

Local councils need to be poor-friendly

It is important that channels for participation by citizens at local government level be kept open, write Imraan Buccus and Ralph Mathekga

August 10, 2006 *Edition 1*

The notion that the voices of the poor need to be heard received a boost with President Thabo Mbeki's recent Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture at Wits University.

The president received widespread praise for speaking to the moral consciousness of South Africa when he raised critical issues around the "deification of personal wealth" and the close relationship between the new capitalist class and the ANC.

Many political commentators have pointed to the fact that some state policies work against the interests of the poor and marginalised, creating a small band of super wealthy, and thus one of the critical challenges facing the government is to hear the voices of the poor.

The government has created legislative and constitutional provisions for public participation, particularly so that the poor can engage meaningfully with processes of governance.

Unfortunately, constitutional and legislative provisions do not mean that effective participation will take place. Civil society and other stakeholders need to be mobilised to participate in enriching deliberations around policies that affect them.

Also, a recent national conference on public participation in legislative processes affirmed the need to improve the level of outreach to citizens, as it is in the interest of government to improve participation, because it improves the quality of legislation, and strengthens accountability, transparency and trust in government.

Outreach

One of the critical points at which the level of outreach needs to be seriously improved is at local government level.

A much talked about shortfall that emerged shortly before this year's local government elections was poor communication between government and communities, hence "service delivery" protests and apathy shown at local government level.

Bearing in mind the constitutional imperative of building a local government system that would serve as a means to extend democracy to communities who have been largely deprived of political rights, local government is supposed to be a nodal point for South Africa's democracy.

In order to realise this objective, the local government structure has to be configured in a way that allows community participation and ownership. This structural shortfall has been a problem that almost led to the collapse of the system.

Citizens' participation in the local government system is necessary to ensure that communities own the system, rather than seeing the system solely as a dispenser of material services such as electricity and water supply.

Consequently, if the system fails in providing basic services, there remain no other grounds for citizens to be patient and loyal to the system, since its only source of strength would have collapsed. Citizens' participation in the system would not only strengthen the institution of local government by bolstering a sense of accountability on the part of local government officials, but will also have the symbolic effect of responsive democracy.

The standard caution raised towards the idea of participation is that it would not resolve everything at local government level, but there is no proving, except for theoretical extrapolations, that participation is a necessary facet of a true or functional democracy.

It is contested that citizens are too busy with their private lives to engage on a day-to-day basis with local government issues and it is believed that by providing material goods such as basic amenities, water and electricity, the local government system would have satisfied its primary objectives, and the apparent demand for participation would ultimately dwindle.

While it is correct to say that citizens are not always interested in the functioning of the government, structural limitations impede participation.

Therefore, the structural limitations to citizens' participation at local government level are an issue of concern, more so for a nation with a strong history of community participation and collaboration.

Link

More than being merely machinery aimed at ensuring service delivery, local government should be seen as a connecting point between national government and communities.

Citizens do not get an opportunity to engage meaningfully with government once they cast their votes and it is only through a well-structured local government system that a constant relationship between citizens and government is maintained.

Democracy is a difficult concept to deal with, for once a democratic route is adopted there is no turning back. Once the basic principles of democracy are adopted, channels for the pursuit of those principles should remain open; whether or not the opportunity is utilised is another matter altogether.

Therefore, it is important that channels for citizens' participation at local government level are kept open and readily available, as this is as important a prerogative as providing basic service delivery.

The need to capture poor, marginal voices cannot be emphasised enough, or we may be in further danger of operating in ways that are disconnected from an orientation that is poor-friendly.

- Imraan Buccus is Research Manager at the Centre for Public Participation (CPP), lectures part-time and is a PhD candidate at the University of Nijmegen (Netherlands). Ralph Mathekgwa is a political researcher and PhD candidate at the New School for Social Research, New York.

 **E-MAIL STORY**