

## Cape Town's Area Coordinating Committees – bottom up participatory planning at work?

### John Williams

South Africa's post-apartheid constitution requires local authorities to consult communities prior to any decision being taken that might affect them. Area Coordinating Teams (ACTs) are a key mechanism for doing this in the city of Cape Town. ACTs are intended to encourage politicians, bureaucrats and communities to reach consensus in planning, housing, health care and infrastructure. However, it is only when these teams develop from being simple symbols of participation to real instruments of change that they can make a real difference in their communities.

Research from the University of the Western Cape assesses whether the participatory spaces opened by ACTs are contributing to grassroots-oriented development programmes. Though there is much to admire in the concept, the author regrets that the ACT process is purely consultative. ACTs have been set up for their symbolic value, rather than to empower communities or to transform unequal relations of socio-economic power in Cape Town.

In 1998 the Cape Town municipality established six ACTs with a view to empowering historically marginalised and excluded township communities. Membership is drawn from three sets of actors: local officials responsible for housing, cleaning, roads, sewerage, health, libraries, sport, recreation and parks; local and ward councillors and all community-based organisations (CBOs) working in a particular area.

CBOs are diligent attenders of ACT meetings. Many participants in the ACT process are young activists with high expectations of a better life in the new democratic order. Four fifths of the CBOs sending representatives to ACT meetings have come into existence since the end of apartheid. Most report that understanding between the city authorities and the communities they represent has improved since ACTs were set up.

However, ACTs face several constraints:

- Many local government functionaries who have been in office since the apartheid era remain deeply uncomfortable with the requirement to consult with ordinary people and are sceptical of their ability to understand planning, governance and management issues.
- ACTs are not taken seriously in the corridors of power – there is little political commitment to their continued existence.
- Many councillors and officials do not bother to turn up for scheduled ACT meetings.
- ACTs lack criteria to define a community organisation: this results in accusations that they entrench elitism by allowing people to claim to be speaking on behalf of communities without having to provide them with any feedback.
- ACT meetings can be unproductive or chaotic – meeting time is wasted on complaints, ideological debates or slanderous accusations against particular officials.
- There are no clear procedures on whether or not individuals should be encouraged to attend and participate.

The legislation and documentation that established ACTs are specific about their limited powers. Participatory governance is not to be interpreted as permitting interference with the municipal council's right to exercise executive and legislative authority. There is no requirement for the Council to take action on any decision made by an ACT.

ACTs are institutionally manipulated and structurally limiting. They serve to ratify rather than influence official behaviour. Communities are only consulted as long as they support the goals of particular officials or politicians.

The author calls on Cape Town City Council to:

- enact by-laws to institutionalise ACTs
- establish minimum criteria for CBO participation in ACT meetings – defining number of members, the constitution, banking and accounting rules and procedures for annual general meetings
- draw up codes of conduct to compel officials and councillors to attend ACT meetings and to take their deliberations seriously.

ACTs could become effective instruments of fundamental social change and open a space for implementation of community-driven projects. The fact that Cape Town communities without an ACT have requested them indicates their potential as catalysts for grass-roots development planning.

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**Source(s):**

'Citizenship, community participation and social change: the case of Area Coordinating Teams in Cape Town, South Africa' by John J. Williams, IDS Bulletin, Vol 35, No 2, pp 19-25, Institute of Development Studies, April 2004

**id21 Research Highlight:** 26 May 2004