FROM SUBJECT TO CITIZEN: BUILDING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITY DIALOGUES AND RADIO STATIONS

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The conventional definition of citizenship focuses on the act of voting and taking a vow to uphold the Constitution and laws of the country. This concept of citizenship is limited, as it reduces the power of citizens to mere "voters". Elected officials and leaders consider citizens as nothing more than consumers, which manifests often at election times when citizens become targets of campaigns and are promised a better future that someone else will create for them (Block 2008: 63). Indeed, citizens in this context have little control and influence over the decisions and policies that shape their lives and the life of their community.

PHOTO: DDP

THIS PAPER examines a pilot project implemented by the Democracy Development Programme (DDP), which has immense potential to build and enable active citizenship in local democratic processes and governance. The project is entitled 'deepening democracy through increased community participation in democratic processes: a multi-media approach'. It is aimed, firstly, at enhancing the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) as process facilitators and, secondly, at using community radio stations (CRS) as mechanisms for deepening civic education in democracy and active citizenship on the local scale. This paper conveys the practical contributions of the project towards building active citizenship and democracy. It discusses the impact of the project through selected case studies and outlines the emerging challenges and lessons for improving active citizenship and participatory local governance.

CONTEXT OF PROJECT

The rationale for active citizenship in South Africa is founded on the understanding that the country's developmental challenges cannot be addressed by the government alone but through the collective responsibilities of government and citizens (van Donk 2012). While active citizenship may be acknowledged as an essential component of good governance, views diverge over the challenges of active citizenship. Some maintain that the majority of citizens have not been successfully integrated into the liberal notions of citizenship that embody current manifestations of democracy in South Africa (Thompson and Nleya 2010). Similarly, Thompson and Matheza (2005), cited by Thompson and Nleya (2010), have previously argued that the marginalised poor, in particular, are perceived as apathetic and reluctant to take advantage of the fresh opportunities available to them in present-day South Africa. As a result, many citizens are unable to exercise their voice in local governance amid the institutional spaces created for such purpose.

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Others shift the blame from citizen apathy to the government's failure to translate political rights into social and economic empowerment, which is equally essential for citizens to have a voice in decisions that affect their well-being (Chagunda 2007; Esau 2007; Moodley 2006; Tapscott 2010). Municipalities are expected to comply with public participation guidelines and principles that ensure communities are not relegated to the background by elite officials. However, public participation is 'reduced to spectator politics, where ordinary people have […] mostly become endorsees of pre-designed planning programmes' (Williams 2006). Moreover, substantial evidence shows that many of the existing mechanisms for public participation, such as ward committees, do not function properly or are (party-) politicised. This often discourages individuals and CSOs from engaging through ward committee structures (Naidu 2011; Smith and De Visser 2009).

Promoting active citizenship can be a daunting task, particularly among people who were previously politically disengaged. Hence, citizenship should transcend voting or fulfilling public obligations and focus on shaping the system's structures through deliberative participation by the state, civil society and community, as partners in local governance and development (Honohan 2005). This suggests mainstreaming democratic participation by re-engaging with citizens in local decision-making processes and governance. The current focus on active citizenship emphasises political relationship between citizens and the state (Jochum et al. 2005).

The literature on citizenship links three distinct theoretical approaches: liberal, communitarian, and civic republican (Gaventa and Jones 2002, as cited in Jochum et al. 2005). The liberal perspective emphasises equal rights, rule of law, and independent and self-interested citizens. Citizenship is constructed as a status entitling citizens to formal rights enshrined in the Constitution, while the function of government is to protect and maximise individual rights. The communitarian approach concerns a social notion of citizenship, where the concept relates to a sense of belonging, group identity and rights, and the common good rather than the pursuit of individual interests. The civic republican perspective emphasises the participation of citizens in public life, with citizens taking responsibility to exert their rights and enforce the accountability of elected representatives. In this realm, citizenship is

characterised by rights and obligations and is shaped by a common public culture (stronger than separate group identities), which is produced by a sense of belonging to a particular nation state (Jochum et al. 2005).

The above theoretical approaches have influenced diverging debates about citizenship. Active citizenship can therefore be defined as both a status and an active practice. It fundamentally re-examines the relationship between citizens and the state, how citizens can relate to each other and how civic participation rather than civil participation[1] can be encouraged in local governance (Chanan 2003, as cited in Jochum et al. 2005).

While the DDP project recognises the libertarian construct of citizenship, the approach and ideas are located within the communitarian and civic republican perspectives. The idea of citizenship advanced in this paper is that citizenship must concern individual willingness to build community rather than isolationism. Citizens must exercise their rights and obligations, and have a collective interest in policies over and above their self-interests as users of services. The community is the starting point of citizenship, as community building enables citizens to truly feel and exercise their power and voices in a way that is respected and heard by their fellow citizens. Government's role in promoting community building and active citizenship should be to facilitate processes and support citizens in communities – not to do things for citizens but to work in tandem, empowering them to participate in their own development.

Citizenship does not happen naturally in response to increased spaces or political opportunity. It is fostered through learning/education, socialisation and citizen participation in public and community life on a daily basis (Veneklasen and Miller 2007). What may be plausible is to deepen civic education, especially in rural and disadvantaged communities. Local CSOs need to be mobilised to complement the efforts of local government and to deepen civic education in democracy and active

citizenship. In principle, CSOs, including community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community radio stations, are best situated to be conduits for implementing civic education programmes in marginalised rural communities.

However, one major challenge is that these organisations and groups frequently do not have sufficient resources and capacity to administer civic education and actively engage with existing local participatory structures. As a consequence, the civic education activities that do take place are often unsystematic, incidental and limited in reach. The DDP project addresses this problem by building the capacity of CSOs to engage with existing participatory structures (so as to increase levels of cooperation and citizen participation) and involving community radio stations in civic education focused on democracy and citizenship.

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DEEPENING DEMOCRACY: A MULTI-MEDIA APPROACH

The long-term aim of the project[2] is to strengthen accountability and good governance in South Africa by enabling and motivating active citizens to participate in local democratic processes. This was achieved through enhancing the capacity of CSOs and using community radio stations as a medium in three provinces: KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape. The target group of the project comprised 45 facilitators from participating CSOs from the three provinces

and nine community radio stations (three from each province). The final beneficiaries of the project are citizens of South Africa.

A two-dimensional approach relating to *reach* and *depth* was employed in order to attain the project's goal and objectives. Reach was achieved through mass media, in the form of easily distributable material like pamphlets[3] and the broadcasting of mini drama series through community radio stations.[4] Depth was ensured by equipping CSOs with training and resources (a manual and a facilitator's guide) and supporting them in conducting intense and challenging workshops on community building and civic educational activities.

Development practitioners widely accept that to build community and social fabric requires an approach that shifts communities into having transformational conversations about a future that they intend to co-create (Block 2008). In view of this, over the years DDP has applied (and adapted) the Peter Block approach[5] of hosting dialogue to its various programme activities. The approach emphasises the importance of ownership, commitment, accountability, possibility and dissent in a series of conversations that moves community members from being subjects and consumers to becoming active citizens (Block 2008).

This method of hosting dialogue has been adapted to take into account South Africa's wounded past and, while acknowledging this past, also implies the need for a fundamental shift – from seeing communities as victims to seeing them as citizens. A fundamental shift is also needed in how community leaders and government (as convenors of gatherings) conduct meetings in which they have conversations about the future of their communities. Citizens also need to fully comprehend the cost of the stalemate and recognise their personal contributions to perpetuating the community-as-victim story. The organisations participating in the project were trained in this tool

for convening meaningful dialogues and workshops with communities and within their own organisations. The impact of the project in activating citizenship is discussed through selected case studies involving CSOs and a CRS.

INSPIRING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CSOs AS COMMUNITY BUILDERS

A series of capacity-building workshops and community-building conversations were held with facilitators from 45 CSOs in KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape. The facilitators included elected councillors, ward committee members and other government officials. Participants were expected to learn and internalise the Peter Block method of hosting dialogue. It was envisioned that, with this knowledge and skills, participating organisations would be able to conduct intense and challenging transformational conversations and workshops with communities and, in so doing, contribute towards community building, active citizenship and improved democratic local governance.

Active citizenship concerns the idea of citizens participating actively in public and community life. The two case studies, considered below, show how organisations can contribute towards active citizenship through mobilising and building the capacities of local communities. In the first case study, citizens got involved in school governing bodies in order to improve the quality of education and governance. The second case study shows how local women used the Peter Block method of hosting dialogue to find solutions and possibilities to overcome their challenges. The participating organisations in the project have assisted local communities to initiate transformational dialogues and to take ownership and responsibility for their actions and problems.

CASE STUDY 1 - MARIANNRIDGE COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Mariannridge Coordinating Committee (MCC) is a CBO that facilitates processes aimed at empowering the community through organising spaces for learning and healing, initiating food security and income-generating projects, and creating opportunities for citizens to participate in partnerships that advocate for change. The organisation strives to create an active community in which all people feel socially connected and part of a healthy society. The aim of the capacity-building workshops was to:

✻ Increase the participation of members including school governing body members, teachers, learners, parents and other community members interested in improving the quality of education and school management in Mariannridge.

✻ Motivate and inculcate a notion of active citizenship and participation in local democratic processes by training stakeholders to use the hosting dialogue methodology.

The intention was to rebuild broken relationships and trust in order to begin a process of creating a different future for a secondary school, based on the possibilities and capacities of the Mariannridge community. The method involved reflecting on questions of ownership, dissent, accountability and commitment, and having conversations about how to be an active citizen. In the first DDP-hosted community builders' dialogue, members of the Mariannridge community had an opportunity to be seen as citizens who have the right to be heard and to voice their opinions of what they would like their community to be, and how they see their roles in achieving that.

The hosting dialogue methodology had an influence on MCC's work, which shifted from *leading* the community to *following* the community, and from focusing on *needs* to focusing on *capacities* of citizens. Jenny Boyce, the director of MCC, now uses the hosting dialogue principles in her daily work. She explains how the methodology has affected the work of the organisation:

> We used the conversations to uncover real issues first. Afterwards, being aware where the challenges are, we used the conversations again to go deeper with those who were part of the issue and looked at the possibilities of working together. We used the concept of the small group to see what passions and skills are among people rather than faults and deficits. It is about building broken relationships and reviving the passions and motivation. The small group also showed how many people were listened to for the first time ever. As an organisation we learnt that we need to step back and look whether we are damaging by helping or if we are really listening to those who we see as trouble makers. We also used the methodology as a healing process with young women who are stuck in their relationships and the outcome of this conversation was remarkable for its members. They see this safe space of conversation as a beginning of their healing, personal growth and contribution to changing lives of others who will be also welcomed in the future conversations.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

'This was the first time I really spoke to our youth like this and I must say that after having an opportunity to talk to these two young people, I am certain that the future is in safe hands.'

'I felt heard for once; I am actually sharing lots of thoughts and opinions about life with people who have the same interest as me.'

'For me it was really excellent to see how people are contributing into a change process.'

CASE STUDY 2 - KWAZULU-NATAL REGIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

Based in Eshowe, Zululand, the KwaZulu-Natal Regional Christian Council[6] (KRCC) is a church organisation that promotes ecumenism[7], development and unity among churches in the struggle against poverty, injustice, diseases and ignorance. Its mission is to enable churches to take action against social ills by helping them to develop skills needed to monitor service delivery within the KRCC region. Their core work revolves around the issues of gender-based violence, crime, drugs and HIV/AIDS.

KRCC applied the hosting dialogue methodology to engage with the rural communities of Nknanini and Masangweni, where for more than a decade farmers have been fighting over land, which has led to killings and resultant arrests. The aim of the workshops was to encourage local women to construct conversations in a different way, in order to find solutions and possibilities to overcome some of their challenges such as gender-based violence, crime, HIV/AIDs and drugs. The methodology focused on their personal contributions, either negative or positive, to the current situation, and allowed them to reflect deeply and to come up with their own solutions to the aforementioned challenges. KRCC was thus able to ensure that the voices of these women were visible.

Below are some of the responses to the question 'why are we here?' that was asked at the start of the conversation. However, as the conversations progressed, participants started to move from focusing on the problems they face (such as the absence of a community hall) to the possibilities they have among themselves (for instance, building their own community hall).

WHY ARE WE HERE?

'To listen to what visitors will do to help solve our problems.'

'We are troubled by the issue of having no school for our children in this area. Therefore KRCC and the visitors must tell us what solutions they have.'

'I thought by coming here I will be able to get feedback as to what land affairs can do to enable the government to build me a low cost housing for my family on this farm.'

KRCC now uses the methodology not only in community conversations, but also when discussing various topics at staff meetings and when reviewing their programme structures. These are some of the reflections by facilitators from KRCC on how the hosting dialogue methodology influenced their work:

What these communities normally see in meetings, are people telling them the solutions to the problems they face. But this time everything was centred on people themselves. This time we asked them to work in groups

where they worked closely with the people who were listening to their successful stories, looking at 'how we can do things in a better way?' There has been a shift from pointing fingers, blaming somebody else without seeing their own contribution to listening to people's contributions. We ended the conversation with a plan with people saying: 'this is what we want to do and this is how we want to do it and these are the resources that we need to get in order to get things done'. To see people changing their attitudes about the problems they have, for me it is a success and I am thrilled.

We used to use our organisational power to uplift people out of poverty and other problems they were facing but after attending the workshop we applied the methodology and found out so much that the communities can do better for themselves. After many years of working with one particular community, for the first time they let go of the talking about the same problem that has been affecting every project we engaged them with and they started looking at

possibilities of what else is out there that they can do for themselves. We forget that people are human beings, they have their own thinking and they know what it is that they want.

BUILDING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS

Community radio stations are central to reaching the masses, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities where civic education in democracy issues and processes is almost non-existent. The rationale underlying the use of community radio stations is that radio is more accessible to the broader community and hence better placed to motivate active citizenship in local democratic processes. Community radio stations are used as mechanisms (or ambassadors) to raise awareness or provide civic education through the broad-casting of *mini drama series*.[8] These series act as conversation starters on issues of democracy, active citizenship and service delivery, and on how citizens can take ownership in solving their problems and holding their local representatives accountable.

CASE STUDY: RADIO KHWEZI IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Located in the Kranskop area of KwaZulu-Natal, Radio Khwezi (90.5 & 107.7 FM) has a huge footprint covering a population of about 2.7 million people, making it a suitable station to pilot the mini drama series. Episodes of the series were developed to be broadcast in English, isiZulu and Afrikaans – languages used by Radio Khwezi. The initiative has been successful, with results thus far, demonstrating that the mini drama series has a huge potential for deepening active citizenship and local governance.

The broadcast of the first drama series in August 2012, received a warm reception from listeners who called into the radio station and voiced their concerns and anger, made submissions and called for regular engagements between citizens and municipal authorities. Citizens were inspired to take ownership and to contest municipal (political) officials and leadership in their constituencies on decisions that affect their wellbeing. Their submissions simply show the extent to which mini dramas incite active citizenship among listeners.

After listening to the mini drama series, citizens raised issues that included poverty and inequality, democratic principles and procedures in solving problems, conflicts, service delivery protests, public participation and the duties of local government representatives such as ward councillors. Citizens specifically raised concerns about: the roles of ward committees and councillors; community development workers; proportional representative councillors; how municipal managers and councillors are appointed, and whether citizens can remove from office those councillors and ward committee members who are not performing their duties as per their mandate; trust between communities and officials; and how to report cases of maladministration. The citizens demanded that municipal officials and their representatives be more accountable, accessible and responsive to their needs and priorities.

More importantly, the mini dramas revealed the level of citizens' understanding and knowledge of municipal processes, with a focus on active citizenship and exercising rights and principles of democracy. Most citizens conceived active citizenship as the right to vote (confirming the conventional view of citizenship). It was also observed that citizens lacked knowledge and information about how to hold their elected representatives accountable and how to participate in local government processes such as integrated development planning, municipal budgeting and performance monitoring systems.

In addition, citizens lacked the knowledge and understanding of the role of elected representatives, which makes monitoring their performance difficult. Citizens' perspectives of ward councillors seem to indicate a lack of trust between councillors and community members because councillors have not been able to fulfil on the promises that were made during election campaigns. The experiences from Radio Khwezi point to the possibility of increasing the scope of this initiative to other areas where civic education in democracy, rights and active citizenship is in peril.

EMERGING IMPLICATIONS FOR ENABLING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The DDP project and its associated hosting dialogue methodology are not distinct from the rationale underpinning the people-centred development paradigm. Developmental elements and principles are central to the DDP's strategies to consolidate democracy and development, with the emphasis on collectivism, agency, empowerment, social justice and participation of civil society and citizens in local democratic processes. Having applied the hosting dialogue methodology for more than a decade, and considering the current lessons emanating from this pilot project, the following implications for improving active citizenship and democratic local governance are discernible.

The approach has proven useful for engaging with partners, strengthening partnerships and coordinating efforts between different stakeholders in the communities where capacity-building workshops were held. The majority of these stakeholders are now able to convene their own transformational dialogues and assign roles and responsibilities to different role players in their communities. For example, at KRCC the hosting dialogue methodology has been applied to staff meetings, performance appraisals, as well as when engaging with other stakeholders. DDP is learning more about activating citizenship in various contexts and

deepening understanding of how the methodology can calm angry voices and make quiet voices louder and more visible. The model emphasises ownership, accountability, dissent, commitment and possibility as a series of conversations that move community members from being subjects to becoming active citizens. As a result, citizens who have gained knowledge of the model become active citizens in local decision-making processes.

Moreover, through community radio stations, mini drama series have assisted in deepening civic education in democracy and active citizenship. Citizens have become keener to contest their leadership, participate in municipal processes and to use radio stations as platforms to raise critical issues that face their constituencies. This results in a process where municipal officials or representatives are invited to challenge issues raised by citizens within a space that allows peaceful face-to-face interactions. The shift of government's role – from leading to following citizens – implies the devolution of power to ordinary citizens in communities. In practice, this implies giving powers to citizens to make decisions relating to budgets, resource allocation, selection of service providers, identification of projects, and also encouraging participation in municipal performance monitoring processes. This may improve accountability, transparency, openness and restore the legitimacy of government at the local level.

Above all, the model has the potential to mend fragmented communities by instilling trust between communities and municipal government through regular dialogue between elected representatives and citizens. In addition, the shift from subject to citizen changes the relationship between citizens and the state. Eventually, citizens who become leaders may hold themselves accountable for the wellbeing of the larger collective of which they are part. This invariably deepens the trust that citizens have bestowed upon their leaders as colleague citizens.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS, LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

This DDP project raised a number of issues relating to the hosting dialogue methodology:

* Dependency is deeply embedded within the South African society, and several iterations of the hosting dialogue methodology may be required before citizens can find and successfully use their voice to assert their citizenship;

* The right to say 'no' is perhaps one of the most important conversations that communities need to make space for. It is here that citizens learn that dissent does not mean betrayal but just another point of view;

* Commitment happens one person at a time and not by a show of hands;

* NGOs, CBOs and others need to be supported along the way so that the methodology is embedded in the culture of the organisation. This requires commitment from the NGO or CBO itself and the facilitating organisation to continually practise the methodology;

* Creating ownership of their own future involves acknowledging that individuals contributed to the present state communities find themselves in; and

* Community radio is a powerful medium to ignite active citizenship but is being under-utilised and under-resourced in South Africa.

The significance of the conversations is not necessarily what the communities talk about, but how they talk to each other. This is where transformational dialogues, and in particular the Peter Block approach to hosting dialogue becomes an invaluable tool. It breaks through the surface and reaches a space where the difficult questions are answered with authenticity that leads to liberation.

CONCLUSION

The DDP project and its methods and approaches covered in this paper should not be regarded as ends in themselves but rather as a way of improving structures and processes that promote local governance and development. After almost two decades of development work, the DDP has come to the conclusion that, compared to project-based work, addressing political processes that shape and constrain local level development has a huge potential for transformation. DDP strives to consolidate democracy and good governance through strategies that include dialogue, capacity building, advocacy and research.

The case studies examined in this paper provide practical lessons and experiences for improving active citizenship and local governance that can be applied to broader local government processes and institutions. Based on these experiences, this paper is of the view that conversations that build social fabric and relatedness result from community building and collectivism – where unpaid citizens avail themselves by choice rather than through programme interventions where experts show up because they are tied to contractual agreements. When citizens and leaders begin to take personal responsibility for their own decisions

and actions and hold transformational dialogues, it may lead to transformation that is consistent with citizen's needs and priorities in all spheres of life.

A key lesson learnt is that those in power are most likely to dismiss the process of empowerment, which they perceive as a threat to current structures. For communities, it is difficult to break through these structures that are designed to shut down the voices of citizens. However, councillors and leaders, who participated in the DDP's project and have applied the hosting dialogue methodology to their work, have indicated that it was facilitative.

Disconnection seems to be one of the biggest challenges within community development work. Through our engagements with communities, we have observed that the segregation that took place during apartheid is still strongly present. Trust is broken, making it difficult to mobilise citizens. Building relationships among community members is the biggest asset of development. This action on its own is often effective enough to begin the transformation process. The use of the Peter Block hosting dialogue method builds connections and relationships, which have the power to contribute to the healing of wounds from the past and move community members towards action.

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NOTES

[1] Gabriel Chanan (2003) has often distinguished between vertical (civic) and horizontal (civil) participation: the former relates to governance, such as participation in a Local Strategic Partnership or in a council committee, and the latter relates to community participation in a sports club or faith group.

[2] The project began in July 2011 and is due to end December 2012. It will be seeking funding to extend the work to other areas.

[3] DDP has developed a more innovative approach; 'Democracy and You', which seeks not only to inform but to open up spaces for citizens to engage with the democratic process. The materials which have been designed and applied on numerous occasions over the years are structured in a way to stimulate interaction and encourage participants to connect their own views into the learning process.

[4] Information on pamphlets and mini drama series can be obtained at www.ddpdurban.org.za.

[5] The Peter Block methodology has been widely used in the North American context and has great possibilities for rebuilding fragmented communities in South Africa. Background information on the Peter Block methodology can be accessed at http://www.peterblock.com/

[6] For more information about the work of KRCC visit www.krcc.org.za.

[7] Ecumenism may refer to the promotion of cooperation and understanding among different religious groupings or denominations.

[8] Mini dramas focus on civic or democracy education at the local level designed to provoke dialogue between communities and their representatives and municipal government. They are broadcast by community radio stations and the emanating experiences or lessons are documented and used as feedback into the learning process.