

Deepening democracy through
local participation

Michelle Esau

Project: Policy Management, Governance and Poverty Alleviation in the Western Cape

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4. analysing the interface between the state and civil society, aimed at establishing how ordinary citizens perceive the services delivered to them and ascertaining what they believe to be their entitlements and obligations as citizens.

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Examining the ward committee system as a form of local
participation in Bonteheuwel in the Western Cape

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Abstract

Societies that were excluded from the processes of governance in the past now face challenges in taking up their political rights and duties. This is made clear in extensive research pointing to the inability of the poor and marginalised to make their voices heard. The South African experience highlights the disconnect between the institutional arrangements to foster participation introduced by the state after 1994 and the ability of the poor to engage with the state through these institutional arrangements.

Within this context, this paper has a three-fold objective. Firstly, it provides a theoretical context for citizen participation in a period where, globally, the focus is increasingly on more participatory approaches for enabling transformative development rather than on the classic tradition of representative democracy. Secondly, it highlights and examines the legislative framework provided by the South African state within which participation is prescribed. Thirdly, it demonstrates the extent to which the structures and processes of participation have enabled more inclusive forms of participation through an examination of the ward committee system in Bonteheuwel in the Western Cape.

Introduction

Societies that were excluded from the processes of governance in the past now face challenges in taking up their political rights and duties. This is made clear in extensive research pointing to the inability of the poor and marginalised to make their voices heard. The South African experience highlights the disconnect between the institutional arrangements to foster participation introduced by the state after 1994 and the poor's ability to engage with the state through these institutional arrangements. In examining some of the job creation interventions introduced by the state, for example, it was found that very little (if any) consultation occurred between the affected communities, bureaucrats and politicians. In a project designed to assist unemployed women

living in Khayelitsha in the Western Cape no consultation occurred (Esau, 2005). Women in the township were simply invited to apply to participate in a project on weaving and printing. In another example in the area of commercial farming opportunities, consultants were used to draw up business plans for communities without any consultation.

These examples, among others, bring to the fore the lack of participation by the poor in interventions intended for them. This, in turn, raises serious questions about the ability of poor communities to influence issues affecting their day-to-day lives. Within this context, this paper has a three-fold objective. Firstly, it provides a theoretical context for citizen participation in a period where, globally, the focus is increasingly on more participatory approaches for enabling transformative development rather than on the classic tradition of representative democracy. Secondly, it highlights and examines the legislative framework provided by the South African state within which participation is prescribed. Thirdly, it demonstrates the extent to which the structures and processes of participation have enabled more inclusive forms of participation through an examination of the ward committee system in Bonteheuwel in the Western Cape.

Defining democracy

Jones and Weale (1999:14) define democracy as “[a system in which] important public decisions of law and policy depend, directly or indirectly, upon public opinion formally expressed by citizens of the community, the vast bulk of whom have equal political rights”. Beetham (1999) refers to the different (but related) meanings attached to democracy over the last half century. He highlights terms such as the rule of the people, rule of the people’s representatives, rule of the people’s party, majority rule, multi-partyism, maximum political participation, equal citizenship rights, a free society and civil and political liberties (1999:2). Summarily Beetham defines democracy as:

A mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that in which all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly – one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise (1999:34).

Beetham describes the ideal-type democracy as one where every member of society is equal in a socio-economic context and has equal access to rights and opportunities. In other words, Beetham’s democracy is dependent on a homogenous society where everyone has equal access, resources and influence over decisions affecting their day-to-day lives. In *Democracy in the Developing World*, Haynes’ use of the term “full democracy” may, to some, appear to be a synonym for Beetham’s ideal-type democracy. The dissonance between the two authors, however, resonates in their interpretation of the terms. Beetham assumes the existence of the ideal-type as one that can be realised provided that certain inherent features are achieved. Haynes, on the other hand, speaks of full democracy as utopian, which in his opinion “does not exist anywhere in the world” (Haynes, 2001:15).

Schumpeter, as cited in Beetham, presents a somewhat exclusionary definition of democracy – one that ascribes power to an elite group. He defines democracy as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”. This perspective of democracy sees citizens surrendering their executive powers to representatives who will act on their behalf and in their interests. Schumpeter believed that the average citizen was not capable of making rational choices about public affairs. It was his opinion that the average citizen’s ability was limited to choosing between elites who would decide for them. Once this choice was completed political activities were out of the hands of citizens. Schumpeter’s view of democracy and the role of an individual in such a democracy is one that

assumes unequal power relations between those who have intellectual and/or other resources and those who lack them. Consequently, this view raises serious concerns about the quality of such a democracy and the ability of each individual to achieve equally.

Nonetheless, this view of democracy does to a large extent reflect the realities that confront several democratic countries today – where political participation is limited by class, education and other factors that effectively exclude the poor and marginalised from processes and structures of accountability over the state. It is for this reason that Schumpeter's definition is useful since it illuminates common errors that should be avoided when considering and designing democratic institutions aimed at achieving equality for all.

Robert Dahl's definition transcends that of Schumpeter's as it describes democracy as comprising seven main features: free and fair elections; inclusive suffrage; elected officials; the right to run for office; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information to those disseminated by the state; and associational freedom (1989:221). For some it may appear as though these features are limited to the role of the citizen in electing representatives to take political decisions. The fact, however, that Dahl refers to freedom of expression, associational freedom and accessing alternative sources of information introduces a perspective that emphasises: (i) the citizen as being capable of independent thought; (ii) the citizen as possessing a political identity free of class; and (iii) an institutional arrangement that allows for oversight and monitoring of state activity.

It is precisely these characteristics that demand a shift from the classical understanding of the Western liberal model of democracy to more participatory forms of democracy. Jones and Weale (1999:90) refer to direct citizen participation as preferential to decision-making through representatives. It is observed that citizens should grant their consent on matters affecting their lives, even where their interests are diverse and varied. The problem with this approach, however, resonates in the time taken to reach such con-

sent (if consensus is reached at all). As Jones and Weale state, "citizens have a generalised interest in preserving time for the full range of activities in which they might engage..." (1999:93). In addition, issues of development and transformation, particularly in the developing world, do not allow for the amount of time needed to deliberate and agree. Communities need immediate access to proper housing, water, electricity, refuse removal, proper sanitation, health care and so on.

The importance of citizen participation is in no way being discounted here. It is observed that approaches to participation should not engulf the classical traditions of the Western liberal model of representative democracy, but instead complement them. Haynes (2001) views this complementarity as progress towards democratic consolidation. He states that structural characteristics resulting in a balance between state and local community power significantly impact on democratic outcomes (2001:29). Despite the above, some recent literature on citizen participation appears to highlight its merits by advertently or inadvertently alluding to the demerits of representative democracy (see Hickey and Mohan, 2004: table 1.1). In fact, democracy through representatives is sometimes presented as an obstacle to progress towards the ideal-type democracy. This is particularly the case where citizens' access to political institutions and structures are unequal and influenced by their socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, arguments such as those of Schumpeter misrepresent the benefits of representation, especially where political involvement is limited to the elite in society.

Understanding democracy in development

Democracy, as a vehicle for the development of all, continues to be a contested and much debated concept. This was brought to the fore at the 21st International Political Science Association (IPSA) congress hosted in Fukuoka, Japan in July 2006, where cynicism emerged in debates on the congress theme,

“Is Democracy Working?” There appeared to be consensus that substantive freedoms and/or equality had not yet been achieved for many in both developed and developing countries. Research conducted using the Afrobarometer¹ on the attitudes of Africans towards democracy, citizenship and governance also highlights concerns about the sustainability of democracy. Despite the cynicism around democracy, however, popular support for the principle of democracy remains high in Africa (Bratton and Cho, 2006:16). In South Africa, support for democracy increased by 5% between 2000 and 2005. In 2000, 60% of those interviewed found democracy preferable to any other kind of government, while in 2005, 65% found democracy the preferable alternative (Bratton and Cho, 2006:17). The Afrobarometer results further showed that political patience was increasing, with respondents in the 12 participating countries agreeing that the present system of elected government must be given more time to deal with problems inherited from colonial and apartheid rule.

These findings were contrary to the anticipated view that political patience may be waning, in particular because of increasing frustration with the slow pace of service delivery. In South Africa, for example, there has been a spate of protests in recent years about the lack of effective delivery. Yet patience with and trust in the overall democratic system remains high. This provides some evidence that societies view democracy as the most appropriate vehicle for political, social and economic change. One may even argue that this perception is influenced by clearer understandings of democracy and greater interaction with political institutions and processes. The need for communities to become politically literate and active is also highlighted by Bratton and Cho, who succinctly observe that:

if ordinary people lack democratic values or have never experienced democratic institutions and processes, they are likely to know little about democracy's content or to be deeply committed to this regime's survival. They are

prone to settle for some other political arrangement – usually some semi-authoritarian hybrid – mistakenly taking it for the “real thing” (2006:14).

This view highlights the relationship between democratic sustainability and societal knowledge of democratic practice, values and processes. It demands that communities acquire a deeper understanding of their role in democratic societies – an understanding that transcends mere voting at national or local elections. In the view of Bratton and Cho, communities must embrace democratic practices by becoming actively involved in matters of governance. This, in turn, places certain responsibilities and duties on citizens but we will return to this discussion later. Let us turn our attention to some definitional perspectives first.

Citizen participation as a manifestation of democracy

As already alluded to, citizen participation in modern thinking transcends the traditional definitions of participation by including the notion that the citizen has an active and vigilant role to play in ensuring watchfulness over government activities; that government is accountable and responsive to societal needs; and that societal needs are accurately identified and met (see Box, 1998; Gaventa, 2004). Box refers to citizen participation as the power of citizens to govern. He states that citizen participation allows for a model of local government and policy making that emphasises “a balance between efficient, rational service provision and open, democratic processes that allow citizens to govern their communities” (Box, 1998:2). Box’s observations are interesting in that he presents a model of civic governance that leads to a more intimate relationship between the citizen, the practitioner and the legislator in responding to community needs. He furthermore advocates that this close relationship can impact positively on the perceptions and opinions that citizens may have of both appointed and

elected officials. Box also views citizen participation as important in addressing the growing distrust that citizens have of political institutions. He is of the belief that closer community involvement in government activities be viewed as a vehicle for increased trust.

Vincent (2004:111) speaks of citizen participation as it relates to development. He states that participatory development requires “that people take the time and energy to engage in establishing the basis for planning, carrying out and/or evaluating some activity or activities that will bring about a change in their own lives”. The value that individuals can bring to their own lives is highlighted here. It is Vincent’s opinion that developmental interventions are only effective if those at whom these interventions are directed are involved in their planning, implementation and evaluation.

Gaventa (2004) also illuminates the significance of citizens being involved in the actual planning process of service provision. He refers to the concept of participation as relating to the rights of citizenship and democratic governance. Gaventa speaks of the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and their institutions, in particular government. For him these new relationships between citizens and local level officials raise fundamental questions about the nature of democracy. It is observed that a key feature of the liberal model is that citizens surrender their power to “make and shape” policy through electing representatives. However, more contemporary definitions of democracy call for new forms of engagement between citizens and government. Ideally, these contemporary definitions require a connection between citizens and the state that is based on participation and inclusion as opposed to the traditional methods that rely on intermediaries and political office-bearers (the Commonwealth Foundation, from Gaventa, 2004:28). This new approach to participation sees the transition of participation that is dependent on knowledge of local community issues and understanding to participation that is dependent on knowledge of planning, policy making processes, and basic rights and laws. This in turn places increased responsibility on citizens to exercise rights and perform duties in a way that will lead to

actual influence over policy making. But what does it mean to be a citizen in this context?

Definitions of citizenship have been influenced by various schools of thought. Jones and Gaventa (2002) refer to citizenship in liberal thought, citizenship in communitarian thought and citizenship in civic republican thought. Citizenship in liberal thought refers to a status entitling individuals to a specific set of universal rights granted by the state (Jones and Gaventa, 2002:3). Despite the inference of political equality this definition does not necessarily imply social and economic equality. Instead it focuses on political equality at the expense of economic and social equality. Accordingly, Jones and Gaventa state “granting each individual the same formal rights is understood to promote equality through making a person’s political and economic power ‘irrelevant’ to rights claims” (2002:3). Notwithstanding this opinion, evidence from South Africa points to the struggles of the poor and marginalised in trying to assert their claim to rights – precisely because of their different socio-economic status. Sandal (cited in Jones and Gaventa) also criticises this perspective of citizenship but from a different angle. He argues that an individual’s sense of identity is formed by relationships with others in the community and that an individual can only realise her or his identity and interests through deliberations over the common good (2002:4). Sandal’s observations tend more towards citizenship in communitarian thought. This perspective of citizenship is seen to develop specific civic virtues, for example respect for other opinions and public interests.

Civic republican thought is described as a combination of the liberal idea of self-interest within the communitarian framework that emphasises community belonging. Citizenship as defined by civic republican thought prescribes that individuals participate in communal affairs (Jones and Gaventa, 2002:4). In this regard, there is a distinct shift from the liberal model that preempts participation through representatives to an approach that requires deliberation and consultation. This view presupposes a civic identity that is shaped by a common public culture.

Kabeer's understanding of citizenship is confined to how excluded groups' view of themselves in relation to others influences their understanding of citizenship. It is her opinion that certain values influence the manner in which collective life is organised and subsequently how people connect with each other (2005:3). Kabeer lists these values as justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity. Justice, in the context of citizenship, refers to claims about when it is fair to treat people the same and when it is fair to treat them differently. In South Africa, for example, poor communities' search for justice was evidenced when the Wallacedene community embarked on legal action against the state in search of their constitutional right to housing. Another example can be found where rural women have, through various processes, attempted to secure their constitutional right to equal participation by challenging their continued exclusion from decision making on matters of communal land.

Recognition is another value highlighted by Kabeer. She refers to the need for human beings to be recognised for their intrinsic worth as well as to be respected for their differences. A point of departure here would be the recognition of an individual's right to have rights. The struggle by rural African women for the right to be treated as equal to men comes to mind again. Although women work the land they continue to be excluded from decision making on matters pertaining to that land. Their constitutional right to equal treatment is consequently obscured by a patriarchal society.

Self-determination is the third value. This Kabeer defines as "people's ability to exercise some degree of control over their own lives" (2005:5). Among others, she alludes to the experiences of indigenous women in Mexico who, through their determined efforts, ensured that issues essential to their right to human dignity found their way onto the agenda of the Zapatista movement.

The last value identified is that of solidarity. This is understood to refer to "the capacity to identify with others and to act in unity with them in their claims

for justice and recognition". Kabeer continues by stating that solidarity can take various forms that transcend the included or excluded status. It is her opinion that solidarity can enable groups or individuals to shift from their excluded status to an included status (2005:7). This speaks to two things. Firstly, that individuals or groups outside of a community have the ability to empathise with that community through supporting its claims for justice. The solidarity that civic organisations express through their active engagement with community members and their role as intermediaries for these communities in public forums enables them to transcend their excluded status to an included status. Secondly, that a distinct relationship exists between common interest and solidarity. Solidarity of this nature is evidenced through the widespread protests across South Africa in 2004 and 2005 where communities united to express their unhappiness with the slow pace of service delivery. While such protests may not necessarily lead to effective and inclusive forms of participation, they do provide some context for understanding Kabeer's views on included and excluded status. Kabeer's contextualisation of citizenship takes cognisance of realities confronting modern societies – where the presence of disempowered groups, differences in social-economic status and varying levels of self-esteem and confidence impact on the extent to which communities are able to fulfill their constitutional rights and responsibilities.

Institutionalising local democracy in South Africa

Several advances have been made to afford South African citizens the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their daily lives and to hold the state accountable. Chapter seven of the 1996 Constitution outlines as one of the objectives of local government to "encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government". The White Paper on Local Government points to a developmental local government that will work with citizens and groups within the community

to find ways to improve the quality of their lives. To this end, particular reference is made to the involvement of marginalised and excluded groups. Section 1.3 of the White Paper states that:

Municipalities need to be aware of the divisions within local communities and seek to promote the participation of marginalized and excluded groups in community processes. For example, there are many obstacles to the equal and effective participation of women, such as social values and norms, as well as practical issues such as the lack of transport, household responsibilities, personal safety, etc. Municipalities must 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, the participatory processes must not become an obstacle to development, and narrow interest groups not be allowed to “capture” the development process. It is important for municipalities to find ways of structuring participation which enhance, rather than impede, the delivery process (White Paper on Local Government, 1998: Section 1.3).

The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 dedicates a chapter to citizen participation. Chapter four refers to a culture of community participation and the need to develop a culture in municipalities that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory governance. In nurturing this system of participatory governance a municipality is required to: encourage and create conditions for the local community to participate in the affairs of the municipality; contribute to the capacity building of local communities to empower them to participate in its affairs; and use its resources and budget for creating such conditions and building such capacity. The Act continues by making reference to the actual mechanisms, processes and procedures for enabling communities to participate. In doing so, particular reference is made to disadvantaged groups, those who cannot read or write, women and people with disabilities. The Act also refers to the involvement of communities in the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) of municipalities. Local communities are encouraged to participate in the prepara-

tion, implementation and review of the IDPs. The City of Johannesburg, for example, emphasises in its 2004/05 guide to the IDP and budget that it is committed to building participatory relationships with local residents. Such interaction between local communities and political institutions at grassroots level is seen as necessary for realising service delivery and good governance. The involvement of local communities in the preparation and formulation of instruments such as the IDP and budget of a municipality therefore allows for two things. The first is that local communities are directly involved in matters affecting them. In this way they can assist the municipality in identifying the best way to address their needs. The second is that local communities can hold both appointed and elected officials to account. The IDP and budget present a measuring tool for evaluating a municipality's performance against planned service delivery. Local communities are provided with greater guarantees that the local municipality will deliver what it promised through demanding accountability in this way. But at the same time this accountability must be accompanied by an environment that is shaped by transparency, trust, access to accurate and timely information and a vigilant and alert citizenry (Jones and Gaventa, 2002).

At a ward level, legislation provides for the creation of ward committees to enable a closer relationship between elected councillors, the administration and the community. Chapter four of the Municipal Structures Act of 1998 stipulates the role of a ward committee is to enhance participatory democracy in local government.² According to Section 73 (2) a ward committee consists of a councillor representing that ward in council and not more than 10 other people. In addition, a proportional representative (PR)³ councillor is deployed to a ward committee as an ex-officio member. The overall function of the ward committee is to make recommendations on any matter affecting the ward to the ward councillor, or through the ward councillor to the Council through the Subcouncil. The ward committee also has specific functions through the Subcouncil. These include creating an awareness of and sensitivity to com-

munity needs by identifying and understanding the needs and reporting on them; acting as a mouthpiece for communities; influencing the Council budget through the articulation of community needs at Subcouncil; monitoring and overseeing the delivery of services in communities and informing Council on progress; helping Council conduct public participation in the areas of the IDP, municipal by-laws and the budget; and holding regular structured meetings. A ward committee, however, is only advisory in nature. This is captured in the rules for establishing ward committees where it is stated:

A ward committee is the statutory vehicle to enhance participatory democracy in local government. It is a structure created, inter alia, to assist the democratically elected representatives to carry out their mandates. A committee is not a structure with a mandate to govern in the ward...The committee is an advisory body to support the councillors and the Council through the Subcouncils (City of Cape Town, 2004:36).

The Municipal Structures Act also speaks to the “diversity of interests in the ward” through: emphasising that (i) ward committee members be representative of the community and have knowledge and understanding of the particular needs of the community; and (ii) the committee consist of the widest possible range of interest groups in the ward. The following sectors have been identified by the City of Cape Town: youth, women, religious groups, sports and culture, health and welfare, business, senior citizens, the disabled, education, community safety forums, non-political community-based organisations, ratepayers’ associations, agricultural associations, informal traders’ associations and the employment sector (City of Cape Town, 2004:10). Let us now turn our discussion to an examination of local democracy in practice.

Local democracy in action

The South African experience of participatory democracy after 12 years of democracy has not really produced the anticipated outcomes of improved

service delivery, accurate identification of community needs and interests, or increased trust between communities, officials and politicians. Instead, communities have resorted to participatory forms reminiscent of a previous political order.⁴ This has left researchers, academia, the media and government pre-occupied with questions about the appropriateness of the model of citizen participation adopted in South Africa. Some of the factors cited as impacting on the efficacy of the model have been the lack of capacity to participate, limited social capital, control by the elite, marginalisation of the poor, a general lack of trust in government, politicisation of the processes of participation and bureaucratic inertia. As is evident through the extensive legislative and policy framework, participatory governance is understood to deepen democracy and contribute to development. Vincent, cited earlier in this paper, stated that change in the lives of citizens can only be effected if they are able to plan, carry out and evaluate those activities intended to change their lives. Why then is it that citizens have decided to disengage from the state structures and processes established to foster citizen participation in government? In attempting to respond to this question we will examine the mechanisms for participation in the area of Bonteheuwel in the Western Cape, in particular the operation and performance of the ward committee system.

Institutionalising local democracy in the community of Bonteheuwel

Bonteheuwel was declared a Group Area in 1965 and accommodated people who were forcibly removed in terms of the Group Areas Act (Tapscott, 1977:143), many from District Six and Diep River. The Group Areas Act by its very nature had a devastating impact on resettled communities. Family life was disrupted, social networks were broken down, crime increased, and increased spatial distances between communities and economic activities impacted on productivity levels, high labour turnover and so on (Tapscott,

1977). The effect of the Group Areas Act on social cohesion was illuminated by Wollheim (cited in Tapscott, 1977:144) when he stated:

My quarrel with the Department of Community Development has always been that it looks on a township as being a community, irrespective of the people or their spirit. A community is a tightly-knit group, and sometimes it takes two or three generations to achieve.

Not only was there a breakdown of social cohesion (now commonly referred to as social capital), but there was also the problem of overcrowding, which exacerbated social and socio-economic problems. Inadequate housing – about 50% of the dwellings had two rooms or less – resulted in overcrowding. The absence of home ownership also impacted on communities, especially where people were previously adequately housed. According to Tapscott (1977:144) residents in Bonteheuwel could not own their homes because Bonteheuwel had not been recognised as a local authority area – a basic requirement for the transfer of home ownership rights.⁵ In addition, the lack of free-standing dwellings impacted on privacy and security and created an environment that was decidedly not child-friendly. Other problems emanating from resettlement and overcrowding included inadequate educational facilities, insufficient health and welfare services, lack of recreational facilities and poor policing (Tapscott, 1977).

Today Bonteheuwel continues to remind us of our divided past. It is typically a working class community where the majority of people still rent houses from the state.⁶ The approximate population size of Bonteheuwel is 77 000 people, the vast majority of whom are coloured and Afrikaans speaking. The 2001 census shows that 33% of the population of Bonteheuwel has no income, 25% earn less than R1 200 per annum and 41% earn less than R18 000 per annum.⁷ Very few residents are in possession of school leaving or higher educational qualifications. The living conditions remain poor and access to social, recreational or even shopping facilities is limited or non-existent. Backyard dwellers are not uncommon. It is also not surprising that the rates of alcohol

and substance abuse, child abuse, gangsterism and crime are high. These socio-economic problems, which emerged as a result of apartheid, make Bonteheuwel an important case for assessing the efficacy of the citizen participation model.

As has been argued in this paper, meaningful citizen participation is dependent on the existence of certain preconditions, including basic levels of literacy and resources such as time, confidence and self-esteem. The effects of apartheid on societies such as that of Bonteheuwel were highlighted in President Thabo Mbeki's first speech to Parliament in 1999. He stated that:

One of the central features of the brutish society we seek to bring to an end is the impermissible level of crime and violence. Acting together with the people, we will heighten our efforts to radically improve the safety and security of all citizens. This will entail a variety of measures focused on ensuring the effective implementation of the National Crime Prevention Strategy...A study...confirmed what surely all of us have known, (of) the correlation between crime, poverty and race...We will therefore make multi-disciplinary interventions in these areas, starting with a few pilot areas, drawing on all spheres of government and engaging the people themselves...Measures will also be taken to strengthen Community Police Fora to improve their capacity to mobilize the people against crime and to improve co-operation between the people and the law enforcement agencies...the partnership between the Government and the people will be one of the hallmarks of the national offensive against crime and violence.

In the Western Cape, the City of Cape Town launched the Cape Renewal Strategy (CRS), which sought to: (i) mobilise people to become active in their own development; (ii) coordinate activities, initiatives and the budgetary resources of the three spheres of government; and (iii) establish a partnership between the public and the private sector.⁸

More specifically, the CRS sought to: (i) ensure that citizens participate in activities that develop and shape their communities; (ii) support and promote IDPs as a primary tool to inform investment decisions by all spheres of government; (iii) adopt different approaches to planning, design, imple-

mentation and financing; (iv) foster real partnerships with a wide range of partners in development; and (v) alleviate poverty and significantly address underdevelopment in a systematic and sustained way.⁹

In working towards the above objectives, the renewal and development of townships was envisaged through visible projects and the demonstration of best practice in integrated service delivery. It was believed that the only way to showcase the effects of the urban renewal program was through implementing projects that could be measured tangibly, for example better street lighting, visible policing, closed-circuit television, foot patrols, equipped parks and so forth. Other initiatives aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty levels included vegetable garden projects and municipal cleaning contracts for local residents.

The Tygerberg Administration, using the precinct model, was responsible for the Bonteheuwel Pilot Project. A precinct was defined as a sub-area with clear boundaries in terms of schools, community centres and churches (City of Cape Town, 2003). Bonteheuwel was sub-divided into eight precincts. About three volunteers were identified in each precinct to organise public meetings (interview with ward Councillor, 4 August 2006). The precinct model was also used to conduct enquiries through speaking to local residents and community leaders. The process proved useful in that it brought to the fore the key issues and concerns of the community. In the Prunus precinct, for example, local residents felt that councillors did not have their interests at heart and needed to be more visible. These residents were also not familiar with their community leaders. At the same time they were positive about certain developments in the area, such as improved street lighting, repairs to pavements and roads, trees being planted and the reduction of crime (City of Cape Town, 2003). The precinct model was replaced by the ward committee system in 2004.¹⁰

The ward committee system in Bonteheuwel typically functioned according to the legislative framework. The area was divided into sectors and the most important associations and/or organisations were identified within these sectors.

Sectors covered *inter alia* the youth,¹¹ sport and recreation, the environment, the aged, safety and security, and women. The different sectors were asked to nominate a person to serve on the ward committee. The nominees were elected at a public meeting (interview with ward Councillor, 4 August 2006). Ward committee meetings were held monthly and chaired by the ward councillor. The agenda was decided by the councillor together with the ward committee members representing the various sectors. Ward committee meetings were publicly advertised through the local community newspaper and posters.

The organisation of representatives on the basis of sectors encouraged consultation and feedback. As outlined earlier, sector representatives were nominated by their sectors and elected by the community at a public meeting.¹² The representative for a particular sector would report back to the board members of the various associations who would, in turn, provide feedback to their members. The education sector was also engaged through links with the principals' forum. This comprised school principals in the area who would then feed back decisions from the ward committee and consult with parents of children at their schools on education-related issues. These issues would then be communicated back to the ward committee via the sector representative.

The ward committee was quite active in Bonteheuwel and was responsible for the introduction of a number of initiatives. These included visible policing, upgrading of the sport fields, and closer interaction between the community and the ward committee members through the various sectors (interview with the ward councillor, 4 August 2006). At the same time, however, poverty and unemployment remained key issues of concern in the Bonteheuwel community – which the ward committee, during its short lifespan, seemed unable to address.

The ward committee in Bonteheuwel appears to have performed well in maintaining a focus on community needs and interests. All the ward committee members interviewed emphasised the non-politicisation of issues as a

key contributory factor to the successful functioning of the committee. In the opinion of one of the ward committee members, the ward committee was able to achieve this by setting out its mandate clearly at a preliminary meeting. This meeting allowed for: (i) a clear briefing of ward committee members by the ward councillor; (ii) a clearer understanding of the roles and functions of the committee members; and (iii) a clearer focus on the role of the ward committee as a vehicle for articulating community needs and interests to the Council through the Subcouncil (interview with education sector representative, 26 August 2006). The education sector representative encapsulated the non-political nature of the ward committee by stating:

Let me tell you a good thing of the ward committee. We came, this was our meeting room, and here there was no political affiliation. Yes we had a Democratic Alliance (DA) councillor that was the chairperson. She was only in the capacity as facilitator. If we walked into this room, all the political parties stayed in the passage (Education sector representative, 26 August 2006).

It was also observed that other ward committees in the same Subcouncil were side-tracked by political differences. In fact, it was believed that this was the fundamental reason other ward committees did not function as well as the ward committee in Bonteheuwel.

Assessing the extent of actual participation in Bonteheuwel

The institutionalisation of policies and legislation to encourage local participation is evident. However, the ability of local residents in communities like Bonteheuwel to influence matters affecting their daily lives through these policy and legislative parameters remains low. We now return to the question posed earlier about the disengagement of citizens from state structures and processes designed to foster participation. The interviews conducted with

the ward councillor, ward committee members and officials from the Council revealed a number of issues that enable some understanding of why poor and marginalised citizens do not participate.

(i) Poor attendance of community meetings

Several of the interviewees alluded to the poor attendance of public meetings by the community. The sector representative for the aged and disabled felt that this could be ascribed to people's interest. She stated that people only attended when they perceived a direct interest in it for themselves. She placed participation in the context of poverty by saying, "for me, there is more for them to be involved in [than] making policies... They are poor and if you can't give them work or food, they are not interested in doing anything else" (interview with sector representative for the aged and disabled, 21 August 2006). The manager of the Multi-Purpose Centre (MPC),¹³ on the other hand, ascribed the lack of participation to people's lack of understanding of their rights as citizens. She said "people don't want to get involved. Only those active in the branches, in the political party, like me, would go to community meetings and [get involved in] activities" (interview with the manager of the MPC, 14 August 2006). In a sample of Bonteheuwel residents interviewed,¹⁴ very few even knew the name of their ward councillor. The manager of the MPC further stated that people are more concerned with what is happening in their own homes than in the community.

This lack of interest and involvement can be ascribed to three things. First, the general impact that poverty has or may have on individuals.¹⁵ Although, as pointed out earlier in this paper, civic republican thought emphasises the liberal idea of self-interest in the communitarian framework, the impact of poverty on individuals appears to break down the sense of community belonging and interest in the common good. It appears that the realities confronting the poor restrict their focus to the needs and interests of the immediate family. Further, and as highlighted elsewhere in this paper, the

very nature of the forced resettlement of coloured and African citizens eroded social networks in these communities. Second, poor communities lack the resources to attend and participate in meetings. Very often individuals in poor families have more than one job and therefore have limited time, they lack transport to attend meetings, they have parental responsibilities, and/or they find themselves in unsafe environments that make attending public meetings in the evening risky. A third factor refers to the increasing distrust between citizens and public institutions, between individuals within the communities itself, and between citizens and their local politicians. Askvik and Bak (2005:1) speak of South Africa as a “low trust society due to its history of racial oppression”. They argue that political transition notwithstanding, trust will dwindle where citizens believe the state does not deliver or meet their needs. As evidenced through the violent protests and demonstrations by many poor communities across South Africa in 2004 and 2005, this appears to be true.

A fourth factor impacting on attendance at public meetings and/or ward committee meetings is the high levels of functional illiteracy in Bonteheuwel.¹⁶ The impact of functional illiteracy on such a “young” community poses problems for local democracy. Several authors (see Gaventa, 2004, Box, 1998, Sen, 1999) demonstrate the relationship between basic literacy and participation. In the absence of basic literacy residents may have less of an understanding of what it means to be a citizen, of their rights and duties as citizens and of their claims to such rights. In an interview with the sector representative for the aged and disabled, the lack of understanding of citizenship and rights was highlighted. She stated that citizens “know their rights, but they don’t know what it means, and what comes with the rights” (Interview, 21 August 2006). In other words, citizens understand that they have a constitutional right to basic services, housing, health care, etc, but do not have a full understanding of what it is they need to do to claim these constitutional rights.¹⁷ Furthermore, the failure to engage with democratic practices and

institutions has a profound impact on the equal ability of individuals to “make and shape” policy. As pointed out by Bratton and Cho, the lack of engagement may result in only a few participating in and benefiting from the institutional practices and processes of democracy – thus raising serious concerns about the quality of such a democracy.

(ii) The general impact of poverty on participation

As referred to above, poverty can impact negatively on participation. The cost of participation, low levels of self-esteem, the inability to confidently and knowledgeably articulate one’s views and the general lack of community belonging could influence the vigilance with which an individual exercises his or her citizenship responsibilities. Both Sandal and Kabeer speak of the extent to which collective life can lead to more inclusive forms of participation and solidarity on issues. Sandal observes that an individual’s sense of identity is formed by her or his relationships with others in the community (2002:4). He also emphasises that an individual can only realise her or his identity and interests through deliberations over the common good. Kabeer, as stated before, believes that individuals unite along common values of justice and solidarity. Nonetheless, the impact of poverty on the community of Bonteheuwel has proven detrimental to notions of community belonging and social capital. The interviews revealed a community divided by their socio-economic conditions and subsequently uninterested in community matters. In the opinion of the ward councillor, substantive freedom and equality have yet to take place in this community. Not discounting the influence of poverty, she adds another dimension to the discourse on participation of the poor:

...opportunities are out of reach because they [the Bonteheuwel community] are not the right colour right now...At first we had a total white apartheid. Now we have the so called black apartheid. So what is the difference? Coloured people are still in the middle. And they are still not benefiting from anything else (Interview with Ward Councillor, 4 August 2006).

Although this viewpoint may be emotively driven, tension resulting from housing allocations in the Western Cape has arisen between coloured and African communities. On a slightly different but related issue, the perception of relative deprivation¹⁸ also exacerbates tension between the haves and the have-nots. Such tension could influence people's understanding of their claims to rights where those who are deprived perceive these claims in the context of what others have already received – what Kabeer refers to as the value of justice.¹⁹ Here the ward councillor stated:

I can show you I have got files this thick [using hands to demonstrate size] in my office of people who are unemployed, people that are looking for work right now. So if democracy was in anyway such a good/ big success why is it that certain communities benefit and everybody else has not benefited? (Interview with Ward Councillor, 4 August 2006).

The lack of interest in political activities by the Bonteheuwel community was also highlighted by the education sector representative. He referred to the divisions in Bonteheuwel and how these impact on community attendance at public meetings:

If we start with democracy...my understanding is that each and every South African has his role to play. But if you look at democracy in Bonteheuwel itself, there is a lot of division – political division, economic division, racial division,²⁰ religious division... (Interview with Education Sector Representative, 26 August 2006).

He expanded on this point by referring to the poor attendance at public meetings. In his opinion the Bonteheuwel community has a very narrow understanding of citizenship that is limited to voting at national and/or local elections. These sentiments are echoed when he stated "...they don't go to meetings, they don't give their input". In his opinion, the Bonteheuwel citizens expect their representatives to understand and identify their needs without any involvement by themselves in this process. He described their attitude by saying "we don't tell you what to do. We don't ask you for things.

You just need to know what we need" (Interview with Education Sector Representative, 26 August 2006).

It is important to note, however, that this may be a very natural and rational way of thinking, particularly in a context where a community's level of literacy is relatively low. It further reinforces the disconnection between the institutional structures and processes on the one hand, and the ability of the citizens to make their voices heard using these structures and processes on the other.

(iii) Facilitating participation through sectors

Evidently the structuring of participation according to sectors was valuable. At the same time, though, in some ways it impacted negatively on the accountability of ward committee members to the community. The responsibility for communicating ward committee decisions and/or issues, as outlined earlier, was delegated to the forums, associations and/or clubs via board members, chairpersons, principals and so on. This proved problematic for two reasons. Firstly, ward committee members were less accountable to the community and more accountable to a network of people through these boards, forums and associations. Secondly, access to participatory structures was limited to members of these clubs, associations and forums. In some cases members had to pay membership fees. This closes spaces of participation to those who cannot afford to pay such fees. The sector representative for the aged and disabled also attested to this when she referred to the fact that only the community leaders and the organisations in the area participated. She highlighted the limited access to participation and the limited benefits citizens could therefore gain from initiatives in the area as a result of the organisation into sectors. She cited the example of employment initiatives introduced in Bonteheuwel through the CRS. According to the sector representative, only those who were connected to certain sectors heard about

this and subsequently benefited. The poor in Bonteheuwel were not connected to these organisations and therefore did not benefit. The precinct model, initially introduced in Bonteheuwel, may be a more inclusive form of participation since it allowed for: (i) the organisation of the community on the basis of geographic location; (ii) direct meetings between the precinct representatives and community members in a specific precinct; and (iii) regular meetings between the ward councillor and community members within the precinct.

(iv) The actual influence that communities have in the decision making process

Several laws and policies, already referred to in this paper, emphasise the benefits of communities becoming involved in processes that affect their day-to-day lives. Yet an examination of these processes reveals a general lack of influence on the part of communities over Council decisions. For example, the Council is supposed to consider community needs in drafting the budget. The manager of the MPC, however, disputed this. She gave the example of poor street lighting in Bonteheuwel and the fact that this is still not provided for in the budget. Further evidence of the gap between community needs and the Council budget was provided by the ward committee members. Respondents agreed that the needs of the community were discussed at ward committee level and were articulated through the ward councillor to Subcouncil. Nevertheless, each ward was given a flat rate for capital expenditure and another amount for projects. In South Africa, where separate development used to be the order of the day, a budget drafted in this manner does not take cognisance of the realities confronting disadvantaged communities. Redress requires that the imbalances of the past be corrected through increased allocations to disadvantaged areas. In this way development and transformation can be realised more equitably.

Concluding remarks

South Africa has made huge strides in encouraging local participation through the introduction of extensive policies and legislation emphasising the role of citizens. However, the configuration of processes and structures for participation may impede or limit equal participation. As is demonstrated through the experience of the Bonteheuwel community, only those who were members of associations or clubs within sectors were consulted and participated in decision-making. Other issues of concern impacting negatively on equal participation include poverty, unemployment, the lack of community resources and a narrow understanding of the rights and duties of citizens. These constraints demand that the state consider approaches to participation that are more inclusive and take cognisance of society's realities.

Notes

- 1 The Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan survey research project conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University (MSU). It measures the social, economic and political atmosphere in societies in transition in west, east and southern Africa. A standard set of questions are put to respondents in the countries of interest allowing for a systematic comparison over time.
- 2 Only types A and B metropolitan and local municipalities may establish ward committees.
- 3 In South Africa, in the local government elections, the electorate votes both for a PR councillor and a ward councillor. A PR councillor is a politically elected candidate whilst the ward councillor is a candidate representing a specific ward.
- 4 In 2004 and 2005 communities mobilised against the state through violent protests and demonstrations against the slow pace of service delivery.

- 5 For an area to be declared a local authority area the Administration of Coloured Affairs needed to prepare the area for municipal status by detailed surveying. Lack of funds prevented the Administration from embarking on this process (Tapscott, 1977:144).
- 6 www.ijr.org.za,02/09/06
- 7 www.ijr.org.za,02/09/02
- 8 www.csvr.org.za,02/09/06
- 9 www.csvr.org.za,02/09/06
- 10 This system, however, was discontinued in the City of Cape Town just before the local government election of 1 March 2006. It is believed that the uncertainty around which political party would win the election was the primary reason for jettisoning the ward committee system. At the time of writing, discussions on whether or not to reinstate the ward committee system in the City were still underway.
- 11 This is an important sector since the youth comprise about 40% of the Bonteheuwel community (Census 2001).
- 12 Although one of the interviewees alluded to the fact that only sectors attended the public meetings.
- 13 This is the centre in Bonteheuwel where community organisations, political organisations and the ward committee (when it was functioning) met. The centre offers a variety of services to the people of Bonteheuwel, including a para-legal service. The South African Police Service is also located in this centre.
- 14 Interviews were conducted with a group of people in a learnership programme based at a primary school in Bonteheuwel. Although not representative of the community itself, the opinions expressed by this group are important since they correspond with many of the opinions expressed by sector representatives who have insights into the views of the community based on their portfolios.
- 15 Amartya Sen speaks extensively to this point in his work, *Development as Freedom*, 1999, Oxford University Press.
- 16 A total of 40% of the Bonteheuwel community has no schooling or only some primary schooling. Only 11% have completed primary schooling, 37% have some secondary schooling with only 12% in possession of a matric or higher education qualification (2001 Census). This is both striking and problematic since the Bonteheuwel community is a relatively young community with 43% of the community aged between 20 and 49 years and 40% between 0 and 19 years.

- 17 We hasten to add, however, that it may not necessarily be the case that citizens understand the context of their rights as contained in the Constitution per se, but instead have formed expectations (influenced by political promises) of what democracy would yield for them.
- 18 The extent to which individuals perceive their economic, political and social standing as compared to others. Essentially, relative deprivation refers to the discontent individuals feel when they compare themselves to others they perceive as similar, but who have more than them. According to Walker and Smith (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relative_deprivation) the experience of relative deprivation has important consequences for both behaviour and attitudes, which include stress, political attitudes and participation in collective action.
- 19 See also Kabeer, 2005. *Inclusive Citizenship*. Zed Books, London.
- 20 This is increasingly becoming an issue of interest; however, it is not the intention of the author to pursue this in detail in the context of this paper.

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