DO WARD COMMITTEES ASSIST MUNICIPALITIES TO ACHIEVE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS? A CASE STUDY OF BUFFALO CITY METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

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A number of organisations have written about the effectiveness of ward committees as conduits for inclusive participation in local governance, arguing that ward committees are not as effective as they could be (McComas 2001; Collingwood & Reedy, 2012; Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014; Freedom House SA, 2017). These scholars, including ourselves, have largely focused on one function of ward committees, that of facilitating inclusive participation in local governance, particularly in decision-making. We argue that, in its design, a big role was crafted for ward committees that went far beyond its primary role of facilitating participatory decision-making, and that it is possible that while ward committees have dismally failed in this primary role, they may have done well in the other functional areas that are discussed below.

THIS year marks the 20th anniversary of South Africa's vision for local government. The White Paper on Local Government is regarded as a landmark policy, the purpose of which was to create a new vision for local government thereby rectifying apartheid inequities. Within this broad developmental vision, local government is tasked with an ambitious developmental objective of helping to create a better life for all. Through the years, achievements have been made towards improving municipal service delivery and governance, however, much still needs to be done to achieve the vision of a better life for all (CoGTA, 2016). Implied in the vision for local government is the notion of inclusivity, shown through the design of local government which includes the administrative arm, the political arm and

communities (Sections 1 and 2b, Municipal Systems Act 2000).

Ward committees are a legislated participatory mechanism established to facilitate inclusivity of community groups and community structures in local governance. Furthermore, the intent and purpose with ward committees was for government to harness capacities and innovative ideas from citizens in local governance and to ensure that service delivery was targeted, addressing people's needs and aspirations.

This paper seeks to assess the effectiveness of ward committees in its other functional areas. These areas include the following: initiating projects to improve the lives of people in the ward; supporting the councillor in dispute resolution; providing information about municipal projects and municipal operations to the ward community; monitoring the performance of the municipality; and initiating and driving community awareness campaigns (DPLG, 2005)[1].

In this research, Afesis-corplan seeks to test the following hypothesis: research has shown that ward committees have failed to facilitate inclusive citizen participation, however, it could be that they are performing well in the other areas of responsibility, thereby contributing to the broad developmental goals of local government.

This research uses Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) as a case study in investigating the extent to which ward committees contribute to the attainment of the developmental goals of local government. The relevance of this paper lies in that it offers input into present policy discussions around inclusive local governance[2] with some (including Afesis-corplan) arguing for the reform of the ward committee system. Many have argued however, that there are other functional areas of ward committees that are less explored in research and that perhaps the ward committee may be performing well in these (Mkwanazi, 2013, Bendle and Holland, 2015, Mbhele, 2017). This paper focuses on the performance of ward committees in these other suggested areas with intent to engage these views.

This paper builds on the work that Afesis-corplan has done in the past (Ngamalana 2016, Ngamlana and Mathoho 2013, Ngamlana 2007). Afesis-corplan has largely focused on the primary role of ward committees in its research (that of facilitating inclusive participation of citizens in local governance) and did not look at other functional areas that are slightly outside of this primary mandate, i.e. to initiate projects to improve the lives of people in the ward. In this paper, Afesis-corplan will not be looking at ward committee effectiveness in the areas already written about, but rather will draw from this past work.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

South Africa has a legislative and policy framework that entrenches participatory democracy in local governance. This framework includes, amongst others, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (108 of 1996), the Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998), the Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000) and the Municipal Finance Management Act (56 of 2003). It is our view that even though there are numerous instances where implementation lags behind the ideals of legislation and policy, never before has law, policy-making and development practice been as democratic and participatory as it is presently (Patel, 2012; Habib, 2014; Freedom House, 2017). The White Paper on Local Government (1998) defined the vision and aspirations for local governance in the country and prescribed that

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local governance should be participatory in nature, go deeper than representative democracy and be developmental.

Local government is regarded as the sphere of government within which citizens experience this developmental nature of government as the sphere that is 'closest to the people'. According to the White Paper, developmental local government means a local government committed to 'work with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives'. Local government should target especially marginalised members and groups within communities, such as women, disabled people and the poorest of the poor. It is also important to note here the impact local government has made with regards to gender equality and equity, environmental sustainability, poverty eradication and to further the principles of democracy (Freedom House, 2017; Report of the High Level Panel on the Assessment of Key Legislation and the Acceleration of Fundamental Change, 2017),

Municipal councils play a central role in promoting local democracy. In addition to representing community interests within the council, municipal councillors aim to promote the involvement of citizens and community groups in the design and delivery of municipal programmes. The White Paper says that the dominant mode of interaction between local government and citizens in the past was control and regulation and as part of developmental local government, it suggests that regulation be supplemented by 'leadership, encouragement, practical support and resources for community action'. It further notes that 'municipalities can do a lot to support individual and community initiatives and to direct community energies into projects and programmes which benefit the area as a whole'. As an example of how local government

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can support poverty reduction at community level, the White Paper suggests that municipalities 'could assist with the provision of support services, such as training to small business or community development organisations'.

It is crucial to note that the White Paper recognises that communities are not homogenous: 'municipalities need to be aware of divisions within local communities, and seek to promote the participation of marginalised and excluded groups in community processes'. It points out the particular barriers to equal participation encountered by women and calls for municipalities to 'adopt inclusive approaches to fostering community participation, including strategies aimed at removing obstacles to, and actively encouraging, the participation of marginalised groups in the local community'. At the same time, it cautions against participatory processes becoming obstacles to development, and of the danger of narrow interest groups 'capturing' development processes. It states that it is important for municipalities to find ways of structuring participation which enhance, rather than impede, the delivery process.

Ward committees were introduced in 2001 as the primary mechanism for community participation in municipalities. Municipalities are divided into ward boundaries with each ward having a directly elected ward councillor and a ward committee of no more than ten members. Since ward committees supposedly have the knowledge and understanding of the communities they serve, it is assumed that they make it possible to narrow the gap between the

local municipality and its communities. According to Ngamlana and Mathoho (2013), ward committees were conceived as an institutional mechanism that would contribute towards bringing about people-centred, participatory and democratic governance. These committees were meant to support the elected ward councillor in creating a bridge between ward communities and the political and administrative structures of a municipality.

As noted above, a number of research reports (Ngamlana, 2007; Ngamlana & Mathoho in GGLN 2012; Skenjana & Kimemia, 2011; Kambala et al., 2012) narrate in detail the failure of ward committees to meet the ideal of an inclusive local government. This paper argues however that there are other functions of ward committees for which the performance of ward committees is yet to be assessed. The paper focuses then on the role of ward committees in these other functional areas, as well as their contribution towards attainment of the developmental vision of a municipality, by drawing on the experiences of Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and its ward committees.

A BRIEF PROFILE OF BUFFALO CITY METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

Named after the Buffalo River, Buffalo City is one of two relatively new metropolitan municipalities in South Africa; it is situated on the Eastern Cape's east coast covering an area of about 2,536km2 (SACN, 2016) and comprises the following smaller cities: East London, Mdantsane, King William's Town and Bhisho. The municipality's population was 755,200 in 2011 and 848,000 in 2016, with a population density of 298 people per km², which is the second lowest in the country after Mangaung. Its population has grown more slowly than other South African cities. The average household income was at R103,204

per year in 2011, which is relatively lower than the other South African metros. Buffalo City's economy is growing, but unemployment and cost of living remain high. The cost of living (which is based on a bundle of staple goods) was R78.80 in 2008 and rose to R110.20 in 2014. This same bundle of goods in 2014, was R107.80 in Johannesburg and R109.40 in Cape Town; thereby indicating a higher cost of living in Buffalo City (SACN, 2016). In 2011, Buffalo City's unemployment rate at 34.8% measured lower than the Eastern Cape's unemployment rate of 37.4%. The main economic sectors in BCMM are community services, finance, manufacturing, trade, and transport. The area has a well-developed manufacturing base, with the auto industry playing a major role. The Eastern Cape had a total population of 6.9 million people in 2015 (BCM, 2017; SACN, 2016; Stats SA, 2016).

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality developed a long-term vision in 2015 of being 'well-governed, connected, green and innovative'. The city re-invented itself from a divided and fragmented past and through its vision, is placing itself on a path to being a successful, prosperous and dynamic modern city that is enterprising, green, connected, spatially-integrated and well-governed. In 2016, BCMM adopted its Metro Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) which is the city's fifteen-year economic trajectory towards vision 2030. Furthermore, the municipality committed to developing its integrated development plan (IDP) in alignment with its long-term vision.

For BCMM, the goal of public participation is to assist it in the realisation of its long-term vision and its strategic goals (BCMM, 2016). The 2016 local government elections ushered in a new political leadership in BCMM along with new ward committee members; the municipality established its current ward committees in 2017 in all its 50 wards. The

strategic intent with the establishment of these ward committees was to ensure that the municipality was inclusive in its approach to local governance, and accessible and responsive to its citizens (BCMM, 2017).

As noted above, ward committees have a legislated mandate of ensuring the inclusion of communities in municipal governance, and this includes ensuring that communities participate in the development of a vision for the municipality they are part of, as well as the implementation of activities that would contribute to the attainment of that vision. Ordinarily, people who have been involved in the development of a vision become keen to participate in the implementation of activities aimed towards the attainment of that vision, as they become the custodians and co-owners of the vision (UNESCO, 2011; Nyaxo, 2015; Condie, 2015; Herman, 2016). Included in the make-up of municipalities are communities (Sections 1 and 2b, Municipal Systems Act, 2000), and a vision of a municipality therefore is also (at least should be) the vision of communities within that municipal jurisdiction. Through this research we will gain an understanding of the extent to which ward committees had been involved in the development of the vision for the municipality. If it so happens that committees have not been as involved in the visioning process, it would be unrealistic to expect that ward committees would lead the charge for mobilising communities to participate in the implementation of strategies aimed at the attainment of the municipal vision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A stratified sampling technique was used to identify key strategic people to interview. Municipal officials who had directly been involved with the development of the municipal vision and those responsible for facilitating public participation were interviewed. The reason for selecting these people is that they had a deeper understanding of the stakeholders that were involved in the visioning process and the reasons for the inclusion of such stakeholders. The same sampling technique was used to select non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to be interviewed. These organisations were drawn from the integrated development planning stakeholder forum of the municipality. The reason for drawing only organisations that were on this particular list is because the municipality uses this list as a master list from which it invites stakeholders to participate in the IDP and other municipal processes. Only 10% of NGOs on this list were interviewed. Every tenth organisation, in order of appearance on the list, was selected until the 10% mark was reached. This method ensured relative randomness to the selection.

Furthermore, a stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting ward committees to be interviewed. Twenty percent of ward committees in Buffalo City were interviewed from wards that are relatively closest to the city (Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 15, 16, 18 and 19). This choice was made intentionally because in previous studies around public participation in BCMM, the municipality lamented their lack of resources for facilitating public participation. It was assumed in this study that if the municipality wanted to involve ward committees in the visioning process, even if it had limited resources, it would at least reach out to those that were closest to the municipal offices.

A questionnaire was designed to guide the interview and was administered by Afesis-corplan staff. Responses collated were analysed and a report produced. Secondary data was used to verify some of the information collected during the primary interviews and an analysis of the legislative framework and of policies regulating public participation in BCMM was

done. The views emerging from the interview process are summarised below. The key questions that the study was pondering were:

a. To what extent were ward committees involved in the development of the long-term vision of the municipality?

b. What role do ward committees play in the implementation of strategies aimed at the attainment of the municipality's vision?

c. What other initiatives are ward committees and/or the municipality doing, over and above the legislated ones, to strengthen the role of ward committees in the implementation of the vision of the municipality?

As mentioned above, the broad aim of the study was to assess the extent to which ward committees are succeeding in performing other mandatory functional responsibilities other than that of facilitating public participation in municipal planning. Using BCMM as a case study, the study will shine a spotlight on the efficacy of ward committees as a mechanism for inclusive local governance.

THE ROLE OF WARD COMMITTEES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LONG-TERM VISION

Municipal officials noted that in the development of the BCMM Vision 2030, ward committees were not directly involved as key stakeholders in the process, but instead they were represented by ward councillors. The visioning process, which commenced in 2014, saw the municipality facilitate a number of meetings and consultative processes and ward committees were never invited to any of these. Local business, NGOs, representatives from higher education, government sector departments, labour and civic leaders are the stakeholders that the municipality invited to these meetings. When asked

why ward committees were not included as one of the key participants in the visioning process, the officials noted a number of issues:

a. That ward committees were represented by ward councillors who also have a mandate of ensuring community representation and since ward councillors chair ward committee meetings, they did not deem it necessary to involve ward committees;

b. The low levels of literacy among ward committee members would have limited these people from participating meaningfully in the process as it was a rather technical process;

c. They were not as convinced that ward committees would add much value in the strategic thinking process that was necessary in the development of the long-term vision, the experience of these officials is that ward committees tend to politicise meetings and prioritise either their personal interests or those of their wards above the greater good of the municipality and this would have held the strategic thinking process back; and

d. The resources available to the officials during the strategy development process were not enough to facilitate travel support for ward committee members.

A majority of ward committee members interviewed were not aware that the municipality had a long-term vision and were not even aware of what that vision is. A majority of the members did not see a direct linkage between their role and the attainment of the municipality's vision; they believed that the municipality had skilled officials whose jobs were to do things that must lead to the attainment of the vision. When asked if they understood that they had an integral role to play in ensuring that the energy and resources within their communities was mobilised and rallied towards the attainment of the vision, they

did not understand how. An overwhelming majority of ward committee members interviewed confessed that they had not been in any ward meeting where the municipality's vision was discussed or made reference to. Of greater concern were comments by some ward committee members, who claimed that their respective communities had their own vision which was not necessarily in line with that of the municipality. A respondent said: 'Attaining the vision is a ground activity. How can we then be expected to run with a vision that we were not part of crafting?' Another respondent said: 'I understand that we are the foot soldiers, but at the same time we need to be aware of what is expected of us in attaining the vision. Being part of writing the vision would have given us the heart to run with. We would have owned it'.

The majority of the NGOs sampled and interviewed were not involved in the strategic visioning process of the municipality but indicated that they may have been invited as they receive regular invites to attend consultative processes organised by the municipality. All NGOs interviewed stated that they would support activities aimed at the implementation of the municipality's vision. The majority of the organisations interviewed believed that in not involving the broader municipal community, including ward committees, in the strategy development process, the municipality had missed an opportunity to unify its entire community towards a common goal. Some advised that the municipality needed to be strategic in its attempt to mobilise its citizens and think outside ward committees in doing so, as they believed that ward committees had lost their ability to rally communities toward a common agenda. One of the respondents stated:

> Gone are the days when ward committees have any meaningful influence in ward communities because they have been mired in the political factional battles and leadership battles in these parties. They have lost their credibility as development oriented structures. It is foolhardy for the municipality to continue to work through these structures to mobilise community views and participation in development processes. If you ask me, the municipality needs to think outside of the ward committee in mobilizing community participation in development. People want to participate and to contribute, they just don't want to be dragged into dirty politics and any involvement with the ward committee or through it would probably result in that dragging of community members through the mud.

The majority of organisations interviewed believed that ward committees were ineffective and that including them in the strategic visioning exercise would have been a waste of time.

SUMMARY

It is clear from the responses of the respondents summarised above that ward committees were not involved in the municipality's visioning process. Notwithstanding the reasons shared by the municipal officials, there is an issue of great concern in the responses of the three groups that has to do with the conceptual understanding of the role of ward committees. The role of ward committees in BCMM is limited to that of assisting ward councillors with community participation in IDP and budget processes and does not go deep enough to cover the mobilisation of resources and harnessing of agency and energy within communities towards the realisation of the municipality's vision. If facilitating public participation in local governance (excluding municipal visioning) is the primary goal of ward committees, and all the other functions of ward committees (those noted in the other sections of this paper) are excluded, then municipal officials, NGOs and ward committee members of BCMM view the role

of ward committees as having a very narrow scope. In this manner, ward committees cannot contribute meaningfully to the vision of developmental local government as envisaged by the White Paper and will certainly not contribute meaningfully towards the realisation of BCMM's long-term vision.

THE ROLE OF WARD COMMITTEES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LONG-TERM VISION

Development specialists argue that inclusive and participatory implementation and monitoring of development initiatives is critical in ensuring a lasting impact and to build resilient societies (UNDP, 2015). One of the mandates of ward committees is to ensure community participation in monitoring the performance of the municipality. The extent to which ward committees participate in monitoring the municipality's performance in the implementation of its long-term strategic goal was investigated, along with its role in initiating ward-based projects that contribute to the implementation of the vision.

The majority of municipal officials interviewed indicated that in their meetings, ward committees do discuss development projects taking place within their wards and these projects are aligned to the long-term vision of the municipality from which the IDP is derived. Some officials indicated that ward councillors engage ward committees regularly on key development initiatives within the municipality, and concerns and comments that ward committees raise with regards to these development initiatives are taken back to council by the ward councillors. It did not appear from the interviews with municipal officials that there was any other mechanism in place within the municipality to facilitate the broader participation of ward committees and others in the implementation and monitoring of the long-term vision.

An overwhelming majority of ward committee members interviewed believed that they play no significant role in monitoring the performance of the municipality in the manner envisaged in legislation. The members argued that the municipality does not give them the space to do so, and that they do not influence decisions in council in any meaningful manner and thus could not claim to monitor the implementation of the municipality's vision in a manner that strengthens implementation. Some of the ward committee members argued that the lack of meaningful opportunities to inform the municipality of the state of service delivery in their wards leads communities to view ward committees as useless and resort to protests. Some argued that they did not have regular meetings with their ward councillors as they are supposed to and even when they do have those meetings, they are not of a developmental nature, but are rather reactive engagements aimed at putting out whatever fires are there. Others claimed that their meetings with their ward councillors tend to divert towards discussing political issues.

When asked if they discussed the long-term vision of the municipality in any of their meetings and strategise on what they would do as a committee within their term of office to contribute towards its implementation, all of the ward committee members said they had not been part of such sessions. It is worth noting that two ward committee members from wards that are based in affluent parts of city said that they, as a committee, analyse the plans and reports of the municipality and in their meetings request that their councillor accounts for the things that the municipality had said it would do. Where the councillor is unable to give a detailed response to their questions, he invites municipal officials to give more clarity on the questions raised. The councillors said this was the manner in which they participate in monitoring the performance of the municipality at

least on those things it has promised to do in their ward.

All the non-governmental organisations interviewed indicated that they were not involved in monitoring the performance of the municipality in relation to its long-term strategy and they did not believe that ward committees were involved either.

SUMMARY

It is clear from the responses summarised above that ward committees are not involved in supporting the implementation of the vision of the municipality and neither do they monitor the performance of the municipality in its implementation of the same. Again, the role of the ward committee is viewed in a limited 'inside the box' manner, i.e. only as a one-way information-sharing tool. It is interesting that the ward committee members from the affluent area go over and above and collect technical reports from the municipality ahead of their meetings such that they can hold their councillor to account. Obviously, to do this would require some resources (travel or access to a printing facility maybe), and some may argue that this is partly what the stipend could contribute towards. The two said ward committee members seemed to have a greater understanding and appreciation of their role than the rest and considering that they had all undergone the same SALGA-facilitated induction training, it would appear as though there is something else in the attitude, literacy and willingness to do the job that exists in some ward committees – this research shows that this is rare and far between.

Generally, it is clear from the views expressed by the municipal officials and NGO leaders that ward committees in Buffalo City do not demonstrate any meaningful role in assisting the municipality to achieve its strategic goals. Municipal officials argue that the functionality, effectiveness, efficiency and performance of ward committees is constrained by limitations in committees' levels of education, skills and expertise and ward committees are therefore unable to play this meaningful role. A Skills Audit Report on BCMM Ward Committees (2018) revealed that more than half of ward committee members had no matric qualification. From the views of both ward committees and municipal officials which are collated by the Skills Audit Report, it can be concluded that the low qualification levels of ward committees hamper them from participating meaningfully in technical municipal planning processes. Notwithstanding that the municipality never intentionally crafted a role for ward committees to play in its strategic planning processes, ward committees also did not claim the space to participate so that they could fulfil their mandate. It is our view that it is possible for technical concepts to be simplified if participation of people with low literacy levels is essential in a planning process. Surely, one does not need formal education to participate in a visioning exercise?

From the non-government organisations interviewed, it would appear as though ward committees had lost their legitimacy in communities as a space for community voice and deliberation, which implies therefore that the involvement of ward committees in the municipal strategic planning process would not have guaranteed or translated into a greater involvement of communities in any case. Communities in urban cities tend to find alternative ways of engaging outside of the ward committee, such as social media platforms, comments on the municipal website, petitions, etc. Interestingly, the municipality does engage with these groups through these alternative platforms, and examples include the platforms created and used by the rate payers associations, local area-based civic associations, community safety forums, etc. These alternative spaces appear to be much more effective in wielding

influence in local decision-making than the ward committee as a space for deliberation and voice.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the ward committee system, as it stands, is ineffective in delivering on the mandate for which it was established, at least in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. It can be argued that what Buffalo City is able to achieve in supporting its ward committees to function better (financially and through other resources), none of the other smaller, predominantly rural and geographically vast municipalities in the Eastern Cape would easily match. Therefore, if ward committees in BCMM – with all the support they receive and the benefit of shorter distances to travel between ward communities, municipal administrative and council offices compared to other municipalities – are ineffective in influencing municipal strategic planning and participatory implementation, committees are unlikely to be effective in achieving the same in those other municipalities.

We argue therefore, that there are many more municipalities in the country with similar features and characteristics as BCMM, who for the same reasons,

fail to involve ward committees in their visioning processes thereby rendering the ward committee system ineffective.

It cannot be said any louder: *ward committees have failed to deliver on the mandate for which they were established.* In previous articles, Afesis-corplan had discussed how the conceptual and operational design of ward committees was problematic, and this paper has not discussed this much, but rather sought to plug a gap in research which in the end, supports the broader message of Afesis-corplan and that of its partners with respect to ward committees. An alternative mechanism for ensuring developmental local governance is necessary, the kind of local governance that will deliver a better life for all. In the context where citizens are increasingly expressing their frustration through violent protests across the country, this conversation is much more urgent. It is also clear from the protests that citizens are looking for ways of engaging that encompass both institutionalised and organic forms of engaging. While government can take the lead in facilitating this conversation, it is our view that government alone cannot build the skills and capacities needed for effective, meaningful, inclusive governance which should essentially be underpinned by civic agency.

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NOTES

1   Ward Committee Handbook developed by the then Department of Provincial and Local Government, now Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs

2   In this paper we are talking about the practice of governance as opposed to the institution of government. Our take is that ward committees aim to improve governance as opposed to inclusive government.