



Reflecting on the Purpose and Modalities for Citizen Participation in Local Governance: *experience from practice*

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SUMMARY

One of the most basic tenets of a democracy is citizen participation in governance. In South Africa, this right is enshrined in the Constitution as well as in a number of other pieces of legislation. More recently, it formed a core message in the National Development Plan (2012) which stated that "*active citizenry and social activism is necessary for democracy and development to flourish*" (NPC¹ 2012:37).

A number of institutional arrangements were established to facilitate citizen participation in governance, one of which is the ward committee. Ward committees, were established as a mechanism aimed at bridging the gap between local citizens and local municipalities (DPLG² 2005:11). Since their establishment, a substantial investment was made by government, civil society and private donors to build the capacity of ward committees to facilitate meaningful citizen participation in local governance, while at the same time questions were being asked about their effectiveness.

This paper provides a reflection on the intended purpose and current modalities to facilitate meaningful citizen participation in local governance, shining a spotlight once more on the ward committee system. It draws on the work of Afesis-corplan, its partner Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), as well as written experiences of others who have written on ward committees.

Furthermore, it presents a brief assessment of the impact of the ANC 2012 National Conference resolutions on ward committees. The author lays a foundation by presenting the legal framework, guidelines and purpose of ward committees. A background to the problem is narrated drawing on past research, this is followed by a presentation of the central role crafted for ward committees in municipal planning processes. Drawing on the ANC 2012 National Conference resolutions the author argues that even this intervention failed to rehabilitate ward committees. Finally, the author further draws on Afesis-corplan's projects to highlight the challenges and negative perceptions citizens have of ward committees. With this being the case, the paper argues that the ward committee as a mechanism has, and continues to fail in creating a space for meaningful citizen participation in local governance.

The paper calls for an intensified national conversation on innovative and effective modalities for citizen engagement in local governance. The author argues that this conversation begins with accepting that the ward committee has failed to facilitate meaningful citizen engagement in local governance and that an alternative is necessary. In this paper, the author makes no assumption that the reader is acquainted with the legal framework, structures, terminology and system of local government.

¹ National Planning Commission

² Department of Provincial and Local Government now Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA)

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic society like South Africa, many people are happy with voting their elected representatives into power and for government to get on and do what it needs to do with little input from their end. For some however, this is not enough. These people want the opportunity to participate between elections to influence government decisions on matters that impact directly on their lives. They want to hold the elected representatives to account on the promises made and the implementation of crucial decisions. To this end, mechanisms are established and legislated to enable these people to participate in decision-making processes that impact on their lives.

The Constitution of South Africa, the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000) and the Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998) are some of the pieces of legislation that provide a legal framework to enable citizens to participate in decision-making processes. Section 152 of the Constitution establishes both representative democracy and participatory democracy as two objects of local government.

Representative democracy involves government by people elected in free and fair elections by eligible voters. Participatory democracy on the other hand, is a form of representative democracy in which citizens are actively involved in the decision-making processes of government. It is worth noting that participatory democracy is not necessarily a new or different form

of democracy, but a strengthening or expansion of formal democracy to include greater levels of participation by civil society.

The legislative background of ward committees

A *ward* in South Africa is a geopolitical subdivision of a municipality by the Municipal Demarcation Board³ for electoral processes. Each municipality is delimited into half as many wards as there are seats in the municipal council. Each ward elects a councillor (a ward councillor) directly and the remaining are appointed by political parties through a proportional representation system.

A *ward committee* is an area-based committee whose boundaries coincide with ward boundaries. It is (at least it should be) made up of members from a particular ward who represent various interests within the ward. Its purpose and functions are well articulated in legislation and its operational modalities are expressed in detail in policies that municipalities establish for this purpose. After each local government election, each ward elects a 10 member ward committee. These ward committees provide an opportunity for local citizens to be heard at a local government level in a structured and institutionalised way. This is in line with Section 73 of the Municipal Structures Act which states that:

³ The Municipal Demarcation Board is an independent authority established in terms of the Municipal Demarcation Act of 1998

1. If a metro or local council decides to have ward committees it must establish a ward committee for each ward in the municipality,
2. A ward committee consists of:
 - the councillor representing that ward in the council who must also be the chairperson of the committee; and
 - not more than 10 other persons
3. A metro or local council must make rules regulating:
 - the procedure to elect the subsection (2)
 - members of a ward committee, taking into account the need:
 - for women to be equitably represented in a ward committee; and
 - for a diversity of interests in the ward to be represented.

The genesis of the Sector Interest Group focus in ward committees

Many authors (including Himlin (2005), Smith and DeVisser (2009), Naidoo (2010) and Allmon (2010)), revealed numerous challenges with the system of ward committees; it is not the intention of this paper to rehash these findings.



From about 2001 to 2005, reasons given for the weakness of ward committees were centred around:

- the capacity of the committee members;
- the 'new' culture of participation that citizens were not accustomed to having emerged from Apartheid South Africa;
- the capacity of the state (local government) to engage, re source and incentivise participation through ward committees; and so on.⁴

A study conducted by the then Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) now Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in 2005 argued that ward committees were more effective in places where members were elected from well-organised sectoral structures. This saw a great move by local municipalities to identify, establish and support the emergence of sector interest groups within their jurisdiction. This included groups like women forums, youth forums, religious groupings, arts and culture, business formations, senior citizens, community safety forums, traditional leaders, agricultural associations, etc. This move was further supported through Section 8(2)(h) of Notice 925 of 2005 published in the Government Gazette which stated that ward committees should be elected from active members in the sector or geographical area.

Two models were proposed (in Notice 925 of 2005) for election of ward committees members. These models were based on sectoral and geographic representation, respectively. Each municipality had to decide on the applicability of each model, and elect accordingly. Section 3(a) of the same notice suggested that if a sectoral election model was chosen, the municipality had to then embark on a process of identifying the sector interest groups. Guidelines on how this was to be done were given.

⁴ Tshabalala (2007), Smith (2012) and Mhlari (2014)

The proposed ward committee election process

The ward committee election process in theory begins with the municipality identifying key performance areas for each ward; for example, local economic development, job creation, provision of basic services, etc. Interested groups then make submissions to the municipality stating their interests and concerns with any of the identified key performance areas. The municipality would screen the submissions and select a group that has demonstrable interest in the key performance areas. The identified structures are grouped into about 10 clusters that qualify for election. The election process itself can be done in two ways, either by all registered voters in the ward or by councillors. In both cases though, ward representatives need to have been nominated by the identified cluster groups made up of sector interest groups.

In predominantly rural wards (or farming communities) where the population density is low and ward jurisdiction covers a large geographical area, election of ward committees is to largely take a geographical spread focus. Identification of sector interest groups in this case follows a slightly different route, starting with council identifying the geographic area or clusters or farms that represent an equitable spread of the residents in the ward. Each geographical area, village or cluster of farms is requested to nominate a representative and elections are conducted by

ballot while a fair gender balance is ensured.

Whether elected from a sectoral interest base or to satisfy a geographic spread, ward committees are to be independent, impartial and of high integrity (SALGA & GTZ⁵ (2006) and SALGA (2011)). They are to do their work without fear, favour or prejudice and they are to account to the community they serve as well as all political parties in council. In fact, Section 73(b)ii of the Municipal Systems Act states that municipalities and metros must make rules regulating *“for a diversity of interests in the ward to be represented.”* Ward committees needed to embrace diversity, different views and opinions in the processes of community participation.



⁵ SALGA is short for South Africa Local Government Association and GTZ is the German Technical Cooperation in South Africa

THE WEAKNESSES OF WARD COMMITTEES SUMMARISED

Afesis-corplan's work, as well as that of others (Himlin 2005; Piper & Deacon 2008; Bendle 2008, Smith & De Visser 2009; Naidu 2010, Pieterse in GGGLN 2013), over the years revealed numerous challenges with the ward committee system. These are captured in various articles and publications including those that Afesis-corplan has produced over the years*. Chief amongst these challenges is the political hijacking of ward committees by political parties. While the law calls for a nonpartisan, independent structure in a ward committee, the reality on the ground reveal the opposite. Other challenges leading to the failure of the ward committee system, to cite just a few, include:

i. Struggle for control

Most political parties are losing members at local branch level (Hofmeister and Grabow (2011), Aylott et al (2011) and Loughlin et al (2013)). The strength of any political party is in numbers, and numbers are achieved by recruiting people at local level. The infighting, rise of elites and personal politics which have led to internal struggle for control and power has weakened local branch support for most political parties. Positioned closest to the people at local level, and with resources and support from local municipalities to mobilise people, ward committees offer a perfect vehicle for political parties to access and ultimately control ward communities.

This is intensified by the move of most political parties to align their branches along ward boundaries. The intended result of this is to 'marry' the ward committee with the local political branch committee. It is common in local wards, throughout the Eastern Cape at least, to find the entire branch leadership committee of whatever popular local political party serving in the ward committee. In such cases, a distinction between the ward committee and the political party branch structure is often blurred.

One of the councillors interviewed through Afesis-corplan's work explained how senior politicians set ward communities against ward councillors. He explained that if fallout emerged between a ward councillor and senior politician(s) for any reason, the politician(s) influenced and manipulated municipal planning processes such that the ward community from which the ward councillor comes received little attention in municipal development plans. In turn, the ward community would blame the ward councillor for poor performance. He further explained that it was in the best interest of ward councillors to ensure that ward committee were filled with people who could serve as their eyes and ears on the ground. *"Politics are a dirty game! Ward councillors have to maintain full control of the ward committee at all times"* he said.

* All these articles are available and downloadable at www.afesis.org.za

ii. Struggle for survival

Ward committees are largely elected from unemployed residents. Most of these members had been struggling for years to find employment. Psychologists argue that with employment come feelings of significance, power and worth (Kular et.al. 2008, Morris 2014). This is a desirable state of mind for anyone, let alone an unemployed person. Once elected onto the ward committee, members receive a monthly stipend. Because their election onto the ward committee is heavily influenced by ward councillors, ward committee members pledge their allegiance to the party that puts food on their tables. This is not politics, but just survival.

iii. Struggle for power and influence

The country's electoral system is such that to advance in a political career, one's name needed to feature in a list developed by key structures of political parties. The trend has been that the higher up on the list one was, the greater chances they had of securing an influential position. Factional battles within political parties are less about ideological differences but more on political career advancement, where factions are established to ensure that a particular group climbs the ladder. The control of ward committees by ward councillors translates in some way

to a control of the local vote. They use these 'foot soldiers' to campaign, silence local voices of dissent and to do whatever else was necessary to secure the local vote. To achieve this, ward councillors need to ensure that they have the right people for this job elected onto the ward committee.

It is important to highlight here that the ward committee position is also viewed by many as an entry level position in a career in politics. For people with political aspirations, this is the starting point. It is increasingly viewed (as expressed by all ward committee members interviewed through Afesis-corplan's work) as a training ground for future politicians. With this view, it goes without saying that ward committee members will take their orders from the 'grooming' political party where their career aspirations lie.

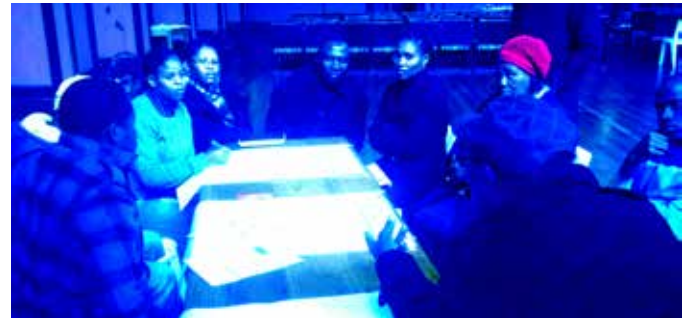
Examples of how the ward committee election is influenced

As had been revealed in Afesis-corplan's past publications (Ngamlana, Mathoho (2013), GGLN (2014)), the general trend⁷ is that ward councillors visit the people they want on the ward committee and sensitise them of the role they are to assume in the ward committee. Naturally, these identified individuals pledge their support to the councillor and the local political party that is offering an opportunity for them to climb the first rung of a ladder in a career in politics. Strategizing around the election process itself takes place with the support of the electoral officer (who is a portfolio councillor of the same party). In a side meeting somewhere, people are appointed to nominate, second and close nomination for each of the ten positions on the ward committee. On the day of election, this is played out at a speed of lightning such that by the time the rest of the attendants of the ward meeting realise, ten people would have already been elected onto the ward committee.

Objections raised by meeting attendants on the legitimacy of the election process are stifled by both the electoral officer and the ward councillor. In a couple of ward committee election meetings attended by Afesis-corplan staff as observers, those with objections were invited to write formal letters to council to which either no response was received and where promises of 'inquiry

onto the matter' were received, these resulted to no action. An overwhelming majority of ward committee members interviewed by Afesis-corplan between 2012 and 2013 shared how they were informed the evening before the ward committee elections that they were on the ward committee; this was before the committee was even elected.

This undoubtedly undermines the importance and legitimacy of sector interest groups in ward communities and in turn frustrates and alienates these groups, effectively silencing their voice and influence in conversations around ward development. It is no wonder such groups have opted to establish issue-based grassroots movements. To date, the relationship between the state and these issue-based movements has tended to be adversarial.



⁷ At least within the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal as revealed in Ngamlana and Mathoho (2013)

THE CENTRALITY OF WARD COMMITTEES IN GOVERNMENT PLANNING

The centrality of ward committee in development planning, particularly at a local government level, is an issue of concern. Because legislation (Section 74(4) Municipal Structures Act) places the ward committee as a central vehicle for citizen participation in local governance, all of local government's planning processes are conceptualised around it. For example, Chapter 4 of the Municipal Systems Act emphasize that municipalities must foster participation in:

- The IDP process;
- The evaluation of its performance through performance management;
- The budget process; and
- Strategic decisions regarding service delivery

While the act above does not necessarily specify the ward committee as a sole vehicle for achieving this desired participation, the centrality of the ward committee even in the Structures Act in particular suggest the same. More recently, sub-outcome 2 of outcome 9 of the 2014-19 Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) states that:

Sub-Outcome 2: Intergovernmental and democratic governance arrangements for a functional system of cooperative governance and participatory democracy strengthened

- a. With respect to strengthening the practices of local level democracy, municipalities are the lead agents for local democratic participation. They need to ensure that platforms and mechanisms exist for citizens to participate in decision-making, and be kept informed of key issues and developments. The anticipated impact through this sub-outcome is that participation at ward level becomes more deliberative, and that the scope for two way communication and interaction enables citizens to express their needs and concerns, as well as for citizens to be kept informed of key issues and developments that are underway.*
- b. Ensure an effective ward committee system to deepen participatory democracy by facilitating the establishment of ward committees and strengthening their oversight function in terms of monitoring and reporting to community progress against the IDP and SDBIP and ward service improvement plans/ ward operational plans.*

In 2014 the Ministry of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) adopted the "Back to Basics approach" that states that:

Back to Basics: ward committees must be functional and Councilors must meet and report back to their constituencies quarterly.

There are many more such other strategic and policy guiding documents which still place ward committees at the centre of municipal planning, implementation and monitoring. One may ask why is this when evidence has time and again revealed the inability of this mechanism to fulfil this role? To answer this, one needs to look at efforts aimed at 'rehabilitating' ward committees.

THE ANC RESOLUTIONS ON WARD COMMITTEES

In its 2012 National Conference, the ANC reflected on the state of local government and the role played (or not played) by ward committees. This was certainly not new as the then Minister of COGTA had in 2009 conducted a comprehensive analysis of the state of local government pointing to a failure of the ward committee system to facilitate meaningful participation of citizens in decision-making. He proposed a Turn Around Strategy which just never got off the ground. In its efforts to intervene, the ANC proposed a number of resolutions on the ward committee including the following:

- Ward committees should be made up of a diversity of community interests, and not dominated by political activists;
- Ward committees should comprise up to 30 people in geographically large wards;
- Municipalities should be obliged to consider proposals from

ward committees and inform them of their response;

- To the extent possible, municipalities should provide resources to ward committees and provide members with some financial support;
- The ANC should consider whether school governing bodies, community policing forums, health forums and other community structures should be part of the ward committee;
- Municipalities should also respond more effectively to community participation outside the state structure; and
- Ward committees should be linked to other forms of community participation.⁸

While one appreciates the intent by the ruling party to solve the problem, the resolutions do not even begin to scratch the surface of the problem. The key shortcoming is that they do not adequately address the political meddling with the ward committee system. As a leading party in most local municipalities in the country where problems with ward committees are identified, there is no strong message in these resolutions aimed at divorcing participation in local political branch structures and the ward committee. For example, there is no resolution that bars ward committees from electioneering, and no guide given towards the amendments of the code of conduct signed by ward committees⁹ and policies at local municipal level which should give effect to some of the conference resolutions.

⁸ Resolutions accessed and downloaded from www.anc.org.za

⁹ Examples of this can be found on www.salga.org.za



By design, ward committees should support the communities from which they are elected and whose interests they are to champion. Protestation is a form of community participation protected in a democracy. Ward committees are barred from standing with and supporting communities to protest through the policies and code of conduct that they sign. It is interesting that the conference resolved that ward committees should be linked to other forms of community participation, yet protestation which is a form of community participation, remains a space in which they cannot participate with their respective communities.

In the resolutions, there are no punitive mechanisms put in place to ensure that ward councillors do not appoint political activists onto the ward committee; this is left to the free will and conscience of ward councillors. There are no mechanisms to ensure the sustainability and functionality of a bloated ward committee (from 10 – 30 members). What can be seen is a move to co-opt independent and autonomous structures at local level - like school governing bodies, clinic forums, policing forums, etc. - onto the ward committee, bearing in mind that once on the ward committee; the right to protest is waved.

THE CSP PROJECT, A POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

After many years of work in local governance and after observing little or no implementation of the 2012 ANC National Conference resolutions in many municipalities, Afesis-corplan concluded that:

Without political will, resources and bold reforms, the ward committee system cannot rid itself of the challenges that had crippled it over years. This is because these challenges are so deeply entrenched in the culture and manner of being of ward committees. From its inception and as a result of circumstances at the time, ward committee largely became extensions of dominant political parties at ward level and more so in the recent past with the weakening of local political branches, it would be difficult for it to be anything else.

At the time, Afesis-corplan believed that at the root of the challenges that were crippling the ward committee system was the fraught manner in which ward committee members were elected. It then decided, with the support of the RAITH Foundation, to pilot a project in nine wards (rural, urban and peri-urban wards) spread over three local municipalities in the Eastern Cape (Buffalo City, Amahlathi and Great Kei) where it would mobilise sector interest groups to take an active role in the ward committee as was originally intended (drawing on the DPLG study in 2005). The rest of this paper is a summary of lessons learnt through this pilot project.

Lessons learnt from the Citizen Support Project

As mentioned above, the Citizen Support Project (CSP) was initiated to support sector interest groups in three local municipalities to 'reclaim' the ward committee space. This was based on the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1:

If ward committees were elected properly from sector interest groups as suggested in policy, they would better represent the needs of their constituents.

Hypothesis 2:

If ward committees were elected from sector interest groups as policy suggests, the ward committee as a structure would be more involved in development and less involved in local politics.

As a point of departure, there was a need to confirm what sector interest groups existed in the pilot local municipal areas. This involved confirming those sector interest groups that were already recognised in one way or another by the municipality, and to confirm those that were not. This initial activity revealed that each of the three municipalities defined sector interest groups differently.

A broad research was then conducted to confirm the extent of the difference in definition and understanding of sector interest groups. The research covered Provincial Departments as well as local municipalities. A sample of a few provincial departments, local municipalities and sector interest groups in the Eastern Cape was selected. A brief questionnaire was developed which was administered mostly through telephonic interviews. A desktop survey was done to verify primary and secondary data obtained.

The findings of the research revealed that:

- i. Terms such as 'sector groups, interest groups, partners, stakeholders, structures, and community based organisation (CBOs)' are used interchangeably in various government institutions both at Provincial and local level; and are understood to refer to the same thing.
- ii. Sector interest groups¹⁰ on the other hand, recognised all of these terms to be referring to them and responded to invites from government whether they called for stakeholders, partners, sector groups, CBOs, etc.
- iii. More than 90% of sector interest groups registered in the database of the local municipalities sampled were established in one way or another, through the support of the municipality, to serve a particular policy mandate or to support certain functions of the municipality. A number of

these municipal registered groups have received some resource support from the municipality at some stage. These included organisations like youth forums, women forum, forum for the disabled, moral regeneration movement, ministerial fraternal, traditional leaders, etc.

- iv. There were no formal written policies or procedures for recognising sectors in any of the municipalities that were sampled.
- v. For those few organisations who were not established or supported by the municipalities but were on the municipal database, they got there through their participation in municipal organised events, and not because they made submission linked on the municipality's expressed key performance areas.

The second task was then to confirm which organised sector interest groups were registered in the three pilot municipal databases. A rough definition of what was meant by the term 'organised' was developed and agreed upon. These were *people or groups that had a common purpose, were working within the same sector, met or talked regularly in a structured manner and had some form of a democratically established leadership or governance structure in place.*

Other sectors, like taxi associations, street hawkers and small

¹⁰ Our definition of a sector interest group is a group of people or organisations coming from a specific sector that are internally organised for the purposes of engaging as a collective with government and others. These include farming groups, small business associations, hawkers associations, youth forums, women groups, homeowners associations, etc.

business owners, people involved in arts and craft, etc. were not in these databases, and it was important to find out why. Furthermore, the project sought, where possible, to assist these groups to organise and to register on these databases. The ultimate aim was, once these groups were registered on the municipal databases they would participate in ward committee election thereby reclaiming the ward committee space. The thinking, as expressed above, was that since these groups were not initiated by or assisted by the municipality to organise, they would hold some degree of independence and will follow through with the original intent of a ward committee even in the face of opposition.

As project implementation progressed however, none of the newly organised sector groups in all three municipalities were interested to participate in ward committee elections. They saw the ward committee as a political space that would either derail their focus and energy from their main goal of pursuing a livelihood. Afesis-corplan could not convince these groups to use the ward committee as a space to influence municipal planning and decision-making. The experience that these sector group members had had turned them off ward committees to an extent that they wanted nothing to do with them at all.

This being the case, it became clear that it would be impossible to prove the hypothesis as noted above. It was impossible

to achieve the project goals with independent sector interest groups that wanted nothing to do with the ward committee when the project goals were to reclaim the ward committee space. Furthermore, to continue to work with those organised sector interest groups that were already on the databases of local municipalities defeated the project purpose as their independence and autonomy could not be confirmed.



IMPACT OF A FAILED WARD COMMITTEE

As mentioned above, ward committees were established for the following purpose:

- To facilitate participation from the community to inform council decisions;
- To strengthen effective communication between the municipal council and the community;
- To assist the ward councillor with consultation and report-backs to the community.¹¹

Ward committees therefore, serve as a crucial link that facilitates communication between the community and municipal councils. In the absence of this link, municipalities make decisions that are not informed by the priority needs of the communities they serve and in turn, development interventions ill-target the needs of communities. Even if development facilitated by the municipalities was targeting community needs, the essence of a democracy is in giving those communities an opportunity to participate in decision-making, a role ward committees are to facilitate.

The weakening of the ward committees meant that communities had to explore other means of 'getting their voice' heard. In the delivery agreement for Outcome 9 published in 2010, government agrees that "*communities feel alienated and*

disconnected from decision-making and feel disempowered in influencing the affairs of the municipality" (Presidency, 2010, pg 10). This has led to the creation of what Isandla Institute called 'popular spaces' for citizen engagement¹². These popular spaces unfortunately tend to be characterised by an adversarial manner of engagement between communities and municipalities. This is understandable considering communities' level of frustration with a system of local government that fails to recognise their voice, as noted by government itself.

The sharp increase in the number of protests in local municipalities in the past few years pointed to this growing frustration of communities and to an absence of spaces in which these frustrations could be addressed in a structured manner. Research showed that municipalities that were effective and efficient in administration as could be attested by 'clean audits' did not necessarily muster the inclusion of citizens in their decision-making processes. This, as expressed by one mayor in an interview, is largely due to the fact that these municipalities count on the ward committee to deliver this participation which it fails to deliver in a meaningful manner.

This paper does not claim there to be a link between the quality and pace of service delivery and ward committee effectiveness. In the absence of effective ward committees

¹¹ Ward Committee Handbook, DPLG, 2005

¹² Gorgens and Van Donk, 2011. Networked Spaces final paper, Isandla Institute. Cape Town

THE MAIN AIM OF THIS PAPER SUMMARISED

municipalities have continued to delivered services, albeit in a manner less inclusive of local citizens. The ward committee system was meant to facilitate a space for co-creation and participation in local governance. In the absence of spaces for co-creation, constructive debate and feedback loops that encourage accountability of elected representatives, citizens are forced to find alternatives and more often than not, those alternative spaces are confrontational in nature. Participation and co-creation does not mean that there would not necessarily be voices of dissent and disagreements over decisions to be made; the intent with the ward committee was the creation of a space where that dissent would be heard and addressed in a structured manner. The depth of our democracy lies in the facilitation of such spaces.

This paper is written solely to call for an open conversation on the modalities necessary to facilitate meaningful citizen participation in local government. We argue in this paper that the ward committee as a mechanism has failed to facilitate this for various reasons that have already been cited by so many others. The failed implementation of the 2012 ANC resolution throughout the country seeks to affirm the inability of the system to rehabilitate itself. With this paper, Afesis-corplan contributes to the conversation on how best the meaningful participation of citizens in local governance can be achieved and sustained. In doing so, it flags a spotlight once more on the ward committee and argues that the status quo cannot continue. In this paper Afesis-corplan offers no solutions; it believes that solutions will come from a meeting of minds. It only asks at this stage, that those minds must meet.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, the legislative framework in South Africa ensures a right for citizens to participate in decision-making and specifically presents the ward committee as one of the major mechanisms to enable its realization. At the core of local government's participatory and planning processes is an assumption that ward committees are effective. This is evident in the continued reliance, in government planning, policy and processes, on the ward committee. This is despite the fact that research has shown time and again that the ward committee is ineffective throughout the country. Borrowing from Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: *"doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results"*; to continue to base local government planning on a failed ward committee system is insanity. The reason why many have paid attention to and written about ward committees is that the planning and monitoring frameworks in local government are centred around it and its failure compromises the local government project as a whole.

As mentioned above, the ultimate aim of this paper is to propel forward a discussion on alternative mechanisms for citizen participation in local governance. Afesis-corplan presents this learning brief as a catalyst for that debate. A national conversation needs to continue on this and civil society must rally together to ponder innovative mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making because in there lies the essence of a democracy. The paper presents no answers.



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