to post-apartheid South Africa (ANC, 1994). The RDP stresses the importance of nation-building through improved standards of living and quality of life for all South Africans, hence the importance of local government vis-a-vis development planning at the grassroots level. Appropriately, therefore, local government is since 1996 a sphere of government in its own right; it is no longer a function of national or provincial government. On the contrary, it is an integral component of the democratic state. In terms of 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 to giving meaningful effect to the basic rights of all citizens, especially black people and the historically neglected and excluded. The latter 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, b, c).

With a view to ensure bottom-up, people-centered, integrated development planning 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). While, 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 that 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 relations of power militate severely against such a constitutionally driven community participatory model of development planning at the grassroots level.

The Constitution, however, does not identify clear measurements of success and failure of such community participation, 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/stretch of the imagination, are, in the new South Africa, expected to be directly responsible for participatory development planning practice at the grassroots level. Here the following 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' as per 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? Could this explain its apparent manipulation and largely symbolic value in the corridors of power at the local level? (Williams, 2004a).

Still, though, this constitutionally entrenched right to participate in the development planning in local government is reinforced in related legislative frameworks and policy documents, accenting without fail the need for and importance of people-driven development at the grassroots level. Thus, for example, the *White Paper on Local Government* (RSA, 1998a) and the Local Government Municipal Systems Act (LGMSA) (RSA, 2000) 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 to bringing as many stakeholders together to delineate, define and promote their common interests, the LGMSA makes integrated development planning (IDP) mandatory at the local level. Theoretically, this means that 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-a-vis a specific municipality, i.e. effective municipal governance at the local level 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 among municipal councilors, officials and community organizations, as borne out by the ensuing literature review.

Some theoretical perspectives

The ensuing literature review is presented under the following rubrics with a view to accent its multi-perspectival content:

- participatory spaces as forms of decentralized governance,
- participants as agents of democratic governance,
- experience as the reflexive lens of participation,
- the empowering/disempowering interface: the fear of co-optation,
- participatory spaces as living community networks,
- participatory spaces of resistance,
- spaces for alternative knowledge formations and institutional change,
- transforming dominant relations of power in participatory spaces,
- non-participation: a voice of distrust in regulatory spaces, and
- Participatory democracy and its discontents.

### **Participatory spaces as forms of decentralized governance**

The space for participation emerges from a legal construction, hence the notion of a '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 among a range of stakeholders at the 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 programs, however, can counter the elite. 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 the local level, and even elsewhere (Kanyinga, 1998). Individualistic notions of participation can override and undermine such counter-elite strategies (MacKian, 1998). This tension between individual ambitions and collective goals with regard to 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' fulfills such a legitimization role (Robinson, 1998).

Referring to the experiences in specific public sectors in Europe and the United States, Bossert (n.d.) states that the public participatory process seeks to establish a balance of interests to avoid being captured by special interests (for example, cf Gargarella, 1998). In Bossert's 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 (for example, cf Sunstein, 1998). Even so, in Bossert's judgment, some interest groups are usually more likely than others to organize themselves and to articulate their interests effectively. He argues that interest groups that 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 contrast, diffuse interest groups without significant investments and low resources, such as the poor and general taxpayers, are often unable to promote their interests effectively. Nevertheless, in Bossert's view, promoting civic networks and broader interest in local concerns strengthens the basis for democratic life (for example, cf Mackie, 1998).

### **Participants as agents of democratic governance**

Bucek & Smith (2000) argue that public participation in institutions of local governance allows for the possibility of revitalizing democracy (cf also 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 significance. 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 (Tully, 1999; Shaw & Martin 2000). 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 the local level (Tully, 1999; Shaw & Martin 2000). This means that participants must be aware of their abilities to make judgments, to effect meaningful change and to play political roles as citizens (Mahajan & Reifeld, 2003). For such a change-inducing scenario to come to pass, citizens must act in a well-structured process (Wondolleck & Manring, 1996). And in the view of Yeich & Levine (1994), such joint co-operation improves collective political efficacy.

### **Experience as the reflexive lens of participation**

Institutional participatory practices are often informed by experiential knowledges 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 a feeling of connectedness (Higgins-Wharf, 1999; Elster, 1998). This range of subjective indicators suggests the need for a multi-perspective approach to the reasons why people participate in local institutions of governance (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, 2001; Chandhoke, 2003). 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 the latter are frequently co-opted by the system and are thus perceived as not being caring about the constituencies whom they are supposed to represent (Robson, Locke & Dawson, 1997). Nonetheless, as Chapman & Wameyo (2001) indicate, there is evidence to suggest that some participants do act as advocates of the interests of the poor and marginalised. Participation, especially in informal networks, has positive results in LIGs for ordinary marginalised people.

### **The empowering/disempowering interface: 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 the local level (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). This exposure to vital information then serves to generate a radical consciousness among ordinary people with regard to the possibilities for transformative budgetary allocations at the grassroots level (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). 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; Cohen, 1998). It is only where a sense of dignity, vision and 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, Rocheleau & Kothari (2002), such 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 and in their communities as a living habitat. Such shared spaces then contain the possibility for the democratisation 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 sociocultural relations of power in a particular community (Gambetta, 1998). Thus, particular community groups can act as a countervailing force to corporations in specific areas (Jong, 2001). 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 a 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 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 an immutable given, is being shaped by particular decision-makers representing the interests of a plurality of allegiances (Price-Chalita, 1994). This characterizes 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 knowledges of the participating groups and the dominant relations of power (Probyn, 1990). Such relations of power would be connected to both the local places and spaces and the wider sociopolitical processes (Routledge, 1997). To the extent that ordinary people can enter such wider sociopolitical processes, to that extent they can seek to overcome their isolation and marginalization (Staeheli, 1996). 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 the shifting of power relations—i.e. governmentality—beyond a particular institution to other institutions in the same place (Edwards, 2001).

### **Spaces for alternative knowledge formations and institutional change**

Fischer (2001) 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 (Fischer, 2001). However, as Geibel (2001) points out, the incorporation of local knowledges into policy

frameworks is often contingent on pressures applied at the grassroots level from international bodies (Negus & Roman-Velazquez, 2000). 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 (Barnes, 1999; Hebdige, 2001; Golding & Murdock, 2000).

### **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 (Holmes & Scoones, 1999). 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 that participatory processes legitimate the decision-making processes to the extent that divergent and often competing claims have been considered through debate, engagement and judgment (Johnson, 1998). A critical, reflexive discourse comes into being where key democratic notions such as 'justice', 'rationality' and 'political will' underpin the deliberative process (O'Neill, 2001; Gambetta, 1998; Fearon, 1998). Where individuals change their perspectives through rational debates, the politics of presence exercise significant influence (O'Neill, 2001).

### **Non-participation: A voice of 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 a 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 (Patterson, 2000). Experiential relations, however, between the represented and representatives serve to improve trust in the process of public participation and government (Prior & Walsh, 1995; Stokes, 1998). Usually, the most organized sections of the community have the time and money to participate in public forums (Smith & Wales, 2000). State actors, however, often mobilize people to participate in community forums (Abers, 1998). Also, advocacy groups, in solidarity with poor communities, can be effective vehicles to usher in substantial representation and the empowerment of the marginalised in society (Baker, 2000). In poor communities, informal communication strategies such as street theatre can serve to conscientise and inform the marginalised about community issues and their rights vis-a-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 the grassroots level (Fung & Wright, 2001; Forment, 1996).

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In a recent paper on community participation in Brazil, Lavallo, Acharya & Houtzager (2005) point out those ties to political parties and contractual relations often increase the ability of civil organisations 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 eventual outcome of a particular public participation process (Goetz & Gaeta, 2001). Often, though, the old-fashioned Freirean approaches of awareness, competence and assertiveness of people and their leadership continue to be the tested and tried factors that determine whether or not ordinary people are empowered at the grassroots level (Ellis, 1993). 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 (Michel's & Van Montfort, 2001; Przeworski, 1998). When constitutional rights are taken seriously, they do tend to introduce new relations and discursive issues into specific policy agendas and frameworks (Seidman, 1999). Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that existing social relations exercise powerful influence on how local knowledges are constructed and presented (Mosse, 1994). 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 (Goodwin, 1999). It is under such circumstances of ambivalent realities and contestations around a specific socioeconomic agenda that the ideological construct of 'national interest' appears to exercise a cohering role in the public domain of competing policy frameworks (Goodwin, 1999).

### **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 (Alvarez, 1993; Oommen, 2004). Redefining mainstream notions such as 'ability' may allow marginalised sectors of society such as the 'disabled' to enter deliberative politics and reshape the discourse and substance of actual lived citizenship (Barnes, Harrison, Moore, Shardlow & Wistow, 1999). 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, 2001; Kensen & Tops, 2001). 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 (Werbner & Yuval-Davis, 1999; 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 (Chandhoke, 2003).

The preceding literature review suggests that there are various factors that contribute towards meaningful community participation at the grassroots level vis-a-vis a particular local authority (municipality). With a view to ascertaining the extent to which the preceding theoretical perspectives accord with empirical reality, the ensuing section considers briefly some examples of community participation in one of the biggest municipalities in South Africa, the much-vaunted and self-avowedly liberal City of Cape Town, in the period 1994-2004.

### **Some examples of community participation in Cape Town, 1994-2004**

In the City of Cape Town, where the author worked from 1990 till 2004 as a principal urban and regional planner (policy and research), there were various attempts at encouraging community participation in the development programs of local government, ranging from critiquing local area planning in 1989 and the definition of a metropolitan spatial development framework in 1991 to the revision and elaboration of various drafts of service delivery programs, eventually resulting in a number of integrated development plans for the City of Cape Town.<sup>1</sup>

Williams (2003; 2004a, b) examines area coordinating 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 uses 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 programs in metropolitan Cape Town.

Theoretically, any public policy that encourages transparency, constructively engages and involves citizens in the functions of a local government, and seeks to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives is good public policy. In this regard, ACTs constitute good public policy—on paper. Creating institutional space and opportunities where individuals, community organisations, council administrations and elected representatives can sit and discuss issues affecting their lives, whether it be improvement of infrastructure, housing, health, or any other service that is provided by local government, should be encouraged and sustained. In practice, though, ACTs are a structural failure. The issues raised at the ACTs are completely non-binding, as council is not obliged to follow through on any issue raised through ACTs. Also, often individual officials and councilors 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

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of this chapter, kindly see the bibliography for all the detailed references to documentation related to Cape Town.

change, council must support ACTs, both by passing appropriate by-laws to institutionalize them officially and by drawing up a code of conduct that compels officials and councilors 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 socioeconomic power in the City of Cape Town.

This means that it is not so much the presence or absence of community organisations at the grassroots level that determines the nature and impact of community participation on local government development programs, 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 integrated development plans. For example, in the case of Cape Town, community organizations, in the form of development forums, are well-organized.

Both the Mitchell's Plain and the Khayelitsha Development Forums are actively engaged in the Urban Renewal Programme, which seeks to address poverty and unemployment in both areas.

Ward committees operate effectively in the Khayelitsha Sub-Council areas, despite the fact that the ward committee system has not even been officially implemented in the City of Cape Town. Despite these forms of organization in the Khayelitsha and Mitchell's Plain Sub-Council areas, Mackay (2004)<sup>2</sup> indicates that 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 for 2004/05 to allow community representatives to influence the annual budgetary process by making specific recommendations on particular service delivery programs to the planning authorities in the municipality of Cape Town. 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 its planning programs. 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. The IDP Directorate, in terms of the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, is supposed to ensure effective community participation in the planning pregame of a particular municipality. Yet, in the case of Cape Town, the specific directorate in question does not seem to have either the logistic capacity or the human resources to comply with this statutory requirement. Consequently, community participation in relation to IDP is largely a ceremonial exercise and not a systematic engagement of communities that is structurally aligned to the development and service delivery programs of the City of Cape Town. Equally

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<sup>2</sup> Mackay, an employee of the City of Cape Town, has been the author's student from 2003. These perspectives are based on his research assignments and personal discussions with the author.

important, in Cape Town, there are no real institutional structures to co-ordinate, evaluate and monitor community participation in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of IDP

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Hence, institutional conflicts seem to exist in Cape Town in relation to community participation. In this regard, Mackay's research (2004: 60-108) is quite revealing. For example, while the Transformation Office in Cape Town claims responsibility and accountability for community participation, it lacks the requisite facilitation or co-ordination infrastructure and skills to execute this statutory task. In fact, the two public participation practitioners are unskilled, lacking the required training and knowledge base in public and development management methodologies to function optimally. This explains the obvious lack of communication and co-ordination of logistics during the IDP participation sessions from 2001 till 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 providing input as to how the IDP process should be conducted. Also, not a single community organization or non-governmental organization participated in the assessment of the form of public participation; the community needs analysis or the planning of the way forward regarding budgetary alignments. While popular participation was supposed to be the main planning approach, the City of Cape Town simply expected communities to support pre-designed IDP programs without explaining to them the substantive processes informing such programs. For example, right 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, councilors and officials failed to explain the current state of service delivery to communities or the purpose of the IDP process, how the IDP process would evolve, the benefits the integrated development plan offered communities and the consequences if they did not 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 attendance by communities at the public participation meetings since 2001.

It could be that the decreasing number of community representatives at such IDP meetings suggests that communities do not trust 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 2001/02 and 2002/03 budgetary periods. Also, this directorate did not change its traditional management style to the new participatory style of budgetary planning for the budgetary periods 2001/02 and 2002/03. For example, 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 City of Cape Town Finance Department. This means distrust arises as a result of empty promises and the fact that the priorities that are listed by communities at the meetings are not addressed or go unnoticed by council. Indeed, very few community expectations are met during communities' participation in the IDP processes. Also, feedback is seldom, if ever given to communities after workshops such as the Mayor's Listening Campaign of June 2003.

There appears to be a great deal of disunity among the communities of the City of Cape Town, as they generally lack an understanding of the IDP process and its interrelated dimensions and institutional processes, rendering them profoundly vulnerable during the formal community participation meetings (scheduled by council). Also, often council members do not lead development processes in their constituencies (the areas they represent) 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, apparently for personal political gain, such as not causing unnecessary conflict with the predesigned format, dimensions and substance of an existing integrated development plan.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the preceding examples of community participation in Cape Town, it is clear that often the non-existence of community organizations undermines community participation. It is, therefore, necessary that communities organize themselves into civic bodies that can represent their interests at the 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 does not mean the realization of a more equitable socioeconomic dispensation. This specifically means communities should not cease to organize; on the contrary, they should refocus their organizational and mobilization energies and goals to ensure the introduction of socioeconomic development programs commensurate with their enshrined constitutional rights, such as the right to life and overall human dignity (Williams, 1999b; 2000a, b, c). Local government planning programs can only contribute towards these citizen rights if communities are aware of their rights and specifically their right to participate in local government planning programs.

It may even be useful to review and adapt those models of mobilization that communities used to plunge the apartheid state into systemic crisis and contribute to the birth of a democratic South Africa on 27 April 1994 (Williams, 1989). Community forms of struggle include, but are not limited to, issue-based protests and mass

demonstrations based on the confrontational model. This model entails exposing existing contradictions, tensions and conflicts inherent to specific planning programs vis-a-vis basic human rights. It could also involve creating harmonious equitable planning programs especially in relation to those sections of society that have been historically marginalised, based on the engagement/consensual model. In addition, the dominant and uneven relations of power in planning bureaucracies and institutional networks could be accentuated with the view to ensuring both the physical and programmatic presence of historically marginalized communities in all planning departments based on the transformative model (Friedmann, 1992).

Councilors, planners and administrators (CPAs) can make a very important contribution to effective community participation by acquiring the requisite skills and knowledge of public participation, civil society and local government. Such knowledge would make CPAs informed decision-makers with regard to community-based planning issues. However, to ensure effective grassroots participation in community-based planning programs, CPAs must promote education and literacy skills in historically neglected communities. Most importantly, perhaps, CPAs must, wherever possible, facilitate social and political mobilization of especially 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 a view to encouraging meaningful dialogue, engagement and empowerment at the grassroots level, it is important that CPAs continuously ask the recurring question that ordinary people pose: During the community participation sessions, whose voices are heard; what are the overriding perspectives and scenarios that are considered legitimate, acceptable and practical; and in whose interests are such dialogues with the community ultimately—do they really serve the poor communities of Cape Town, or are they simply highly atrophied, and thus status quo-entrenching instruments of the newly established black elite?



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