

Is anyone listening to the poor?

Does institutional participation work for the poor? A French-South African conference, documented by CLAIRE BÉNIT-GBAFFOU, raises questions about access to power and resources.

POOR PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA participate in democracy in greater numbers than the affluent do: they turn out to vote as well as play their part in civic structures and forums. But what do they get for their faith in democracy and their loyalty to party structures? Not much, suggests a recent French-South African research project.

A November conference, jointly led by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) and Wits University Centre for the Urban Built Environment (CUBES), looked for ways to give the urban poor greater access to power structures and resources.

Though urban residents may be consulted about local needs, their voices seldom reach policy-makers. Integrated Development Planning (IDP) workshops at eThekweni, for example, produced a predictable list of concerns (housing, unemployment, crime, services), but their compilation does not translate into influence upon decision-making processes, said Richard Ballard. Budget priorities, he pointed out, are set by more powerful actors, namely, provincial ANC structures and business.

The autonomy of political decision-making, often ANC-led, does not take the concerns of the poor into account. In this regard, the absence of a pro-poor party outside the ANC alliance does not help build accountability; local ANC branches could play a more meaningful role in fostering internal debate, said Vincent Darracq. Steven Friedman also distinguished between 'invited' or institutional forms of participation, which are often deemed to be a failure and discarded when conflict arises,

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and 'invented' or alternative forms, which may be more meaningful platforms for participation.

Nevertheless, institutional forms of participation such as those offered by IDPs do have their advantages. Researchers Alison Todes and Amanda Williamson pointed out the social importance of participatory platforms in empowering marginalised women. At these forums people are given a voice – giving the state a 'sound from the ground' – but the poor can also get a 'sound from the state', as mentioned by Robyn Rorke.

Involvement by the urban poor is probably more effective at a local level in local projects than at metropolitan, provincial and national levels, where there is a need for a social movement or political party to represent the cause of the poor in a broader context.

Suggestions to emerge from the conference, then, include a multi-scalar approach, enabling political mobilisation at the local level to reach and influence metropolitan power structures and decision-making processes.

This means that researchers must take the scales and territories of political mobilisation into consideration when seeking ways to ensure that the poor will be heard. Practically, there is also a need to take participation more seriously at the metropolitan level and in the ANC structures. Consolidated participatory structures, at least, should accompany every project that is implemented in poorer areas. These minimalist participatory platforms could contribute to decrease tensions and frustrations on the ground as well as 'make local government work better'.



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