

# Can participation make a difference? Prospects for people's participation in planning

By **Dr David Hemson**, Research Director, Infrastructure and Service Delivery, URED, HSRC.

THE QUESTION of public participation has become one of general debate in South Africa. Government officials at the national, provincial and local spheres often mention that there are formal processes laid down in policy and statutes for participation, and often encourage the idea. Social movements and the poor respond that these either do not exist or they are powerless and ineffective. The izimbizo convened by the Presidency and provincial authorities tend to bring out the problems in meeting the demands of the poor. These dilemmas point to the need for the 'deepening' of democracy over time, a phrase suggesting that the existing formal democratic structures of society are not opening public decision-making to the historically dispossessed. The historic Reconstruction and Development Programme stated that deepening democracy would ensure that elected structures conduct themselves in "an answerable and transparent manner" (ANC, 1995: 5.2.3).

It also implies that the same structures are not progressively working to end the deprivation of apartheid by providing essential services to poor people.

The upsurge in social movements over the past few years has increasingly raised issues relating to the inequality of access by the poor; in urban centres this has centred on the disconnection of households from services such as electricity and water. In the deep rural areas there has not been the same outburst of social mobilisation, but the izimbizo similarly reveal deep discontent with either the absence of essential services or services which operate very poorly.

These issues associated with impoverishment and disconnections have been highlighted in service delivery (McDonald, 2002) while other analysis points to the sizable backlog which still exists despite a considerable increase in access to services providing

for human development (Hemson, 2004). Crucially, it is anticipated (Hemson, 2006) that the targets for safe water and improved sanitation to be provided may not be reached. On this basis there is a scenario for continued deprivation and impoverishment for a large segment of the rural population whose lives are not improving.

Although there are occasional statements of the need for government policy to be pro-poor, and there has been a considerable extension of social grants, poverty and deprivation still characterise conditions for the black majority. Increasingly there is a tendency for the middle class leadership to abandon their roots on their way to enrichment; an issue which has driven President Mbeki to denounce their preoccupation with wealth. The opposite side of the coin is the problem that the slow increase in growth does not create jobs and all-round development; that an extremely large wealth gap persists; and that there is still a paucity of skills.

Although the last municipal elections had a high level of participation, the problems that preceded them, such as inferior services and arrogant municipal officials, have tended to persist. To what extent can public participation in local and provincial government provide a remedy and turn around the situation in access and quality of services, and bring about changes in the interests of the poor?

In this article the public participation of citizens in South Africa beyond elections, and in the opportunities provided for in local government, is explored to understand the extent to which forms of such participation are available to citizens. Can public participation break through the 'blockages' to service

*The izimbizo convened by the Presidency and provincial authorities tend to bring out the problems in meeting the demands of the poor.*

delivery identified by the President and open up the prospect for delivery and improved services?

The idea of participation is popularly put forward as a solution to the problems of service delivery and to achieve public accountability. In a recent interview Gauteng Provincial Secretary Gengiza Mgidlana said:

“We need more public participation. We educate communities about the importance of participation, structures, provincial government and their role as citizens. If people find a gap in our administration or policies, they can petition for changes and we are obliged to consider submissions on everything from our budget and service delivery to policy prioritisation. Communities must verify service delivery through these means.” (Jackson, October 2006.)

Is this an idealised conception of the relationships between communities and government or could such participation provide remedies to problematic access, or no access, to services?

### What is the purpose of participation?

There are essentially three levels of participation identified here in local government. Firstly there is the formal electoral participation through voting at municipal and national elections and, secondly, participation as a citizen in official structures such as izimbizo, ward committees and in the consultations of the municipal Integrated Development Plans. Finally there are the wide range of activities opening up through the development of social movements;

the contestation of municipal policy and practice through marches, memoranda and the setting up of local alternative community structures.

Voting is a form of participation less demanding than social mobilisation and engages the largest number of people; other forms of participation involve smaller numbers. Contemporary surveys such as SASAS (the national attitude survey conducted by the HSRC) provide some measurement of the engagement in official structures such as ward committees, although the level of participation in social movements (while highly visible) still has to be gauged. The levels of participation are least demanding at the electoral level and most demanding in the form of participation through community groupings and social movements.

Citizen participation is possible in a variety of activities but occurs largely at the local government level where needs are most pressing and government most accessible. This is also the level at which formal institutions and procedures are set out in policy and

statute (although they may exist very unevenly).

There are at least two levels at which participation is justified; firstly as a *democratic requirement* to allow citizens to engage in decisions about the multifold issues in social, environmental, and service issues largely at a local level and, secondly, to *improve the effectiveness* of government in providing services through the articulation of ‘customer’ issues causing dissatisfaction. The resolution of such dissatisfaction would secure an improved service, possibly at a lower cost since the reasons for vandalism and non-payment would be removed.

The language of politics here is crucial. The term ‘citizen’ implies individuals acting within a framework of rights and in a political context, that of ‘customer’ and ‘client’ (the language of the World Bank and neo-liberal discourse) relates to an individual whose primary relationship is in the context of service provision in which commercial relations, rather than political relations, apply. In the former context relationships are primarily institutional and political; in the latter they are contractual and commercial. In addition ‘citizen’ implies the possibility of group action, while customer implies an individual engaged with a service provider.

In the debates which are preceding the finalisation of a regulatory framework in water (and in other services) civil society has insisted on the use of ‘citizen’ not just as a matter of language, but also because the term ‘customer’ is often inappropriate. In the water sector where there are substantial numbers of households that do not yet have access to safe water, the term ‘customer’ does not apply and the primary issue is that of citizens’ rights to access.

### Seeking answers from surveys

Two important questions arise in relation to participation: firstly of the levels of engagement by citizens in local government and, secondly, of its effectiveness. The author has made use of the SASAS (the national attitude survey conducted by the HSRC) to analyse the participation through the knowledge of formal institutions and attitudes towards voting, declining to vote, and social mobilisation. The SASAS survey is conducted annually and in the last survey a total of 5 843 respondents were surveyed from across the nation in all provinces and geotypes (such as urban townships, tribal areas, shacklands, etc). Quality control is exercised, but in the light of the proven track record of the service provider, only 1% of captured questionnaires needed to be checked. The material does not, however, provide full measures of participation in social mobilisation.

A number of questions are examined in relation

*Citizen participation is possible in a variety of activities but occurs largely at the local government level where needs are most pressing and government more accessible.*

to participation:

- Are the formal structures of participation available to citizens?
- Are these readily available to the poor and those living in impoverished areas?
- Is participation an indication of the level of political knowledge and discussion among citizens?
- Does participation lead to a greater conviction that delivery will be improved?

The survey indicates that the largest proportion (43%) have some knowledge of ward committees in their areas, some do not know (23%) and the remainder are not sure (34%). Those not sure may be evenly divided between those who in fact have a ward committee (although it may not be well known) or do not have such a committee, but the data does indicate that less than half the adult population acknowledges the existence of a ward committee (Figure 1).

The reporting of answers to the question. “Do you have a ward committee in your neighbourhood?” has a voluntary element i.e. a respondent is likely to know something about ward committees where there is personal or local community involvement. The data is not one of an absolute measurement but one of probing some level of social knowledge and experience.

Although knowledge is, in the nature of the institution, not comprehensive, it is adequate to delineate the geographic spread of ward committees. From the survey there is a surprising range of contact with ward committees, particularly among poor people in less accessible settlements.

In figure 2, knowledge of ward committees is presented by province, by type of location and by income. There is a wide range among provinces with regard to knowledge about ward committees. The data indicates that many of the rural provinces have a high level of ward committees (e.g. more than 60% of respondents in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo report knowledge of ward committees) with a lower level in the more urban provinces (e.g. less than 40% of respondents in the Gauteng and Western Cape report such knowledge).

The selective nature of knowledge and access to ward committees is shown in the table below. This reflects that respondents in settlements that are characterised by poverty and deprivation are more likely to know of ward committees than those in formal settlements and smallholdings (Figure 3).

In the table above, 61% of respondents living in urban informal settlements (or shacklands) know of ward committees, while in the urban formal

**Fig. 1: Knowledge of ward committees**

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
13,108,409	6,974,074	10,474,172	30,556,655
43%	23%	34%	100%

Source: SASAS 2005

**Fig. 2: Knowledge of ward committees by province**

Province	% Yes
EC	66%
LP	63%
FS	54%
KZN	42%
NW	41%
MP	37%
GT	36%
NC	34%
WC	19%

Note: Ranked by knowledge of ward committees. Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of ward committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

**Fig. 3: Knowledge of ward committees by type of settlement**

Type	% Yes
Urban informal	61%
Tribal	59%
Hostels	57%
Urban formal	35%
Smallholdings	22%
Farms	10%

Note: Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of ward committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

settlements 35% of the respondents know of them.

Further analysis of the data by income confirms that poor people have greater knowledge of ward committees than those who are better off.

In figure 4, those reporting ‘no income’ have the highest knowledge of ward committees (51%) while those in the highest personal income category have the lowest level of knowledge (32%). Knowledge of ward committees is shown to decline steadily with rising income categories.

In the more demanding participation involving formulation of Integrated Development Plans, as will be mentioned below, there is a low level of participation. Significantly, however, African people are much more

**Fig. 4: Knowledge of ward committees by personal income**

Personal Income Category	%
No income	51%
R1-R500	47%
R501-R2000	43%
R2001-R7500	35%
R7501+	32%

Note: Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of ward committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

**Fig. 5**

Race	%
Black African	82
Coloured	8
Indian/Asian	1
White	8
Total	100

Source: SASAS 2004.

**Fig. 6: Trust in local government and ward committees, 2004 and 2005**

Know of ward committee		
	2004	2005
Local government		
Trust	61%	50%
Neutral	13%	12%
Distrust	26%	40%
	100%	100%

likely to be involved than other races (Figure 5).

These participants tended to be largely male (62%) with females at a significantly lower level of participation, at 38%.

Despite the generally higher level of knowledge of ward committees among the poor and thus the possibility of greater levels of participation, knowledge of ward committees does not appear to lead to greater confidence in local government.

In figure 6, there is a decline of trust in local government from 61% to 50% in the period 2004-2005 where ward committees are known. Where there are no ward committees known to respondents, in data not presented here, there is actually a small decline in distrust, from 37% to 36%. A little surprisingly, perhaps, there is evidence that there is a decline in trust in local government where there is a ward committee. Knowledge and experience with ward committees does not lead to greater confidence that local government will listen to and act on the needs of the poor.

This appears to point to the fact that the ward committee system is not strengthening confidence in local government since these are not working as they should.

### Participation in formal structures or through social movements?

The analysis above leads to additional questions. If there is greater knowledge of the formal structures of participation than may have been anticipated, can higher levels of participation lead to planning and improved service delivery? The relationship between such participation and the ability to represent their needs through Integrated Development Plans and other processes is explored, since undoubtedly higher levels of participation would improve municipal effectiveness.

There are further questions: for those who are disengaged from politics, what are the opportunities for representing their interests? Are those who are less inclined to vote in municipal elections more inclined to consider wider social action in social movements?

Here we analyse two political types, first the larger group made up of 23.5m respondents older than 16 years who are committed to voting in municipal elections and, secondly, a grouping of 7.2m respondents who are 'disengaged' from voting in municipal elections. This group either does not want to vote, doesn't know or declines to answer. The former group is termed as having 'high participation' in having a commitment to voting in municipal elections and the latter as 'low participation' i.e. not having a clear commitment to voting. The former are overwhelmingly African while the latter are mostly African but have sizable proportions of White and Coloured adherents (Figure 7).

The grouping showing higher levels of participation tends to be poorer, with 89% reporting a personal income of less than R5000, while 77% of those with low participation had an income of more than R5000.

Rather than present extensive tables on each issue, the most significant responses to key questions have been selected in comparative tables below in which the political characteristics of each group are examined, along with the degree to which they are participating.

In terms of the general outlook (Figure 8) of the two groups there is close agreement among them that HIV/AIDS and unemployment are the key national challenges. There are significant differences between regarding whether life in South Africa has improved in the last five years, with the 'low

participation' group showing a less optimistic outlook. In relation to the outlook for the next five years, there is also a larger proportion in the group (26%) who feel life will worsen (Figure 9).

Somewhat surprisingly, there is a high civic commitment among both groups in relation to the duty of citizens to vote, but further questions show major differences. Among the 'low participation' group there is a much stronger feeling that voting does not make a difference, that voting is meaningless because politicians cannot be trusted, and that all elected parties are the same. This is possibly predictable from the selection of a group undecided about voting. What is possibly important here is that there are strong minorities among the 'high participation' group in relation to the same attitudes (Figure 10).

The 'high participation' group has a higher level of trust in local government in South Africa and considerably greater knowledge of a ward committee (49% as opposed to 26%) and of a councillor. It appears that the knowledge of local government structures and personnel is affected by prior commitment to voting (or commitment to voting is reinforced by awareness of these structures) (Figure 11).

There are also major differences between the two groups in relation to planning. In relation to the crucial IDPs, the 'high participation' group has a considerably higher knowledge of these and five times the likelihood of participating in the formulation of an IDP. There is, however, a fairly low likelihood of people participating in IDPs in general (Figure 12).

What is the link between low levels of participation and other forms of mobilisation? If people find the formal channels ineffective will they represent their interests rather through social movements? There are some crucial indicators here of the possibility for social mobilisation. Firstly, throughout social groupings in South Africa there appears to be a high level of support for the right to organise freely, and there is little difference between the 'high participation' and 'low participation' here. The differences arise in relation to mass action and, curiously, among those who are not committed to voting there is less support for the idea of mass action. This group appears to be made up of a compound of different attitudes. Of those who have an abstentionist view to politics with a 'quietist' attitude to social mobilisation, and those (possibly among the social movements) who have an abstentionist view, with a high level of commitment to mass action.

The difficulties that arise in making this distinction clear in South Africa is that there is a low level of political discussion. The data shows a higher proportion of 'high participation' among those who talk

**Fig. 7: Characteristics of the two groups**

	High participation	Low participation
Black African	83.9	52.1
Coloured	6.2	19.3
Indian/Asian	1.8	5.7
White	8.1	22.8
Total	100.0	100

**Fig. 8: General outlook**

	High participation	Low participation
The most important challenges facing SA are HIV/AIDS and unemployment	82%	90%
In the last five years has life improved for most people in SA?	60%	42%
In the next five years will life worsen?	15%	26%

**Fig. 9: Voting**

	High participation	Low participation
It is the duty of all citizens to vote	86%	67%
Whether I vote or not makes no difference	25%	44%
Voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted	28%	44%
After being elected all parties are the same, so voting is pointless	24%	38%

**Fig. 10: Attitudes to local government**

	High participation	Low participation
Trust your local government in SA	52%	34%
Have a ward committee	49%	26%
Do you know a councillor in your local mun/council?	51%	30%

**Fig. 11: Knowledge of planning**

	High participation	Low participation
Do you know of an IDP for your municipal area	12%	7%
Participate in formulation of IDP for your municipal area	5%	1%

**Fig. 12: Attitudes to social mobilisation**

	High participation	Low participation
Citizens should have right to form/join organisations freely	86%	84%
Mass action is acceptable way to express views in democracy	76%	35%
Talk about politics often or very often	20%	15%

about politics (20%). This tends to confirm the view that those who are opposed to electoral politics also tend to be less politically involved in other ways.

### The contradictions of participation

There is a considerable unevenness in public participation. For the middle class who have already secured a position in society it can be assumed that there may be high levels of formal participation in government through voting, although less interest in community participation at the local level. Participation appears to be uneven with the poor appearing to need to be more engaged than the middle class in forms of public participation, even though the middle class has a high level of participation through, for example, school governing bodies, environmental issues and in suburban security groups.

For poor people still striving to achieve access to housing, services, and a better standard of living, participation is essential and is a form of political engagement to ensure that services are delivered. The point is made (if in the opposite direction) by the Gauteng official who argued that “people tend to become depoliticised when their living conditions improve, but we need to maintain interest at a sufficient level in order to hold our executives accountable”. (Jackson, 2006).

The analysis of the SASAS survey reveals that there are not high levels of participation in local government and that South Africans have a generally low level of political discussion, declining with levels of income and education. Despite this, poor people have, surprisingly, higher levels of knowledge of ward committees and of their councillors. The indicators of income and location in informal settlements and tribal areas, for instance, show that the poor have a closer relationship with these structures. The questions the surveys do not answer are whether these structures serve their interests; and whether people still maintain options to mobilise around community needs in other ways.

Despite low levels of political discussion there is a high level of support for the right to demonstrate and develop social movements in their interests. Although this year's local government election increased the majority of the ANC, many communities feel that problems in accountability between representative structures and local people remain. Attitudes towards

local government reveal tensions between political loyalties, community participation and support for the strategies of social movements. There are indications of attitudes in support of social movements, combined with attempts to redirect local government delivery, in their interests.

In policy and statute the ward committees are intended as the prime means of encouraging citizens into such public participation. Whether ward committees are functioning on these lines and achieving effective representation is a matter for debate. At the izimbizo there are frequent allegations that they are inoperative or paralysed by local contestations; or are simply an extension of the friendship network of ward councillors. While many ward committee members complain of frustration, councillors also feel they do not have the power to articulate the needs of poor communities and direct the municipal officials to take action to benefit the poor.

Surveys do not answer the question of the effectiveness of participation. In a number of municipal situations being studied, the key question posed by those who participate in the formal structures is that of municipal responsiveness. In the words of a rural dweller assessing lack of delivery: “We have reported all this before, I don't think things will change”. The goal of ward committees is to make government “more responsive to the people's needs and aspirations” (DPLG, 2005: 10) but even though public accountability of municipal officials through participation is required by law, the practice is very much the exception rather than the rule. The National Policy Framework on Public Participation (DPLG, 2005, 15) mentions that in many service departments “consultation and accountability [are] very rare”.

Despite a surprisingly high level of knowledge of ward committees among the vulnerable in urban informal settlements and tribal areas, it is also true that these are the areas where service delivery is least effective (in water services with high levels of interruption) and where backlogs are most pronounced (Hemson, 2004). Attitudes within the ‘high participation’ group reveal complex knowledge of the formal processes with continuing high levels of support for mass action and the freedom to organise. The questions are whether this mixture is unstable and social movements will spread; and whether the formal processes of participation can gain more credibility. The current low levels of participation in the IDPs show how much ground has to be covered.

*People tend to become depoliticised when their living conditions improve.*

## REFERENCES

- ANC. 1994. *Reconstruction and Development Programme: A policy framework*. Johannesburg.
- Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ), Idasa and Afesis-corplan. 2005. *Ward Committee Resource Book: Best practices and lessons learnt for municipal officials, councillors and local governance practitioners*. South Africa.
- DPLG. 2005. *Draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation*. Public Participation and Empowerment Chief Directorate, Free Basic Services and Infrastructure Branch.
- Durban Metro. 1997. *Building and understanding community-based development fora*. Urban Strategy Department.
- Hemson, D. 2004. Is the water flowing? Equity and efficiency in rural water services. *Joint Population Conference*, 4-8 October 2004. Durban.
- Hemson, D. 2006. Tomorrow will be better than today: Delivery in the age of hope. In Gunnarsen, G., MacManus, P., Nielsen, M., and Stolten, H.E. (eds) *At the end of the rainbow? Welfare state and integration in the new South Africa*.
- Jackson, D. 2006. City Hall encourages public participation. *Sunday Times*. 29 October (no page number available).
- McDonald, D. 2002. The Bell Tolls for Thee: Cost Recovery, Cut-offs, and Affordability of Municipal Services in South Africa. In McDonald, D.A. & Pape, J. (eds) *Cost Recovery and the Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa*. London: HSRC Publishers and Zed Books.