

Participatory Governance—the need for inclusive strategies at local level

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Since Planact was founded in 1985, the organisation has always attempted to put the concept of participatory democracy into practice. Throughout the various changes in government policy frameworks encountered from the apartheid era to the transition to democracy, and finally to the consolidation of South Africa's democracy into permanent government institutions, Planact has worked to support communities at local level to participate in the decisions that affect them, by assisting local organisations and networks with information, training and capacity-building support. With the establishment of a democratically-elected local government, that support extended to capacity-building for local councils as well. In this article, Planact reflects on the core values motivating its work around community participation, and highlights some of its more recent experiences in communities with the introduction of ward committees—both the potential and the problems with this most-recent prescription for participation.

The imperative for participatory governance

Many decisions in South Africa and indeed many parts of the world have historically not responded adequately to the needs and values of communities, especially the poor and disadvantaged sectors of the community. As a result planning has not sufficiently been reflective of the needs of the community. This is a contradiction to popular belief as most politicians, officials, theorists and certainly the community believe that some form of stakeholder involvement in decision-making is necessary in planning on issues that affect people's daily lives. The constitution of South Africa, which happens to be one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, also entrenches the right to meaningful participation as fundamental to democracy.

With all the agreement on the necessity of participation, the definition and implementation of participatory processes still remain a huge challenge. There is still some misunderstanding and differences of opinion in this regard. The problem is that the extent to which participation is incorporated into development strategies depends on what is meant by the term. It is however apparent that no clear consensus exist on the definition (Pratt & Loizos, 1992:52). Moser (1983:3) argued that the range of different definitions was the primary reason for spreading of confusion. Great care must therefore be taken both in defining, interpreting and applying the term participation.

Planact has been concerned about how to interpret what participation implies at the local level and how best it could be achieved especially for the poor and marginalized communities that Planact operates in. Seeing that the majority of South Africans are poor and have been marginalized for a long time it becomes imperative that they understand their part in local democracy and how plans and decisions can have a positive effect on their lives and their living environment.

Pretty and Scoones (1995) pointed out that, there is a high tendency for those who use the term participation to adopt a high moral ground, implying that any form of participation is good. Pretty and Scoones and Chambers (1995) alert us to the use of community participation in such a way

that it moves beyond mere cosmetic labelling and rhetoric to processes that ensure that everybody has an opportunity to participate in the various processes and to be able to hold those responsible to carry out recommendations accountable.

Arnstein (1969) also described participation in terms of the degree to which people are involved in the projects and programmes that affect their lives. To explain this, he produced a typology of eight levels of participation, which he arranged in a hierarchy as illustrated below:

Degrees of citizen power

8. Citizen control.
7. Delegated power.
6. Partnership.

Degrees of tokenism

5. Placation.
4. Consulting.
3. Informing.

Non-participation

2. Therapy.
1. Manipulation.

According to Arnstein, the intensity of participation is viewed as a one-dimensional process in which the levels of intensity were defined along a continuum. In this case, participation is described in terms of a series of increasingly meaningful inputs into decision-making process, with each level corresponding to the extent of citizen power in determining the 'end product'. Arnstein advocated for empowerment of the less privileged citizen, and that, it is the redistribution of power that enables the poor marginalized citizens who have been excluded from the planning and development processes, to be consciously included in mapping out the future.

Planact believes that the inclusion of marginalized communities, which includes: the poor, the youth, the disabled, women, etc., together with other stakeholders will ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of development processes. The inclusion of all groups living within the community or representatives they have chosen themselves will ensure that participation is not just a cosmetic process to endorse decisions that authorities have made unilaterally. They will also be able to hold those responsible for carrying out recommendations accountable. This should also ensure that costs and benefits are distributed equitably throughout the community.

In order to ensure that previously disadvantaged communities are able to engage effectively with the process, significant efforts must be made to empower them in terms of economic and educational profiles. Constant effective information dissemination must complement formal and informal training that the communities must be given. Logistical arrangements such as the time and place of discussions, language, freedom of expression etc must be carefully addressed so that nobody is excluded from discussions that they have been mandated to participate in.

Planact's support to Community Development Forums—the case of Diepsloot

As part of the initiative to enhance participation at the local level, the Gauteng Province decided that the establishment of local and/or sub-regional forums was necessary. These forums would

constitute representatives of all stakeholders in a particular area and facilitate participatory planning and development in their respective areas. As a result, In June 1994, the RDP Commission for the Gauteng province initiated conferences that became known as VISTA 1 and VISTA 2 to address community development. These conferences initiated the need to set up Local Development Forums and Community Development Forums. The provincial government supported the establishment of these forums through the RDP commission as well as encouraging the development of network committees. The network committees became responsible for supporting and co-ordinating the work of the development forums.

Planact was then approached first by the then Northern Metropolitan Local Council and then by other local authorities and community representatives to assist in the setting up and building the capacity of such Community Development Forums in various communities in Gauteng. Diepsloot in Northern Johannesburg demonstrated one of Planact's successes in this initiative and will be used to demonstrate the issues and lessons.

Diepsloot was established in 1994 with the resettlement of the Zevenfontein residents to Diepsloot West, which was proclaimed a Less Formal Township. The Council expropriated the first piece of land to accommodate displaced families from Honeydew who were allowed to settle on the Rhema Church farm in Sunnyside. A second expropriation was undertaken by Council in 1996 to settle land invaders of the Far East Bank in Alexandra and displaced families from plots in the Randburg area. The new residents were located in the newly created Diepsloot reception area. A further relocation of residents from Alexandra township to Diepsloot took place in 2000. Diepsloot has demonstrated the challenges of providing low cost housing and service delivery in Johannesburg and in the province and the country as a whole. Besides the needs for housing and services, the diverse nature, backgrounds and expectations of the residents who came from many different places and backgrounds made it difficult to work together for the benefit of the whole community. A coherent, inclusive participation framework was thus very difficult to achieve.

Planact's involvement in Diepsloot started in 1997, initially just to facilitate a housing project. The originally ad-hoc nature of development in that area implied that the council was not willing to invest much time and resources in involving the community in various planning and development processes. However after endless efforts from Planact and other supporting role players to officially place Diepsloot on the development agenda, it was agreed that Planact would support and assume certain responsibilities for the socio-economic/community participation component of the Diepsloot portion of the Strategic Framework. The rationale for Planact's decision was based on the following:

- Any IDPs aimed at upgrading the level of services and the provision of housing for the Diepsloot community had to be based on a detailed information analysis of existing trends and future trends in the area.
- The participatory process offered an ideal opportunity to acquaint Planact workers with community dynamics and establish links with community representatives
- Given the tendency by local authorities to delay active engagement in marginalised, informal areas such as Diepsloot, Planact's work with community representative groupings could play a major role in enabling those groupings to mobilise and lobby around development initiatives.

- Offering the former Northern Metropolitan Local Council (NMLC) programmes for the training of councillors and officials on aspects relating to Integrated Development Planning (IDP) and Housing, using training manuals developed by Planact, further contributed to Planact's strategic engagement on good governance particularly in the jurisdiction of the NMLC.

During the same period, Planact also began to establish direct relationships with community representatives of various organisations in both Diepsloot 1 and 2. This ongoing process was aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- Identifying all organising bodies in the area
- Establishing direct contact with each organisation, opening communication channels and assessing the attitude of each organisation towards development
- Investigating the political and community dynamics in the area
- Engaging in organisational development to strengthen community representation and prepare a community forum to engage with its local authorities around development issues

Planact's objective after 1999 was:

To facilitate development within the Diepsloot area through supporting the development (capacity enhancement) of the DCDF to effectively participate in development processes.

The major goal in this regard was

- to strengthen the representative, democratic and accountable character of the DCDF and
- to enable the community to play a central role in development projects or initiatives affecting the community (directing development projects or initiatives affecting the community)

The progressive development and modifications of Planact's involvement, which centred around ensuring that the community develops the capacity and partnerships to engage with various development processes demonstrates the need to adapt community participation to challenges prevailing in a particular area. It is critical to establish institutions that facilitate participation. It is even more important to ensure that these institutions have the necessary capacity to execute their duties. Another very important issue that Planact insists upon is the development of formal and informal partnerships and networks to support the efforts of the institutions concerned. These are issues that Planact wishes to continue advocating to strengthen the ward committees that have been established through the Municipal Systems Act (2000).

Many lessons can be learnt from Planact's involvement in Diepsloot. First, it has been demonstrated that partnerships that are formed with organisations such as Planact are useful in assisting government to achieve its developmental mandate. The provincial government had decided to maximise participation at community level but procedures had not been put in place to ensure that this objective is achieved. Planact was able to turn the overall objective of maximum participation into reality in Diepsloot. Secondly it was demonstrated that careful conflict management can facilitate consensus building even in a community that was deeply divided along political, tribal and economic boundaries. Different groups that came from different geographical areas and political and tribal backgrounds who were competing fiercely for scarce resources were

brought together to develop a Community Development Forum that was able to articulate the needs of the community as a whole. The establishment of the CDF also demonstrated the benefits of ensuring maximum representation at all levels within the community. Block committees, street committees, and other community based organisations were represented on the CDF thus making sure that it was as inclusive and representative as possible. Planact went on to train and support the CDF thus ensuring that the representatives of the community had the necessary capacity to articulate their issues at all levels. This capacity is still lacking in many communities including some councillors and council officials.

A Shift from CDF to Ward Committee—what implications for participation?

The establishment of Local/Community Development Forums across Gauteng and other parts of the country encountered various problems such as a lack of a clear framework to guide them. Different areas then adopted their own individual approaches some of which worked well while others failed. Those that did not work out sparked off intensive debates around the effectiveness of such forums. Another problem has been that some local authorities did not recognize Community Development Forums depending on their individual perceptions of them, coupled with their effectiveness in the respective localities. The national government then explored the advantages and disadvantages of Local Development Forums and other community participation initiatives and decided to introduce and legislate Ward Committee systems through the Municipal Structures Act (2000).

Planact's point of departure, as it began to engage with capacitation of ward committees, has been to ensure that there is a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities between various stakeholders such as councilors, ward committees and other community based organizations and organs of civil society. This has proven a difficult task, where many perceived ward committees as replacing all forms of communication to the municipality, including the Community Development Forums. It needed to be made clear that while ward committees are the official/legal representatives of the communities, they draw their strength in their representivity. This implies that they must have strong linkages with as many other community-based structures as possible both in a formal and an informal way. The limitation of ward committee members to ten restricts to a large extent the geographic and sectoral representation of the whole community. However linkages may be in the form of sub-committees and the relationships between the sub-committees and other community based structures.

In Diepsloot, the community decided to make the shift to ward committees and for all intents and purposes disbanded the CDF. Planact continued its relationship with the elected ward committee initially, but found that the direct relationship to government that this afforded called Planact's role into question, and also, the progress of development in the community was increasingly capacitated by the local authority, so Planact's role seemed no longer necessary. Then, with the cooperation of the local council, Planact undertook an evaluation of the operations of the new ward committee, as a way to contribute to the emerging issues around the introduction of ward committees. This research contributed to the Urban Sector Network publication, 'Review of the Status Quo of Ward Committees' (April 2003). Ward committee members, the ward councilor and Johannesburg Metro officials were interviewed for the study. Some of the findings of the study do suggest that the Diepsloot ward committee is not fully capacitated nor well-utilised in the Johannesburg Metro planning processes.

Most ward committee members in Diepsloot are aware that the ward committees operate within a legislative framework but are not familiar with the provisions of the Municipal Structures Act and the Municipal Systems Act. The ward councillor and council employees have more familiarity with this legislation. Most were confident that they could always articulate the needs of the community via the ward councillor to council or other committees within council. There is a general agreement that ward committees should play an advisory role, bridging the gap between community and municipality. This includes the voluntary co-ordination of projects in the community and assisting the ward councillor in ensuring an efficient delivery of services and facilities.

Most ward committee members had heard about the IDP but had not seen the plan. (Note that because JHB is divided into Regions, each region has to have its own local IDP.) In a recent LIDP review process attended by some ward committee members, the majority had only recently been elected to the committee and were still coming to terms with the LIDP. One ward committee member felt that the IDP process in the Johannesburg Metro is top-down because during the review, people are called upon to comment but the budget has already been decided. Council officials are at pains to explain budgets as determined by available resources. Politicians are seldom called upon to explain how they have prioritised spending. Meetings are held with the ward councillor to discuss community needs but this is rarely linked with the IDP in setting local performance targets. The Regional Strategic Manager as well as the Office of the Speaker, explained that performance management is very new to most ward committee members, who are preoccupied with setting up the ward committees and familiarising themselves with their roles. There was little feedback about how ward committees access or comment on the Auditor General's report and the Annual Report by the municipality and this may not in fact be happening.

In Region 1, communication between the ward committee and municipality was relatively strong. Apart from communicating with the ward through the ward councillor, the regional administration has departmental meetings with ward committee members to discuss specific issues. Examples of this include meetings with the Health Department on HIV/AIDS and general health issues. Meetings are also held with utility companies such as Pick-it-up for rubbish collection and Johannesburg Water regarding additional water supply. Some officials felt that insufficient work is done to ensure that ward committee members report to local residents. Proceedings within the ward committee meetings are mostly reported back at an organisational level with the assumption that this will reach residents of the ward.

Diepsloot is receiving considerable attention from council although not on the same scale as, for example, the Alexandra Renewal Project. Most ward committee members come from activist backgrounds and there is great deal of commitment and co-operation with the ward councillor. There has been concrete engagement with the municipality on issues like the local multipurpose centre, water provision and rubbish collection. This points towards a real role for ward committees in designing and facilitating service delivery; however, currently this happens in isolation from the IDP. Planact's study suggests that issues that relate directly to core functions of the municipality like water, rubbish collection, and electricity could be more systematically assessed and reported within a framework of performance indicators and targets. This would lend greater focus and relevance to communication that is already happening and ensure improved community engagement in service delivery.

Planact has worked to capacitate ward committees in a number of communities, and has also attempted to assist local authorities with communication strategies at local level that incorporate ward committees, but are inclusive of the various community organizations that exist in a particular area. Ward committees are generally seen as a vehicle to promote popular participation in local government issues. Yet there are real concerns that are emerging in this framework. One concern is the level of accountability of ward committee members to the wider community—it is not clear that there is adequate attention to this function, without which information becomes isolated at ward committee level and never has a broader impact. In addition, there are indications that the social capital developed in the community over time is not necessarily incorporated in the ward committee framework, and in fact may be isolated by it. Ward committees tend to eclipse all the other community organisations because they have been legislated. Because they are intended to provide independent advice they must avoid the real danger of becoming appendages of the political parties that control the municipality or the ward. This carries with it the risk of suppressing civil society and becoming less responsive to the needs of ordinary people.

Finally, what power does a ward committee actually have to influence decision-making on behalf of the community at council level? There is no real authority vested in the ward committee, and it may not even be effectively fulfilling a monitoring role in the assessment of the performance of the municipality. Capacity-building is not the only concern here, because the question is fundamentally one of whether there is space for dissenting voices to be heard, a critical feature of democratic practice. Ward committees, when used effectively in local communities, may be one method for facilitating community participation, but to the extent that they become the exclusive means by which citizens can access decision-making processes at government level, the practice of participatory democracy will indeed suffer.

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