



## IN PROFILE: THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES IN NURTURING AND SAFEGUARDING LOCAL DEMOCRATIC SPACES

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This paper explores how the Development Action Group's (DAG) experimental capacity-building projects demonstrate the potential of civil society intermediaries to play a vital role in nurturing and safeguarding democratic accountability and responsiveness in urban governance arrangements.

### BACKGROUND

In the post-apartheid era, the development of urban areas in South Africa continues to be characterised by urban poverty, urban sprawl, fragmentation, a lack of service delivery, inequity in resource allocation and continued racial segregation. The government has made progress in embracing democracy and produced sufficient, appropriate legislation for democratic urban governance to occur. However, the current nature of participatory processes reveals uneven results, depending on the expertise of those who apply it, amongst other factors. Civic leadership is considerably weakened and spaces for public accountability and policy engagement are underutilised. The sporadic protests witnessed over the past three years or so, attest to the disconnect between the institutional arrangements introduced by the state in post-apartheid South Africa to foster participation on one hand, and the ability of the poor and marginalised to engage with the state through these formal mechanisms, on the other.

Successful democratic urban governance requires that government designs and employs participatory approaches to developing and implementing policy, thus relinquishing some decision-making authority while retaining responsibility. Simultaneously, it requires that citizens take up their rights and become more engaged with the state by holding it accountable and influencing policy. The South African experience, thus far, has demonstrated that both groups lack the skills to do

this without capacity enhancement and support from intermediaries. A few well-resourced and established NGOs currently benefit from the opportunities to participate, while the rest of organised civil society only benefit when access to processes and information has been mediated by specialist NGOs. The general public, usually not part of any association, find it near impossible to influence state decisions. Very few interest groups are actively pursuing opportunities and creating new ones.

DAG recognises that intermediaries in the form of NGOs have an important role to play in capacitating community-based leadership and change agents to actively engage in socio-economic dialogue within the urban environment. The Re-imagining Cape Town sub-programme and urban transformation agenda, within human settlements and across the city, requires active, mobilised, and knowledgeable citizens, working at a range of levels (local and systemic) around common issues.

### DAG ACTIVE CITIZENS AND DEVELOPMENT FACILITATOR INTERNSHIP

Following an evaluation of DAG's former Community Leadership Program (CLP), the organisation conceptualised a settlement-based action-learning programme to empower already active citizens – largely young community-based organisation (CBO) leaders/activists – to engage more meaningfully in processes geared to improve challenges within

their respective communities. During 2014, a capacity-building project evolved into a Development Facilitation/Active Citizenship (DFAC) internship process, launched as a pilot project in Khayelitsha in August 2015, mainly because of DAG's well-established Re-imagining Khayelitsha initiative and wide support from a range of local stakeholder groups.

The aim of the internship was to build and strengthen the existing knowledge, skills, and capacity of active citizens, particularly women and youth, already working on social and economic justice, civic activities or community-based development issues and projects in their communities and neighbourhoods. This project was thought to be essential for building the basis for informed citizen participation and leadership skills to resolve current and future urban challenges, in partnership with civil society organisations (CSOs) such as DAG and others.

## WORKING WITH YOUTH IN KHAYELITSHA

DAG embarked on an eight-month experimental project designed to capacitate youths in leadership and community-based change agent skills. The DFAC internship programme started with twenty-five CBO leaders/activists drawn from across Khayelitsha and was primarily an action-learning training programme, closely aligned with DAG's Re-imagining Khayelitsha project. The selected participants were active members of community-based campaign movements, CBOs and leadership structures demonstrating a strong interest in making change happen across Khayelitsha.

DAG worked with a number of project partners to implement various aspects of the internship project, including Training for Transformation at The Grail Centre and the Adult Education Department

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and Global Citizenship Programme at the University of Cape Town, together with various contracted specialists. These core partners assisted DAG in rolling out various aspects of the training linked to the six outcome areas of the Re-imagining Khayelitsha project:

- ✦ Access to basic services.
- ✦ Affordable housing.
- ✦ Tenure security.
- ✦ Improved livelihoods/job creation.
- ✦ Environmental awareness and sustainability.
- ✦ Strengthening social capital/networks.

The internship involved a range of formal and informal learning and knowledge-building methods and activities.

The second phase of the internship entailed the placement of the interns into active projects and initiatives in various communities where they would be mentored and supervised. The interns worked alongside DAG and partners to apply their new skills and knowledge in the collaborative effort to re-imagine, co-design, and facilitate the implementation of innovative projects aiming to inspire and improve the daily lives and experiences of Khayelitsha's residents. The trainees were assigned to projects and initiatives in six different wards and this offered a mix of challenges and opportunities for them to work on.

## LESSONS LEARNT

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that they would actively facilitate development in disadvantaged communities. This was based on the identification of the following challenges: the disconnect between formal institutional arrangements for participatory governance introduced by the state and the ability of the poor and marginalised to engage with the state through these, as well as the tendency of many young people to revert to either passivity or protest action because of this disconnect.

Reflections to date from course facilitators, the trainee interns and DAG staff indicate that while the pilot of the internship seems to have been a successful and innovative attempt to build and empower already active citizens, it still needs to be fully evaluated, reviewed and, no doubt refined, before being replicated. Participants most valued inputs related to social history, cultural diversity, and self-mastery, all of which challenged them individually and collectively to see themselves, and their local and wider context, from new angles and perspectives. While this is difficult to accurately measure, DAG staff saw exponential growth in each trainee's self-confidence as a result of their exposure to a range of learning opportunities and cross-cultural exchanges across the city, as well as within their own local context.

The project was also strategic in terms of facilitating a participatory action planning process: the pilot project demonstrated alternative practices at a community and/or ward level, and there is potential to replicate the project in a way that will

focus on providing training to non-politically aligned community-based change agents and or capacitating elected ward committee members.

### CONCLUSION

As far as DAG is aware, there are no similar internship programmes offering young people with an interest in urban or community development the unique opportunity to learn and apply their skills in community-based projects and activities. To date, youth participation in democratic urban governance and development planning in South Africa has been fairly limited. In platforms where youth do engage, activities are often triggered or facilitated by intermediaries (i.e. youth associations, community councils and civil society organisations). Considering this reliance, it can be argued that South African youth still need additional support to strengthen their capacity, courage and active participation in local democratic spaces. This calls for capacity-building orientated interventions from intermediaries.

The action learning internship was directly linked to the objectives and anticipated outcomes of DAG's Re-imagining Cape Town programme and, in particular, the partnership-based "Mayenzeke eKhayelitsha", Re-imagining Khayalitsha, project. Although the legislative and policy framework for interaction between government and citizens is extensive, it is insufficient to enable inclusive participation without enhancing the capacity of citizens and state actors (officials and politicians). This project successfully demonstrated how DAG, as an intermediary, can nurture and safeguard local democratic space through capacitating development facilitators that have the potential to collectively create and utilise participatory opportunities enabled by the existing democratic urban governance frameworks.