



BARRIERS TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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Many conflicts in development can be understood as struggles by the poor to hold the powerful to account. Contests over the rights and responsibilities of actors in development are increasing in intensity amid clashes between the promotion of a rights-based developmental approach and market-based notions of access and entitlement to resources. How these conflicts are played out has enormous implications for efforts to tackle poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals¹.



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THE ACTIVE exercise of citizenship has been conceived in both very broad terms, as any form of voluntary public activity, and in far narrower terms, as political participation in electoral-partisan activity. Coehlo (2007) argues that, in many democracies, citizens enjoy relatively free and equal exercise of their political rights, including that of the vote, but they experience gross inequalities in access to public goods that are necessary to the enjoyment of many other (non-political) rights and entitlements that constitute contemporary citizenship.

Therefore, in its most general sense, citizenship is concerned with the rights and obligations of members

of society. While this paper does not deal in detail with the definitions and discussions on the most appropriate definition of citizenship, much of this debate has been influenced by the work of scholars such as Marshall (1950) and Turner (1992). Marshall argued that citizen rights have been extended from civil rights (i.e. right to free speech), to political rights (i.e. right to vote), to social rights (i.e. rights to welfare), while Turner points out two forms of citizenship: citizenship developed from above and citizenship developed from below. The discussion in this paper is located within the democratic theory that individual citizens, who actively exercise

their rights and entitlements by voting, making demands on public officials or engaging in the public life of the community, help to transform political institutions into democratic ones.

This paper looks at barriers to active citizenship and more especially barriers to the emergence, upkeep, recognition and institutionalisation of community-based monitoring and planning, drawing on the work done by various partners within the Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) and lessons shared from implementing different models of alternative participation spaces. In presenting the arguments, the paper will have a bias towards citizen participation in local governance. However, this does not in any way imply that citizens can only be deemed active if they are engaging in local governance processes; it is simply the angle that the authors have chosen to locate and anchor the discussion.

Governments and social organisations find it increasingly difficult to sustain the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. Therefore, along with regular elections, free political parties and freedom of speech and association, the implementation of mechanisms capable of promoting greater citizen involvement in public decisions, greater transparency and/or more horizontal flow of information need to be encouraged (Kimemia 2009).

In summarising the findings of comparative research on decentralisation and participation in South Africa, Robins et al. (2008) point to five major limitations to citizen participation in local governance:

- a) Lack of political commitment or leadership on the part of local elites with regard to the new participatory spaces;
- b) Lack of political mobilisation of the poor;
- c) Inadequate financial resources to guarantee the sustainability of participatory experiences;
- d) Lack of institutionalisation of participatory spaces and mechanisms; and

- e) Lack of technical and managerial capacity, as well as inequalities of information among participants.

Authors such as Coelho and Nobre (2004) and Abers (2001) show that deliberative processes contribute towards changing participants' positions and opinions, narrowing the gap between people's opinions and contentious issues, while for Cornwall and Coelho (2007) important questions remain concerning the democratic potential of participatory processes. Given the informality that is a feature of participation in deliberative processes, questions that still need to be addressed are around the quality of processes (inclusion, involvement and transparency) or of the outcomes that are attributed to participation (innovation and distribution).

Two recommendations are generally suggested: the first is to redesign participatory bodies (Fung 2004) and the second is to mobilise social actors (Gaventa 2006; Cornwall 2007). Over the past few years, various organisations within the GGLN have explored different mechanisms of redesigning participatory structures, while focusing on mobilising social actors. This paper will draw on the work of these organisations² to support its main arguments.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

A look at the history of South Africa, and its impact on active citizenship, may be useful before attempting to explore possible limitations and current barriers to active citizenship. Since 1994, the post-apartheid leadership has made significant strides in uniting the country. The end of apartheid and the introduction of a legal framework that ensured everyone's right to free and fair democratic elections and access to justice meant that all races can live as rightful citizens in the land. However, South Africa still faces enormous developmental and structural challenges. The inequality gap continues to

widen, while opportunities continue to be defined by race, gender, geographic location, class and, at times, even linguistic background (ILO 2007: 148).

As has been well documented, of the three spheres of government (national, provincial and local), local government appears to be the most dysfunctional (as noted also in the Local Government Turnaround Strategy report 2009). Party political fights have had the most (and worst) effects at local level. Although South Africa's Constitution makes citizen participation central to local governance, various government reports have raised concerns that citizens are not living up to their constitutional obligations, giving a particular interpretation to the relationship between the state and the people (SAHRC 2008).

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In looking at the structural and developmental challenges facing South Africa, the core of the problem is the lack of civic education to prepare post-apartheid South Africans for, on the one hand, what government is expected and can do and, on the other hand, the roles and responsibilities of citizens (Gregory 2005; Finkel and Howard 2005; Galston 2001). It is widely agreed that effective citizenship, whether in well-established democracies or in those in transition, requires some educational preparation. For example, ward committees were established without being properly prepared for participation in local governance. In no time these structures were hijacked by local politics and failed to effectively fulfil the purpose for which they were intended (CoGTA 2009). It did not help that by the

second local government elections, candidates who stood for election as ward councillors had largely been participating in ward committees (Helliker 2010), thereby creating the impression that ward committees were the first point of entry towards a successful local political career.

As local politics continue to hijack the developmental space at local government level, the demand is increasing for alternative spaces for citizen engagement in local governance (Poswayo 2012). Various civil society organisations have begun piloting alternative mechanisms to the ward committee that citizens could use to engage with local government. They include Planact, the Built Environment Support Group (BESG) and the Black Sash. The pilot projects explored different spaces and led to the emergence of terms such as 'invented spaces', 'closed spaces', 'networked spaces', etc., which aim to push the boundary beyond the legislated 'invited' spaces (Masiko-Kambala et al 2012). The organisations have shared experiences and lessons learnt through different platforms in an effort to inform government policy.

FACTORS THAT HAMPER ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The involvement of citizens and communities in local government is a statutory requirement of the legislative framework in South Africa. However, even with such an accommodating legal framework, a number of challenges continue to hamper active citizen participation in local governance. While by no means exhaustive, below are some of the factors that obstruct active citizenship.

POLITICAL WILL

Despite the legislative framework that places citizen participation at the centre of local governance processes, the question of political will to facilitate this participation remains. The continued efforts to establish

ward committees, as the only legitimate structures through which citizens should engage with the state, are limiting the emergence of alternative, citizen-initiated forms of organisation. On numerous occasions (and in most parts of South Africa) local government has sidelined citizen-initiated participatory structures, hailing 'dysfunctional' ward committees as legitimate citizen representative structures. This was the experience of both Afesis-corplan, in its support of Civil Society Action Groups (CSAG) in the Eastern Cape, and the Black Sash, in facilitating the Community Monitoring and Advice Programme in South Africa's nine provinces. This attitude and prescriptive stance from the state has been seen as a key contributing factor to the growing phenomenon of service delivery protests.

In their study into the causes of service delivery protests in urban informal settlements, Heese and Allan (2009) noted that poor communication between citizens and the state was the biggest catalyst of service delivery protests. They found that even a well-functioning ward committee system could not reach the entire community and all interests groups within the ward. Local government would still need to create room for other organised structures through which citizens could participate in local governance, such as ratepayers' associations, social movements, networked structures, etc. Clearly, political will would be required to push the boundaries of participation beyond those legislated by the state.

STATE CAPACITY TO ENGAGE

The African National Congress (ANC)'s cadre deployment policy (ANC 2007), with all its good intentions, robbed the country of capable and highly skilled people in various positions of influence and had the greatest effect on the local government sphere (Kanyane 2009). Yet local government is the most heavily legislated sphere and demands that highly complicated compliance measures are in place (Steytler

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and De Visser 2007). The legislation requires citizens to be involved in local government, with ward committees as the primary vehicle through which citizens should participate. However, the ward committee system has failed to deliver on its intentions, and so alternative vehicles for citizen participation in matters of local governance are being piloted.

These alternatives call for an innovative state that is ready to engage in these creative spaces. However, in many instances, the efforts of citizens to engage creatively with the state are met with a lack of capacity from the state. Examples include the experiences of Planact in its implementation of participatory budgeting (Makwela 2012), Afesis-corplan's support of CSAGs (Poswayo 2012), and BESG's support for people-driven housing development (Bailey 2011). Poorly informed officials, poorly written plans, or highly complicated technical plans developed by consultants, which even officials cannot interpret or implement confidently, are just some of the obstacles faced.

In some cases, municipal officials are not willing to think (or capable of thinking) outside the box in order to meet the unique demands of the municipality, while meeting their compliance obligations. For example, in one municipality the community (supported by the PCRD) undertook a comprehensive community-based planning process, which included developing a long-term vision for their ward. They then engaged with municipal officials in an attempt to get the broader municipal vision reviewed, so that it could incorporate or reflect their ward vision. The officials could not understand the possibility of reviewing a municipal vision. Only after years of countless engagements and submissions

to council (and finally a protest) did the municipality review its vision statement and incorporate the broader aspirations and visions of the ward communities.

Any increased support of citizens' efforts to organise outside the state's legislated structures must be accompanied by capacitating the state's ability to engage effectively in these alternative spaces. In this regard, efforts to professionalise local government and to ensure that qualified and skilled officials are placed in relevant positions will assist.

While they play a highly commendable role in bridging the gap between the state and citizens, intermediary organisations should preferably empower communities to engage directly with the state. One typical example is South African NGOs (and consultants to a large degree) who assisted communities to develop community-based plans when these were first introduced.

DISEMPowering ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY ORGANISATIONS

At times the development of an active citizenry is limited by the presence and role played by intermediary organisations. In communities where literacy levels are low, unemployment is high and classism may even exist, local officials tend to prefer to engage with intermediary organisations rather than with local citizens. Officials generally find it easier and less time-consuming to explain the technicalities of their processes, technical plans and budget issues to the intermediary organisations than to deal with citizens directly (Helliker 2010). As a result, citizens have to get information from a "middle-man" as opposed to engaging with the state directly. This robs citizens of an opportunity to ask questions and raise issues on the spot, and to hold their elected representatives to account (Vellem 2012).

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intermediary organisations should preferably empower communities to engage directly with the state. One typical example is South African NGOs (and consultants to a large degree) who assisted communities to develop community-based plans when these were first introduced. Community-based plans provide communities and local authorities with a common ground for discussing development priorities. The tools and methodology are, in essence, aimed at empowering communities to plan for themselves with assistance from local authorities and other structures where possible (SASDIA 2004). However, at the insistence of certain municipalities, a number of NGOs fell into the trap of facilitating the development of community-based plans without capacitating local communities with the necessary skills and tools, and then engaged with these municipalities on behalf of the communities for the implementation of the plans (Labuscagne 2007). Community-based planning, as a concept, promised great success, but has been severely compromised by these NGOs who disempowered communities and paraded themselves as the 'be all and end all' for communities (Labuscagne 2007). The key role of intermediary organisations in any development process should be to support and empower communities and to act as catalysts to unlock their potential, including their ability to engage with the state (Helliker 2010).

NARROW ECONOMIC BASE (LACK OF FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCES)

According to the Auditor-General's report, most local municipalities in South Africa have a very limited revenue base. They struggle to run their operations effectively, do not have the proper accounting systems in place and/or lack the ability to attract requisite skills (AGSA 2012). In general, public participation tends to command the least budget in municipal budgets, while the institutionalisation of public participants in all municipalities, as called for in the Framework for

Public Participation, is yet to be fully achieved. Citizens often struggle to attend meetings organised by the municipality, especially council meetings where the most crucial decisions are generally made.

A recent study, conducted by Afesis-corplan in seven municipalities in the Eastern Cape, revealed that poorer municipalities considered the cost of facilitating effective citizen participation to be extremely high. They have to support citizens travelling to central venues for meetings in areas where wards are vast and straddle a number of rural villages (Afesis-corplan 2012). In these municipalities, officials confessed that emphasis was on compliance rather than facilitating effective citizen participation. In such meetings, municipalities only shared pre-drafted plans as opposed to getting input on the citizens' developmental needs and priorities, which can then inform planning. In essence, the communication approach used was top-down, prescriptive, and only aimed at compliance with the law (Poswayo 2012).

PARTICIPATION FOR PERSONAL GAIN

In most rural municipalities the biggest employer is often the municipality (or other government departments), and standing for election as ward councillors is the best available paid job opportunity for low-skilled individuals. Currently the criteria for electing ward councillors do not include any academic requirements, making it relatively easy to achieve. Individuals up for election as ward councillors are elected based on their standing in the communities where they live, their level of activism and involvement in local politics and, in many instances, their position in the ranks of the political party that endorses their candidacy.

Individuals seeking election as councillors often actively mobilise citizens to participate in local government matters in order to profile themselves as possible candidates for ward councillor. Then, when

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these individuals join municipal councils, citizen mobilisation movements at grassroots level are robbed of capable and seasoned leaders. Yet a pool of leaders to sustain grassroots movements could be provided by deliberately grooming leaders at different levels of the civic mobilisation process. Therefore, it is crucial that organised community groups develop various levels of leaders to ensure that they place their own in municipal councils.

With regards to the leadership issue, the experience of CSAGs³ found that groups are stronger and more active in the year preceding local government elections. However, once elected as ward councillors, the lead individuals (or some members) were the first to discourage the group's participation in local governance and to even sow dissension among the group. Further investigation points to a belief and an understanding that, once the individuals are elected as councillors, their thinking shifts, from 'participating to governing' to wanting limited interference with their 'governing' (Gregory 2005).

CLASSISM

A growing notion within South African communities is that local governance is a complicated affair that can only be understood by those with a certain degree of literacy (Project Literacy 2004). Coupled with this view is very little effort on the part of the state to make information accessible to all citizens irrespective of literacy levels. A certain section of society – the less educated – is in turn locked out of the participation space. This behaviour allows for the rise of local elites – those who can understand and engage with the state

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on behalf of the rest of the illiterate community – who most of the time represent the community without a clear mandate. Better education would enable certain organised citizen groups to shape public opinion through effective use of the media, economic pressure (i.e. withholding rates, strategic boycotts, etc.) and establishing a range of local networks to help their cause. With support, an enabling prescriptive legislative framework and political will, government could reach illiterate and poorer citizens as well as engage with literate citizens.

In the Eastern Cape, where a number of communities continue to fall under the jurisdiction and authority of traditional leaders, classism had been cited as the key issue that limits citizen participation in the formally legislated spaces for participation (Triangle Project 2012). In these communities, where the ward committee system and the traditional system co-exist, citizens tend to participate more in the traditional system that they know and are familiar with, rather than try to grapple with the local governance system that is relatively new to them. In numerous cases, the ward councillors and the traditional leaders have brought their constituents together to deliberate on development priorities, but this is only possible when harmonious relationships exist between the two (for example the Planact's participatory budgeting pilot). However, when the relationship is not good, each leader hosts their own meetings, locking their constituents out of the benefits of both systems, as was reflected by the work of BESG in social housing delivery (Bailey 2010) and

Afesis-corporation's CSAGs and Good Governance Surveys (Ngamlana and Mathoho 2012).

Currently no legislative framework effectively brings these two systems together in a true manner (allowing for transfer and balance of powers within council). To this day, sections of society actively participate in local governance (through the traditional system) but do not have the tools or power to hold municipal leaders to account. While the roots of this issue are complex and cannot be attributed to classism alone, the Afesis-corporation's Good Governance Surveys reveal that classism is one of the major contributing reasons for municipal officials preferring to engage with the ward committee system as opposed to the traditional system.

CIVIC EDUCATION

As noted above, during the "transition" period, no efforts were made to prepare South Africans for their role and responsibilities in a democracy. At the time, efforts focused on ensuring that previously disenfranchised groups were ready to cast their vote in the first national election. Voter education efforts were intense but did not extend to preparing for democracy (if such a thing exists). A number of years later, researchers are realising this was a step missed in the country's foundation phase (Galston 2001; Finkel and Howard 2005; Ramphela 2012).

Over the years, poorly resourced, NGO-led civic education programmes have also not yielded the results to scale, as required in South Africa's development process (Triangle Project 2012). Much more institutionalised, state-supported civic education programmes (drawing from international experiences) are needed to prepare the next generation of active citizens. Calls are being made by various activist and advocacy groups that such civic education should be incorporated in the main educational curriculum, from the lowest education levels (Ramphela 2012, Triangle Project 2012). While different times may call for a

different kind of activism, steps still need to be taken to prepare the next generation to engage with the struggles of their time much more actively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section draws on the barriers to active citizenship, as summarised above, in order to extract some recommendations to inform policy and practice. The recommendations are summarised (in no particular order) as follows.

EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL CHAMPIONS

Political champions need to emerge who can promote alternative spaces and true citizen participation in matters of local governance. These champions will have to be individuals of strong character, who will not back down under political pressure and would have to be willing to be unpopular. Furthermore, these champions would have to be accountable to the community or the citizens who voted them into power. While the failure of the ward committee system has been noted, what is not clear is how political parties will be monitored and curbed from manipulating and using these structures for their purpose.

CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education is a necessity and should be linked to the school curriculum, so as to ensure that the key tenets and principles of a democracy and the role of a citizen in a democracy are entrenched at a young age. Currently, civic education efforts, by the state, are largely aimed at voter education and, by NGOs, are limited and fail to reach the quantities of scale necessary.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Various levels of leadership must be developed at community level to drive citizen-based efforts to engage with and to hold the state accountable. Citizens should

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be encouraged to contest local government elections, as these elections are strictly about local issues. Communities also need to actively mobilise to put the right people in their local municipal councils.

DEVELOPMENTAL ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY ORGANISATIONS

The role of intermediary organisations remains that of empowering and supporting citizens in their cause, whatever that may be. Whenever they enter a community or a space, intermediary organisations should at all times aim to work themselves out of a job quickly. However, this may not always be easy, as the developmental process can take a long time.

NEED FOR PARTNERSHIPS, NETWORKS AND SUPPORT

Participation outside of legislated spaces can sometimes be resource-intensive, which would in turn discourage community members. Therefore, such organised groups should seek support from partners (e.g. NGOs, an institution of higher learning, a corporate entity, etc.) who will share and understand their cause. The struggle for change and good governance is no doubt an intense one and networks and partnership support is critical.

CONCLUSION

Numerous elements limit active citizenship in local governance. This paper has not exhausted all the facets of the challenges but has brought a few to the fore in an attempt to help stimulate debate, and inform policy and

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practice. The prescriptive stance that the country has taken towards citizen participation in matters of local governance has not worked as well as envisaged, and the legislated spaces have failed to bear the expected fruits. Therefore, alternative citizen-led organised structures need to be accommodated creatively in matters of local governance.

A paradigm shift is needed for engaging with citizens. Both government officials and NGOs should consider and treat citizens as custodians of information

with regards to their own development. The call is for a proactive approach where citizens can groom their own leaders within local government to ensure that they place the right people in the right jobs. Finally, targeted and strategic civic education programmes are required with the aim of preparing the next generation of active citizens. For this to be possible, political champions need to emerge, together with a mobilised, energised and willing citizenry able to organise itself and push the boundaries of participation in local governance.

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NOTES

- ¹ The Millennium Development Goals are eight critical economic and social development priorities, which the international community reached consensus on achieving by 2015.
- ² Over and above reference to the work done by Afesis-corporation, this paper will also draw specifically on the work of Planact based in Gauteng, Built Environment Support Group (BESG) based in KwaZulu-Natal, Project for Conflict Resolution and Development (PCRD) based in the Eastern Cape and the Black Sash which is based in various provinces in South Africa.
- ³ Civil Society Action Groups are civil society-led structures that are set-up within a municipal area to represent civil society interests in local government processes. The groups are made up of organised civil society structures, faith-based organisations, activists, ratepayers groups, and some elements of business. Afesis-corporation has been supporting the CSAGs for the past four years in various municipalities in the Eastern Cape.