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Can participation make a difference? Prospects for people's participation in planning

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The question of public participation has become one of general debate in South Africa. Government officials at the national, provincial and local sphere often mention that there are formal processes laid down in policy and statutes for participation, and often encourage the idea. Social movements and the poor respond that these either do not exist or are powerless and ineffective. The izimbiso convened by the Presidency and provincial authorities tend to bring out the problems in meeting the demands of the poor, ineffective participation and the blockages in service delivery. These dilemmas point to the need for the 'deepening' of democracy over time; a phrase which seems to be suggesting that the existing formal democratic structures of society are not opening public decision making to the historically dispossessed. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, stated deepening democracy would ensure that elected structures conduct themselves in "an answerable and transparent manner". It also implies that the same structures are not progressively working to end the deprivation of apartheid by providing essential services to poor people.

The upsurge in social movements over the past few years has increasingly raised issues relating to the inequality of access by the poor; in urban centres this has centred on the disconnection of households from services such as electricity and water. In the deep rural areas there has not been the same outburst of social mobilisation, but the izimbiso similarly find deep discontent with either the lack of essential services or services which operate very poorly.

These issues associated with impoverishment and disconnections have been highlighted in service delivery (McDonald, 2002) while other analysis points to the sizable backlog which still exists despite a considerable increase in access to services providing for human development (Hemson, 2004). Crucially it is anticipated (Hemson, 2006) that the targets for safe water and improved sanitation to be provided may not be reached. On this basis there is a scenario for continued deprivation and impoverishment for a large segment of the rural population whose lives are not improving.

Although there are occasional statements of the need for government policy to be pro-poor, and there has been a considerable extension of social grants, poverty and deprivation still characterise conditions for the black majority. Increasingly there is a tendency for the middle class leadership to abandon their roots on their way to enrichment; an issue which has driven President Mbeki to denounce their preoccupation with wealth. The opposite side of the coin is the problem that the slow increase growth does not create jobs and all-rounded development; that an extremely large wealth gap persists and that there is still a paucity of skills.

Although the recent municipal elections had a high level of participation many of the issues preceding them; such as inferior services and arrogant municipal officials have tended to persist. In those areas where there has been considerable civil discontent there have not been significant changes in line with people's needs.

To what extent can public participation in local and provincial government turn around the situation in access and quality of services and bring about the changes in the interests of the poor?

In this article the public participation of citizens in South Africa beyond elections and in the opportunities provided for in local government is explored to understand the extent to which forms of such participation are available to citizens. Can public participation break through the 'blockages' to service delivery identified by the President and open up the prospect for delivery and improved services?

The idea of participation is a popularly put forward as a solution to the problems of service delivery and to achieve public accountability. In a recent interview Gengiza Mgidlana, Gauteng Provincial Secretary said the following:

"We need more public participation. We educate communities about the importance of participation, structures, provincial government and their role as citizens. If people find a gap in our administration or policies, they can petition for changes and we are obliged to consider submissions on everything from our

budget and service delivery to policy prioritisation. Communities must verify service delivery through these means." (Jackson, October 2006)

Is this an idealised conception of the relationships between communities and government or could such participation provide remedies to the problems of problematic access or no access to services. Are citizens able to access the existing institutions provided for in and remedy issues they prioritise?

What purpose for participation?

There are essentially three levels of participation identified here in local government; firstly there is the formal electoral participation through voting at municipal and national elections and secondly the participation as a citizen in official structures as izimbizo, ward committees, and in the consultations of the municipal Integrated Development Plans. Finally there are the wide range of activities opening up through the development of social movements; the contestation of municipal policy and practice through marches, memoranda and the setting up of local alternative community structures.

The form of participation through voting is less demanding than other forms of participation and has the largest number of people and is followed by other forms. Contemporary surveys such as SASAS (the national attitude survey conducted by the HSRC) provide some measurement of the engagement in official structures such as ward committees although the level of participation in social movements (although highly visible) still has to be gauged. The levels of participation are least demanding at the electoral level and most demanding in the form of participation through community groupings and social movements.

Citizen participation in a variety of activities is possible at various levels but occurs largely at the local government level where needs are most pressing and government most accessible. This is also the level at which formal institutions and procedures are set out in policy and statute (although they may exist very unevenly).

There are at least two levels at which participation is justified; firstly as a *democratic requirement* to allow citizens to engage in decisions about the multifold issues in social, environmental, and service issues largely at a local level, and secondly to *improve the effectiveness* of government in providing services through the articulation of 'customer' issues causing dissatisfaction. The resolution of such dissatisfaction would secure an improved service possibly at a lower cost since the reasons for vandalism and non-payment would be removed.

The language of politics here is crucial; the term 'citizen' implies individuals acting within a framework of rights and in a political context, that of 'customer' and 'client' (the language of the World Bank and neo-liberal discourse) relates to an individual whose primary relationship is in the context of service provision in which commercial relations rather than political relations apply. In the former context relationships are primarily institutional and political; in the latter they are contractual and commercial. In addition citizen implies the possibility of group action, while customer implies an individual engaged with a service provider.

In the debates which are preceding the finalisation of a regulatory framework in water (and in other services) civil society has insisted on the use of 'citizen' not just as a matter of language, but also because the term 'customer' is often inappropriate. In the water sector in which there are substantial numbers of households which do not yet have access to safe water the term 'customer' formally does not apply, and the primary issue is that of citizen rights to access.

Seeking answers from surveys

Two important questions arise in relation to participation: firstly of the levels of engagement by citizens in local government and secondly of its effectiveness. The author has made use of the SASAS (the national

attitude survey conducted by the HSRC) to analyse the participation through the knowledge of formal institutions and attitudes towards voting, declining to vote, and social mobilisation. The material does not, however, provide full measures of participation in social mobilisation.

A number of questions are examined in relation to participation: firstly whether the formal structures of participation are available to citizens, secondly whether these are readily available to the poor and those living in the most impoverished or slum areas, thirdly whether participation is an indication of the level of political knowledge and discussion among citizens, and finally whether participation leads on to a greater conviction that delivery would be improved.

The survey indicates that the largest proportion (43%) have some knowledge of ward committees in their areas, some know that they do not (23%) and the remainder are not sure (34%). Those not sure may be evenly divided between those who in fact have a ward committee (although it may not be well known) or do not have such a committee, but the data does indicate that there is less than half of the adult population which acknowledges the existence of a ward committee.

Knowledge of ward committee

Source: SASAS

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
13,108,409	6,974,074	10,474,172	30,556,655
43%	23%	34%	100%

2005

The reporting

of an answer to the question. "Do you have a ward committee in your neighbourhood?" has a voluntary element i.e. a respondent is likely to know something of ward committees where there is personal or local community involvement. The data is not one of an absolute measurement but of some level of social knowledge and experience.

Although knowledge is, in the nature of the institution, not comprehensive it is adequate enough to delineate the geographic spread of ward committees. From the survey there is a surprising range of contact with ward committees particularly among poor people in less accessible settlements.

In the tables below knowledge of ward committees is presented by province, by type of location, and by income. There is a very wide range between provinces in knowledge about ward committees. The data indicates that many of the rural provinces have a high level of ward committees (e.g. more than 60% of respondents in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo report knowledge of ward committees) with a lower level in the more urban provinces (e.g. less than 40% of respondents in the Gauteng and Western Cape report such knowledge).

Knowledge of Ward committees by province

Province	% Yes
EC	66%
LP	63%
FS	54%
KZN	42%
NW	41%
MP	37%
GT	36%
NC	34%
WC	19%

Note: Ranked by knowledge of ward committees. Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of Ward Committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

The selective nature of knowledge and access to ward committees is shown in the table below which shows that respondents in the settlements which are characterized by poverty and deprivation are more likely to know of ward committees than those in formal settlements and smallholdings.

Knowledge of Ward committees by type of settlement

Type	% Yes
Urban informal	61%
Tribal	59%
Hostels	57%
Urban formal	35%
Smallholdings	22%
Farms	10%

Note: Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of Ward Committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

In the table above 61% of respondents living in urban informal settlements (or shacklands) know of ward committees, while in the urban formal settlements 35% of the respondents know of them.

Further analysis of the data by income confirms that poor people have greater knowledge of ward committees than the better off.

Knowledge of Ward committees by personal income

Personal Income Category	%
No income	51%
R1--R500	47%
R501—R2000	43%
R2001--R7500	35%
R7501+	32%

Note: Figures are of proportion of respondents in each row reporting knowledge of Ward Committees and do not add up to 100%. SASAS 2004.

In the table above those reporting 'no income' have the highest knowledge of ward committees (51%) while those in the highest personal income category have the lowest level of knowledge (32%). Knowledge of ward committees is shown to decline steadily with rising income categories.

There is generally a low level of participation in the formulation of Integrated Development Plans, as will be mentioned below. Significantly, however, African people are much more likely to be involved than other races.

Race	%
Black African	82
Coloured	8
Indian/Asian	1

White	8
Total	100.0

Source: SASAS 2004.

These participants tended to be largely male (62%) with females (38%) at a significantly lower level of participation.

Despite the generally higher level of knowledge of ward committees among the poor and thus the possibility of greater levels of participation, knowledge of ward committees does not appear to lead to greater confidence in local government.

Trust in local government and Ward Committees, 2004 and 2005

	Know of ward committee	
	2004	2005
Local government	61%	50%
Trust	13%	12%
Neutral	26%	40%
Distrust	100%	100%

In the table above there is a decline of trust in local government from 61% to 50% in the period 2004-2005 where ward committees are known. Where there are no ward committees known to respondents, in data not presented here, there is actual a small decline in distrust, from 37% to 36%. A little surprisingly, perhaps, there is evidence that there is a decline in trust in local government where there is a ward committee. Knowledge and experience with ward committees does not lead on to greater confidence that local government will listen to and act on the needs of the poor.

This appears to point to the fact that the ward committee system is not strengthening confidence in local government as they are not working as they should.

Participation in formal structures or through social movements?

The analysis above leads on to additional questions. If there is greater knowledge of the formal structures of participation than may have been anticipated, can higher levels of participation lead on to planning and improved service delivery. The relationship between such participation and the ability represent their needs through the Integrated Development Plans and other processes is explored; undoubtedly higher levels of participation would improve municipal effectiveness.

There is a further question: for those who are disengaged from politics, what are the opportunities for representing their interests? Are those who are less inclined to vote in municipal elections more inclined to consider wider social action in social movements?

Here we analyse two political types; the first a grouping the larger group made up of 23.5m respondents over 16 years old which is committed to voting in municipal elections and secondly a grouping of 7.2m respondents which is 'disengaged' from voting in municipal elections; which either does not want to vote, doesn't know or which declines to answer. The former group is termed as having 'high participation' in having a commitment to voting in municipal elections and the latter as 'low participation' in not having a clear commitment to voting. The former are overwhelmingly African while the latter are mostly African but have sizable proportions of White and Coloured adherents.

Characteristics of the two groups

	High participation	Low participation
Black African	83.9	52.1
Coloured	6.2	19.3
Indian/Asian	1.8	5.7
White	8.1	22.8
Total	100.0	100

The grouping showing higher levels of participation tends to be poorer, with 89% reporting a personal income of less than R5000 while 77% of those with low participation had an income of less than R5000.

Rather than present extensive tables on each issue, the most significant responses to key questions have been selected in comparative tables below in which the political characteristics of each group area examined and the degree to which they are participating.

General outlook

	High participation	Low participation
The most important challenges facing SA are HIV/AIDS and Unemployment	82%	90%
In the last 5 years has life improved for most people in SA	60%	42%
In the next 5 years will life will worsen	15%	26%

In terms of the general outlook of the two groups there is close agreement among them that HIV/AIDS and unemployment are the key national challenges. There are significant differences between them whether life in South Africa has improved in the last five years with the 'low participation' group showing a less optimistic outlook. In relation to the outlook for the next five years there is also a larger proportion in the group (26%) who feel life will worsen.

Voting

	High participation	Low participation
It is the duty of all citizens to vote	86%	67%
Whether I vote or not makes no difference	25%	44%
Voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted	28%	44%
After being elected all parties are same, so voting is pointless	24%	38%

Somewhat surprisingly there is a high civic commitment among both groups in relation to the duty of citizens to vote, but further questions show major differences. Among the 'low participation' group there is a much stronger feeling that voting does not make a difference, that voting is meaningless because politicians cannot be trusted, and that all elected parties are the same. This is possibly predictable from the selection of a group undecided about voting, what is possibly important here is that there are strong minorities among the 'high participation' group in relation to the same attitudes.

Attitudes to local government

	High participation	Low participation
Trust your local government in SA	52%	34%
Have a ward committee	49%	26%
Do you know a Councillor in your local mun/council	51%	30%

The 'high participation' group has a higher level of trust in local government in South Africa and a considerable greater knowledge of a ward committee (49 as opposed to 26%) and of a councillor. It appears that the knowledge of local government structures and personnel is affected by the prior commitment to voting (or commitment to voting is reinforced by awareness of these structures).

Knowledge of planning

	High participation	Low participation
Do you know of an IDP for your municipal area	12%	7%
Participate in formulation of IDP for your municipal area	5%	1%

There are also major differences between the two groups in relation to planning. In relation to the crucial IDPs, the 'high participation' group has a considerably higher knowledge of these and five times the likelihood of participating in the formulation of an IDP. There is, however, a fairly low likelihood of people participating in IDPs in general.

Attitudes to social mobilisation

	High participation	Low participation
Citizens should have right to form/join org freely	86%	84%
Mass action acceptable way to express views in democracy	76%	35%
Talk about politics often or very often	20%	15%

What is the link between low levels of participation and other forms of mobilisation; if people find the formal channels ineffective will they represent their interests rather through social movements? There are some crucial indicators here of the possibility for social mobilisation. Firstly throughout social groupings in South Africa there appears to be a high level of support for the right to organise freely, there is little difference between the 'high participation' and 'low participation' here. The differences arise in relation to mass action; curiously among those who are not committed to voting there is less support for the idea of mass action. This group appears to be made up of a compound of different attitudes; of those who have an abstentionist view to politics with a 'quietist' attitude to social mobilisation, and those (possibly among the social movements) who have an abstentionist view with a high level of commitment to mass action.

The difficulties in making this distinction clear in South Africa is that there is a low level of political discussion. The data shows that a higher proportion of the 'high participation' are among those who talk about politics (20%). This tends to confirm the view that those who are opposed to electoral politics also tend to be less politically involved in other ways.

The contradictions of participation

There is a considerable unevenness in public participation; for the middle class who have already secured a position in society it can be assumed that there may be high levels of formal participation in government through voting although less interest in community participation at the local level. Participation appears to be uneven, the poor appear to need to be more engaged than the middle class in forms of public participation even though the middle class has a high level of participation (such as School Government Boards, environmental issues and in suburban security groups).

For poor people still striving to achieve access to housing, services, and a better standard of living, participation is essential and a form of political engagement to ensure that services are delivered. The point is made by the Gauteng official who argued, "People tend to become depoliticised when their living conditions improve, but we need to maintain interest at a sufficient level in order to hold our executives accountable" (Jackson, 2006).

A number of questions are examined in relation to participation: firstly whether the formal structures of participation are available to citizens, secondly whether these are readily available to the poor and those living in slum areas, thirdly whether participation is an indication of the level of political knowledge and discussion among citizens, and finally whether participation leads on to a greater conviction that delivery would be improved.

The analysis reveals there are not high levels of participation in local government and that South Africans have a generally low level of political discussion. Most political discussion appears to take place among the better educated. Despite this poor people have, surprisingly, higher levels of knowledge of Ward Committees and of their councillors. The indicators of income and location in informal settlements and tribal areas, for instance, show that the poor have a closer relationship to these structures. The question which the surveys do not answer is whether these structures serve their interests and whether people still maintain options to mobilise around community needs in other ways.

The SASAS survey indicates there is a high level of support for the right to demonstrate and develop social movements in their interests. Although this year's local government election increased the majority of the ANC, many communities feel that problems in communication between representative structures and local people remain. Attitudes towards local government appear to reveal tensions between political loyalties, community participation and support for the strategies of social movements.

Despite low levels of political discussion there is a high level of support for the right to demonstrate and develop social movements in their interests. Although this year's local government election increased the majority of the ANC, many communities feel that problems in communication between representative structures and local people remain. Attitudes towards local government appear to reveal tensions between voting patterns, participation and support for the strategies of social movements. There are indications of attitudes in support for social movements combined with attempts to redirect local government delivery in their interests.

In policy and statute the ward committees are intended as the prime means of encouraging citizens into such public participation. Whether ward committees are functioning is a matter for debate. At the izimbizo there are frequent allegations that they are inoperative or paralysed by local contestations or simply an extension of the friendship network of ward councillors. While many ward committee members complain of

frustration, councilors also feel they do not have the power to articulate the needs of poor communities and direct the municipal officials to take action to benefit the poor

Surveys do not answer the question of the effectiveness of participation. In a number of municipal situations being studied the key question posed by those who participate in the formal structures is that of municipal responsiveness, in the words of a rural dweller: "We have reported all this before, I don't think things will change". Despite a surprisingly high level of knowledge of ward committees among the vulnerable in urban informal settlements and tribal areas, it is also true that these are the areas where service delivery is least effective (in water services with high levels of interruption) and where backlogs are most pronounced (Hemson, 2004). Attitudes within the 'high participation' group reveal a complex of knowledge of the formal processes with continuing high levels of support for mass action and the freedom to organize. The question is whether this mixture is unstable and social movements will spread or whether the formal processes of participation can gain more credibility. The current low levels of participation in the IDPs show how much ground has to be covered.

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