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Social Change and Community Participation: The Case of Health Facilities Boards in the Western Cape of South Africa

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This chapter investigates whether South Africa's post-apartheid legislation has had any significant impact on how Health Facilities Boards (HFBs) respond to the constitutional right of ordinary people, especially Black[1] people, to participate in the provision of healthcare services in their communities. It investigates community participation in HFBs by focusing on the historical context of participation in South Africa; the ideals of participation in the post-apartheid regime; the practices of participation; and the tensions that inform it. Analysis of two HFBs in the Western Cape suggests three possible reasons for the racially skewed nature of HFBs and why Black people in general do not participate in them. First, historically, whites have dominated institutions of governance in South Africa, including hospitals and their related structures. Second, procedures for the election of HFBs seem to favour literate and influential members of a community at the expense of poorer, largely illiterate members. Third, the culture of deference to professional authority undermines substantive dialogue and the empowerment of Black communities. Drawing on evidence from surveys of hospital users and interviews with hospital managers and members of HFBs, this chapter seeks to unravel some of the dynamics of exclusion from these invited spaces and explore some of the steps that might be taken to amplify the representation of hitherto excluded actors.[2]

Participation in Contemporary South Africa

Contemporary possibilities for citizen participation in South African politics are deeply shaped by the country's apartheid history. There were no legal rights or avenues for Black participation in political self-governance until 1994. The government was highly centralized, deeply authoritarian and secretive, and ensured that fundamental public services were not accessible to Black people. The struggle against apartheid took place outside the spaces of governance, and sought to mobilize community participation in order to transform South Africa's repressive government. Until 1976, a largely passive dream for liberation existed amidst unspeakable forms of oppression and exploitation. Dormant as its actualization remained, this allowed at least imagined spaces of participation.

The murder of Steve Biko in September 1977 signalled the need for not only community organization and mobilization at grassroots level but also community control. In subsequent years, spaces of community organization and mobilization multiplied throughout South Africa, culminating in the birth of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. The UDF claimed operational spaces against the apartheid state throughout South Africa, sustaining community forms of liberatory struggles at street and neighbourhood levels, often in the name of the banned liberation movements such as the African National Congress. From 1984 to 1989 the struggle against the apartheid state intensified, extending from local to international arenas, resulting in a range of divestment campaigns and cultural boycotts. This period created spaces of ungovernability throughout South Africa. The period from 1990 to 1994 saw the unbanning of the liberation movements and the beginning of the consensual politics of negotiation, leading up to and beyond the end of white minority rule.

The period since 1994 has been one of 'transitional governance', involving the negotiation of demands for democratization and deep social change. In this context, community participation has literally become synonymous with legitimate governance. This began with the negotiated settlement of a range of promissory spaces of participation, such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994 and the Constitution of South Africa of 1996: the former the outcome of community participation and the latter ensconcing the right to participate in local government planning programmes.

From 1996 to 2000, the need for visible, experientially significant forms of social change gave rise to various types of 'development' partnerships mediated by socio-historical relations of power and trust, resulting in largely truncated spaces of participation. Since 2000, there has been a manifest shift from euphoria to disappointment, from generative hope to existential despair at the slow pace of change. Yet this despair, too, has given rise to new transformative spaces such as the Treatment Action Campaign, Jubilee 2000 and a myriad other local initiatives that seek to democratize politically liberated spaces. At present, then, community participation finds a strong place in rhetorics of governance, but with mixed results on the ground, as entrenched power relations shape the possibility of this participation being meaningful.

These broad dynamics play out in local government politics. Until the early 1990s, local government had no constitutional safeguard, as it was perceived as a structural extension of the state and a function of provincial government. In the wake of the abolition of apartheid in 1990, local government assumed an important role vis-à-vis institutional transformation. Thus, with a view to ensuring bottom-up, people-centred, integrated development planning at grassroots level, the South African constitution states that '[t]he objective of local government is to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government' (RSA 1996: subsection 152e). This is a radical posture, but one that encounters profound structural limitations in the midst of bureaucratic institutions and uneven relations of power.

There is reason for concern that in South Africa ordinary people serve mainly as endorsers of pre-designed planning programmes and objects of administrative manipulation in which bureaucratic elites impose their own truncated version of 'community participation' on particular communities. Consent for governance is not earned through rigorous policy debates of the merits and demerits of specific social programmes; rather, political acquiescence is manufactured through 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.

What possibilities exist, then, for meaningful spaces of participation? Some of the limitations of these spaces, and also some of their