Community Participation and Democratic Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Rhetoric vs Reality[1]

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Community participation is important in post-apartheid South Africa with regard to the design, implementation and evaluation of integrated development planning at local level. This paper evaluates a number of research projects to assess community participation in Cape Town from 1994 to 2004. Evidence, however, suggests that community participation has been largely rhetorical and not substantive. Thus, with a view to encourage strategic engagement of communities with local authorities, this paper suggests a range of conceptual, theoretical and practical steps to advance transformative planning practices at grassroots level. Hence the importance of substantive elements of community participation such as the initiation, identification, orientation and authentication of participatory processes.

Keywords: South African constitution, local government, integrated development planning, policy debates, programmatic purpose, planning bureaucracy, grassroots, Area Coordinating Teams, Mayor's Listening Campaign.

1. Problem statement and key arguments

The direct involvement/engagement of ordinary people in the design, implementation and evaluation of planning, governance and overall development programmes at local or grassroots level, has become an integral part of democratic practice in recent years.[3] 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, states that "[t]he participation of citizens in the structures will…

revolutionise the way that local governance happens at the metropolitan level. Individual municipalities will be empowered to decide what is best for their situation, with the guidance of national legislation that permits a variety of forms of local participation" (RSA,1998). 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, 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".

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 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[4] (except every four years when it is required to vote for a specific party). Such a limited form of democracy gives rise to an administered society, not a democratic society, as the consent for governance is not earned through rigorous policy debates of the merits and demerits of specific social programmes, but political acquiescence is manufactured through the skilful 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 programmes 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 paper reviews community participation in Cape Town with the view to advance specific strategies to effect more meaningful forms of engagement, dialogue and empowerment at grassroots level.

The rest of this paper comprises three interrelated sections, viz:
• Post-apartheid constitution and its significance for community participation
• Some examples of community participation in Cape Town: 1994-2004; and
• Conclusions and recommendations.

2. Post-apartheid Constitution and its significance for community participation

The history of the struggle against Apartheid in Cape Town indicates that community participation depends to a great extent on the nature of organization and mobilization at grassroots level as well as the programmatic purpose of such participation (Williams, 1989). 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(cf eg RSA, 1993; 1995; 1996,a,b,c; 1997, 19981,b; 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 (Friedmann, 1992). 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 (Williams, 2000). Indeed, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in recent years have made 'public participation' a type of mantra to effect meaningful change in the lives of poor people (McGee with Norton, 2000). Moreover, the World Bank[5] has launched a special website called " Voices of the Poor", to provide the necessary educational and training materials for "people-centred" development at local level, a sentiment that also resonates profoundly in post-apartheid South Africa.

It should be stressed, however, that local government in South Africa had until the early 1990's 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).

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, amongst 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).

With a view to ensure bottom-up, people-centred,

integrated development planning at 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 of 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 grassroots level.

Extant literature suggests 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 grassroots level vis-à-vis a specific municipality, ie, effective municipal governance at 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 between municipal councillors, officials and community organizations (Lavalle, 2004).

Most researchers also agree that there are various factors that contribute towards meaningful community participation at 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 councilors and officials

in a specific municipality to ensure effective, efficient and sustainable community participation in development planning programmes (cf eg Friedmann, 1992; Fung and Wright., 2001). Since ten 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 these theoretical perspectives, the ensuing section considers briefly some examples of community participation in on one of the biggest municipalities in South Africa, the much-vaunted and self-avowed liberal City of Cape Town, 1994-2004.

3. 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 & Research), there were various attempts at encouraging community participation in the development programmes of Local Government, ranging from critiquing local area planning in 1989, the definition of 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 Integrated Development Plans for the City of Cape Town.

Williams (2003; 2004a,2004b) 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 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 integrated development planning projects and programmes in Metropolitan Cape Town.

Williams concludes that Areas Coordinating Teams

constitute good public policy – on paper. By creating institutional space 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, should be encouraged and sustained. In practice, though, ACTs are a structural failure. Not only are the issues raised at the ACTs completely non-binding, as Council is not obliged to follow through on any issue raised through ACTs. Also, 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, Council must 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 Integrated Development Plans [IDPs]. For example, in the case of Cape Town, Mackay (2004)[6] 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 Mayor's Listening Campaign through which various meetings

were held in 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 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 their planning progammes 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 Municipal Systems Act, Act No 32 of 2000, is supposed to ensure effective community participation in a municipality's s Planning Progamme, yet, in the case of Cape Town, for example, the specific directorate in question, does not seem to have either the logistical capacity nor 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 to influence the Development and Service Delivery Programmes of the City of Cape Town. Equally 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 the Integrated Development Planning.

Hence, the institutional conflicts that seems to exist in Cape Town in relation to community participation. In this regard, Mac Kay's research (2004, pp 60-108) is quite revealing: For example, whilst 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 fact the two Public Participation practitioners are unskilled, lacking the required training and knowledge base in public and development management methodologies to function optimally. Hence the obvious lack of communication

and co-ordination of logistics during the IDP's 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 making input as to how the IDP should be conducted. Also, 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, yet the City of Cape Town simply expected communities to support pre-designed IDP programmes without explaining to them the substantive processes informing such programmes. 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, Councillors and officials failed to explain the current state of service delivery to communities or the purpose of the IDP; how the IDP would evolve; the benefits the IDP offered for communities and the consequences if they did not participate in statutory planning processes. Consequently, communities attend these supposedly participatory meetings (Mayor's Listening Campaigns) as ill-informed or non-informed spectators. Hence there is a notable decrease in attendance by communities at public participation meetings since 2001, perhaps because they 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 Council officials. 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. Also, feedback is seldom, if at all given to communities after the workshops such as the Mayor's Listening Campaign of June 2003.

Indeed, in Cape Town in 2004, ten years since the birth of democracy in South Africa, communities still do not receive equal electricity services. Black communities, residing in areas maintained by ESKOM, do not receive the minimum government contribution of 60 kilowatts like those largely white communities who reside in municipal areas. Indeed, generally, 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 fact, racial boundaries in service delivery still exist and attitudes of management have still not changed (Williams, 1998; 1999a, 2000). For example, in Cape Town, the method of waste removal is disproportionate because solid waste, trashed in standard black bins on wheels, in white areas, is removed on a weekly basis while Big Dumping Waste Bins (a hygiene threat) in Black areas such as Wallacedene and Scottsdene are only removed when the need arises – ie they are removed on an irregular basis. In plain language, this means that whites are still the privileged group in post-apartheid Cape Town. 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.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

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 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 grassroots level. In short, the birth of democratic South Africa does not mean the realization of a more equitable socio-economic 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 socio-economic development programmes commensurate with their enshrined constitutional rights, such as the right to life and overall human dignity (Williams, 1999b; 2000a,b,c). 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 perhaps be useful to review and adapt those models of mobilization that communities used to plunge the Apartheid State into systemic crisis that resulted in the birth of a democratic South Africa on 27 April 2004 (Williams, 1989). These community forms of struggle included, amongst other strategies, issue-based protests and mass demonstrations against poor services (Ibid). It is only when communities realize that, unless they are informed citizens claiming their constitutional rights through effective community participation in local planning programmes, only then they can ensure a more equitable socio-economic dispensation in historically marginalized sections of the post-apartheid society (Williams, 2003; 20004a,b). Relying on the good intentions of the bureaucratic elite of local government, as borne out by their highly questionable record since 1994, quite obviously does not take them to the Promised Land of "a better life for all". This, however, does not mean that the bureaucratic elite of councilors and planning officials have no role to play. On the contrary, they can make a very important contribution to effective community participation by, amongst other practical steps:
• acquire the requisite skills and knowledge of public

participation, civil society, local government;
• promote education and literacy skills in historically neglected communities;
• understand community views on participation.
• encourage voluntary participation;
• ensure that the public's contribution will influence planning decisions;
• ensure equal opportunities for participation;
• seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected;
• communicate to participants how their input affected the decision;
• provide participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way;

Most importantly perhaps, Councillors and officials must realize that community participation is not a neutral endeavour. Hence they must consider the following planning issues that impact on community participation vis-à-vis integrated development planning at local level, viz:

• **intervention:** who makes the decision(s) with regard to specific issues eg officials or councillors or civil society bodies or all of them and how?
• **initiation** of specific steps to change existing situation on the ground eg in terms of Reconstruction and Development Programme [RDP]: what is the origin of specific development of policies? Were they local, national, regional or global and why?;
• **identification** eg who identifies specific policy issues: what factors impact on particular service delivery programmes? Are they all taken into consideration? If not, why not?
• **orientation**: eg whose voices are heard, what are the overriding perspectives, ideals, frame of reference, intended beneficiaries?;
• **authentication**: eg are there instances of co-determination of service-related issues, ie partnerships with specific community groups ? Are these partnerships sustainable?

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