

Taking local government to the people

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Recently thousands took to the streets in Khutsong, Mzimkhulu, Durban and parts of the Free State to express their discontent at ineffective service delivery. The brutality of the police response, in some instances, was a stark reminder of how the security forces of the eighties operated and does indeed invite some critical reflection in explaining the levels of public discontent, and whether more meaningful forms of effective participation in processes of local governance could help avoid often conflictual situations; some eleven years into South Africa's political liberation.

While the primary source of the problems around service delivery is the neo-liberal developmental trajectory of the state, post apartheid political activity takes place in a highly contested arena; one that is contested by the market. Despite this, it would be developmentally dangerous to disown processes of participation that are constitutionally provided. What does, however, need deeper interrogation is the fact that mechanisms to facilitate citizen input are not accessible to the majority population in South Africa; a population characterised by poverty and horrific inequality.

Political scientists have recorded that the failure of democracies to link citizens with the institutions and processes of the state impact on the vibrancy of democracies, resulting in the dilution of democracy and a widening gap between citizens and state institutions. Therefore, the key challenge is to develop mechanisms that enable the poor, the unorganised and the unemployed to influence policy making, thus contributing to a process of democratisation that is inclusive.

The discontent we have seen around the country at local government level can be largely attributed to the fact that people are extremely frustrated at the inability of local authorities to provide basic social services to people who happen to be, by no coincidence, largely Black and poor. It was this same Black working class population that placed the current government in power, so the discontent is, to be euphemistic, understandable. Clearly, many of those in power would know that the international communist anthem calls on the prisoners of starvation and the toilers of the world to

arise and demand justice and equality. Communities are feeling disempowered because there exists a lack of opportunities to make people feel a sense of ownership and control of creative mechanisms to address their needs.

There are clear legislated provisions for community participation in municipality decision making, with Section 152 (1) of the Municipal Systems Act providing for public involvement in the sphere of local government, by compelling it to 'provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; and encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.' Moreover the Act provides for community involvement in local development planning and budget processes and also imposes a duty on municipalities to create a conducive and accessible environment for implementing a continuous systematic process of involving citizens in taking decisions relating to their affairs. Such constitutional and legislative provisions leave no doubt as to the existence of extraordinary political commitment to notions of participatory governance. But the problem remains the translation of these provisions into meaningful civil society contribution, where citizen participation could potentially reduce poverty and social injustice.

The significant absence of formal or functional ward committees coupled with the lack of understanding of the role that ward committees are supposed to play contribute to alienating civil society from effectively participating in processes that facilitate service delivery at local government level. Municipalities need to sincerely and seriously engage communities and not resort to seeking input into already formulated ideas and policy; where such participation serves simply as endorsement of planned action by the local authority.

Often the spaces that are created for engagement become the preserve of a privileged few; and our research shows that groups often feel marginalized and disempowered when participating in such processes. The unequal power relations between politicians and bureaucrats, government and civil society representatives, those with access to information and resources and those without, those belonging to organized structures and those not, those who are viewed as educated and those not, urban and rural residents, men and women, and people with different abilities need to be urgently

addressed. These unequal power relationships play themselves out in the policy arena, resulting in some issues not making it onto the agenda, the exclusion of some stakeholders, the rendering invisible of others, and the exclusion of many from that critical juncture where decisions are made.

While there may be legislative provision for participatory mechanisms, the fact that thousands are taking to the streets suggests that no meaningful participation in local governance is taking place. The mechanisms are inadequate, inaccessible and disempowering, and clearly new and creative approaches that ensure the receptivity of government institutions to the voice of civil society are urgently required. Should citizens be provided with genuine opportunities to influence decision-making at the local level, from the prioritising of development needs to allocation of operational expenditure, surely they will not feel they have to take to the streets as a desperate means of drawing attention to their needs.

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