



ENHANCING CITIZEN VOICE: THE CASE OF IMPENDLE

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Impendle is a large rural area in the western highlands of KwaZulu-Natal. The Impendle Municipality, bound in the west by the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park and in the east by Msunduzi Municipality, falls within the uMgungundlovu District.



PHOTO: STRING COMMUNICATIONS

Traditional dwellings are common in this sparsely populated mountainous landscape, with a population of about 40 000 people. With unemployment as high as 60%, there is a great dependency on pensions and social grants.

There is no industrial activity and most people derive their livelihood through agricultural pursuits.

Infrastructure is poor and, in many cases, water is still collected from natural sources. However, there is increasing access to communal standpipes and treated water in dwellings. The sanitation backlog is about 58% and most sanitation services are VIP

latrines. The official refuse backlog is estimated to be about 97.5%, with collection provided only to a small number of rate-paying properties near the municipal offices. However, there is relatively high access to electricity. In 2007, 5 750 households had access compared to 1 142 households in 2006, out of an estimated 7 342 households.

Of the 1 500 km of road network in Impendle, only 16 km is all-weather road, which means that even main roads become impassable in wet weather. The majority of the roads servicing communities are in a bad condition, especially in summer. The poor

state of Impendle’s infrastructure is attributed to lack of funding, technical capacity and a proper maintenance programme¹.

HIV and Aids prevalence in the district is one of the highest in the country, about 45%, and health services are under severe pressure with an average of 1 500 people per nurse².

HOW CITIZENS PARTICIPATE

There are only four wards in Impendle municipality, with great distances between communities and limited access to transport. Public participation comprises integrated development planning and budget road shows, with a free meal, and token public meetings. However, due to the physical constraints imposed by the terrain, information on issues of public interest has not been adequately communicated to all constituencies within the municipality.

What has emerged is a synergy between ward committees and established community-based organisations (CBOs). The large wards and poor levels of accessibility mean that ward committees are reliant on community structures for communication, holding meetings and providing feedback on their behalf. Importantly, it establishes a mutually beneficial relationship between CBOs and ward committees, as CBOs support ward committee functions and ward committees directly with CBOs on issues of ward development.

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There has been a history of active CBOs in the Impendle community, with the role they have played in community development being assimilated into the ward committee processes. As one housing committee member says, ‘The CBOs are helping us, we know each other, so we call meetings if there is something to report. Some [people] don’t talk with ward committees. They use the CBOs first. If you need something, you can talk to them, you can complain.’³

The status and role played by CBOs in the Impendle community means that CBOs and their membership feel that they can approach councillors and municipal officials and, due to the topography and size of the wards at Impendle, they are sometimes better located and informed to do so than the ward committees.

As two members relate, ‘We talk with CBOs and then talk with the councillor.’⁴ ‘I feel proud because I’ve got a voice now to the municipality and others have a voice through me.’⁵

ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

The role of development organisations in facilitating CBO engagement on issues affecting communities cannot be overlooked. For example, the Built Environment Support Group (BESG) assists CBOs to participate in local governance. In Impendle, many of those interviewed indicated that they hadn’t realised how they could participate in public meetings or that ward committees needed support from the community to be effective. Many CBO members went to a municipal meeting for the first time and began to understand municipal development processes. ‘It was my first time to the IDP forum and I see what the municipality is doing,’ commented one member.⁶

Another says, ‘Our CBO did report on orphans and vulnerable children to the municipality through the ward committee. The municipality gave the

children school uniforms. BESG has helped us to read and think about what we didn't know. I can make recommendations to the councillor and I have confidence to talk to the councillor in meetings. Next year the IDP will be in isiZulu too!⁷

Further personal development is often encouraged through the work of development organisations. 'Through BESG we have learnt a lot. We can get knowledge and report to the community. I am doing ABET three days a week now.'⁸

SUPPORTING WARD SYSTEMS

National perspectives on ward committees conclude that they have been largely unsuccessful in their mandate. Key sectors of the community have been left out of the participation process as a result of geography, superficial consultation and a lack of training of ward committees to engage with different sectors of the community. With the influence of ward committees lacking, it becomes a token process.⁹ Ward committees in Impendle have faced similar challenges. As a ward councillor relates, 'Some ward committee members don't work, so we need active CBOs to fill these gaps.'¹⁰

In addition to growing cooperation between CBOs and ward committees, the municipality has established a system of ward support to councillors and ward committees through the appointment of a ward administrator. Each of the four wards has been assigned an administrator to take minutes of meetings and provide ward reports to council. Ward administrators must have matric, basic computer skills and proficiency in English. According to Impendle IDP manager, Khulekani Zulu, 'We now have records of the minutes of ward meetings and it is easier for council to consider proposals that are on paper.' This step has also enabled a few

Impendle matriculants an opportunity to work for the municipality.

Support to ward systems has also been provided by the provincial government in the form of Community Development Workers (CDWs), who have been deployed to assist the municipality. However, as this respondent says, 'There is not much happening between ward committees and CDWs formally. The Provincial Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs asked council to use CDWs and they must be present at ward committee meetings. The province wants them to be more integrated into municipal processes and the municipality is in the process of drafting a programme for CDWs in the municipality.'¹¹

PARTICIPATION OF TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY

The integration of traditional and municipal structures is not in evidence at Impendle. Historically, traditional leadership structures are well established in Impendle but are not fully active within the municipal council, as Mayor Sizakele Makhaye explains. 'Amakhosi are supposed to be part of council but it is complicated by the fact that their lands cross municipal boundaries and they may only attend council meetings in a particular municipality.'¹²

Another reason for a lack of visibility of traditional leaders at council meetings is that they are not compensated for their time or transport to council meetings. Lack of funding is also a reason for the lack of engagement around development issues. There are also the party political issues that affect co-operation, as the majority of the councillors are ANC and the traditional leaders are historically IFP although this is changing.

CONCLUSION

The lack of traditional leadership participation in municipal structures and the poor functioning of some ward committees means that there is much space for CBOs at Impendle to function as conduits for public participation in local governance.

Furthermore, as Mayor Makhaye confirms, the CBO culture of volunteerism in a historically close-knit community and the fact that these community structures are constituted mainly of women has had a positive role in the growing relationship between CBOs and ward committees.

In the past, public participation at Impendle has been a formality delivered by the municipality to passive citizens. What is evident is the beginning of a shift in attitude on the part of civil society towards participation in municipal governance and a greater willingness on the part of the municipality to accommodate a more substantive and meaningful participation process. CBOs and ward committees are working together to find a more representative voice in order to participate more effectively in local governance and the development of their communities.

Impendle is one of eight local and district municipalities in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands that is the location of BESG's 'Deepening Democracy Project'. The project aims to deepen citizen participation in local government decision-making and improve transparency and accountability in service delivery to indigent communities.

ENDNOTE

¹ Impendle Municipality. 2010. Integrated Development Plan Review 2009/2010. June 2009.

² Impendle Municipality. 2010. Integrated Development Plan Review 2009/2010. June 2009.

³ Mrs Qaphelisile Mkhize, Nzinga Housing Committee Member.

⁴ Ms Buhle Lushaba, Ward 4 committee member.

⁵ Mrs Qaphelisile Mkhize, Nzinga Housing Committee Member.

⁶ Mrs Gabisile Mazeka, caregiver/volunteer at the Nzinga drop in centre.

⁷ Mrs Sbongile Mbelu, caregiver/volunteer at the NIP Site.

⁸ Mrs Lindiwe Mvelase, caregiver/volunteer at Infudomalo (CBO).

⁹ Bailey, D. and Mdlalose, M. 2009. Mainstreaming HIV/AIDS through community participation structures and mobilisation of ward committees.

http://www.halogen.org.za/documents/Input%20Paper_Community_Participation_and_HIV_AIDS.pdf

¹⁰ Councillor Sizakele Makhaye, Mayor of Impendle Municipality.

¹¹ Councillor Sizwe Ndlela, Ward Councillor (ward 4), Impendle Municipality.

¹² Councillor Sizakele Makhaye, Mayor of Impendle Municipality.