



DEPARTMENT OF TOWN AND REGIONAL PLANNING

**COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING
PROCESS**

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ABSTRACT

Why is community participation important and necessary in development planning processes? This paper seeks to examine the extent and failures of community participation in planning processes in view of the different types of mandatory planning legislations within the South African context.

Post 1994 in a democratic South Africa, community participation has become a key process in policy and legislative frameworks for legitimate governance, making it mandatory for people driven development to be implemented at local government level. For instance, the Municipal Systems Act, No 32, 2000 (MSA), highlights a number of interrelated goals such as meeting the basic social and economic needs of citizens, such as the previously disadvantaged South African communities. However, it has become increasingly evident that the current approaches to development planning are hindered by the lack of participation and people centered development, which empowers communities to influence decision making process that affect them directly in their respective areas.

The poor people of South Africa in particular have not fully reaped the rewards of democracy. Despite the efforts of government of reaching out to the poor residents of South Africa about addressing their needs, the voices of the people on the ground seldom translates to coordinated planning and programme implementation. On the other hand, it is equally important to keep it in the back of our minds that in view of its benefits, community participation may cause planning and the service delivery process to take longer. In the current state of affairs the state is faced with huge basic services and infrastructure backlogs and the pace of service delivery needs to be up scaled. The pressure of service delivery and infrastructure impacts negatively on time allocated for participation.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Community participation signifies the direct involvement of community members in the affairs of the overall development planning programmes and governance at the local level. It is argued that contemporary understanding of community participation in the new democratic South Africa is informed by the memories of community struggles against the apartheid regime. This means that previously disadvantaged communities have a richly-textured history of strategic mobilization against exclusionary and discriminatory government practices at the local level (Williams, 2006). Even with such rich history of mobilization amongst previously marginalized communities, the concept of people driven development through Integrated Development planning (IDP) in South Africa generally has thus far been largely not substantive.

The White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa, 1998c) defines the IDP as a process through which local government can establish an integrated development plan for a short, medium and long term. Since municipalities are at the forefront of service delivery, they work in partnerships with civil society and the IDP approach is based on the principle of inclusive and representative consultation and/or participation of all residents, communities and stakeholders within a particular municipality.

In the context of South African planning, due to a range of structural disadvantages created by the past planning laws of the pre 1994 era, Our local government is faced with a massive task of taking a leadership role to involve and empower citizens and stakeholder groups in broader planning initiatives. This is necessary in a sense that it will create social resources by way of empowering the poor communities to get more involved as well as stimulate a sense of common purpose in finding local solutions for sustainability.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF LITTERATURE

2.1 The Concept of Participation

Cornwell, (1987:88) describes community participation as a formally structured instrument which is used either to bring about or to accelerate the process of change. Similarly Coetzee, (1989:260) defines participation as a process which requires the voluntary and democratic involvement in contributing to the development effort and decision making in respect of setting goals, forming policies and planning and implementing social and economic development programmes.

According to the World Bank Participation Sourcebook, (2003:3) participation is a process through which a community influences and shares control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them. Furthermore, the World Bank sees popular participation as a basic precondition to reach the affected poor people and in that case very critical for successful decentralization to the grassroots level. It creates a good platform that helps to build up civil society and to ensure that the needs of the poor are heard and the weight of their voice in local issues is increased (World Bank, 2000/2001: 107)

Drawing on the above definitions one can then agree with the authors that these descriptions imply that the concept of community participation is associated with transformation, whereby people who were previously marginalized in decision making are provided with an opportunity to partake in decision making processes that affect them directly or indirectly.

2.2 Policy Context of Community Participation in South Africa

With reference to Section 152 of the Constitution (South Africa, 1996) which clarifies the objectives of local government in relation to public participation, all development-related legislation passed since 1994 by national and provincial governments has required participative processes in plan formulation. As pointed out in the White Paper on Local Government, participation is about the *deepening of democracy*, as well as about ensuring that all affected parties have a say in determining and prioritizing needs, preparing strategies to address them, and monitoring the delivery and outcomes of such strategies.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP, 1994) was “focused on the people’s most immediate needs, and relied on their energies to drive the process of meeting those needs. One of the key principles drawn from the RDP is that development is not about the delivery of goods to passive communities but it is about active involvement and growing empowerment (RDP, 1994:5). Other key policies on community participation in South Africa include, the White Paper on Local Government (1998) which introduced the notion of “developmental” local government, including the concept of community empowerment.

Subsequently, the Municipal Systems Act, No 32 (MSA, 2000) introduced integrated development planning. Chapter Four of the (MSA, 2000) addresses community participation in local government, by stating that municipalities must develop “a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory government”. It further emphasises that municipalities must encourage, and create conditions for local communities to participate in the affairs of municipalities which includes the drafting of the IDPs. Furthermore, municipalities are also required to contribute building capacities for the local communities in order to empower them to participate in the affairs of their municipalities, and of that of ward councilors so as to foster inclusive community participation.

2.3 Local Government in South Africa

The South African Government consists of three spheres: national, provincial and local government. The provincial sphere is responsible for most developmental services but local government takes an increasing role, both at district and local municipality levels. Below this are wards and ward committee systems which have been introduced to give effect to the principle of participatory local governance.

Pre 1990, local government in South Africa had no constitutional safeguard until the early nineties as it was previously perceived an extension of the State and a function of provincial government (Williams, 2006:200). However, post 1994; local government has become a key role player in the transformation and development process in South Africa and high expectations have been linked to this sphere of Government. In order for local government to fulfill its mandate, Integrated Development Planning (IDP) has been introduced and legislated as a crucial tool. The underlying philosophy, goals and processes of this South African planning approach has much in common with the Local Agenda 21 (LA21).

Public participation is rooted in the IDP hence local government is therefore required to establish appropriate structures in order to ensure effective citizen participation. Additionally, the IDP makes provision for monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure transparency and accountability of the elected political leadership.

3.0 PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

3.1 Community Participation in Planning

According to Hope (1996:12), planning refers to the formulation and execution of a consistent set of interrelated measures designed to achieve certain specific social and economic goals. This formulation and execution process involves conducting a needs assessment, and prioritization thereof of the identified needs. Therefore in view of this, it is equally critical for the community that is intended, to benefit from a particular development initiative to participate in the planning process. Similarly in most cases communities that are to benefit from a particular development initiative often have indigenous knowledge or first had information about their area that outsiders heading the initiative do not possess (Swanepoel, 1997:4).

The IDP instrument is perceived as one of the key tools for local government to achieve its development role. It combines democratic governance, participatory planning and efficient managerial practice. In the modern planning world, it is seen as a vital framework for communities, citizens and other interest groups to enter into public dialogue and debate about the intended desirable future to be achieved.

Overall, active participation in planning and decision-making increases the legitimacy of local government. It gives people the experience to have more influence over their lives, and it is vital to contribute to the determination of the community's development.

3.2 Methods of Community Participation

One of the major problems central to the process of development planning is when practitioners and leaders apply a top-down approach process, whereby all the decisions are made at top levels and the affected communities do not participate. This approach impacts negatively on the affected communities in a sense that transparency and community empowerment is compromised. The results of these impacts could lead to programme and project blockages due to communication breakdown between the parties when consensus is not reached.

In contrast to the above approach Kellerman (1997), states that a two way communication process is essential for development planning and implementation. This means that an inclusive communication strategy must be developed where all the needs and interests of the various stakeholders can be fully addressed and communicated across all channels. The two way communication approach is somewhat similar to what is called the bottom-up approach. This approach involves planning and making decisions with communities. It must be noted however that the bottom-up approach consumes more time due to intense consultations through the various phases of the programme or project.

Drawing from the above statements, it is evident that both the top-down and bottom-up approaches can be complementary to each other in practice by transforming top-down strategies into bottom-up ones. This can be done by ways of making local government to reach out more and involve the broader civil society forces to take ownership and responsibility of their own fate. Civil society equally has to support local government, especially the ward councilors. The councilors are the direct link between local government and communities. Councilors therefore have the task to ensure equal and just participation between the two parties.

4.0 OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

4.1 Opportunities of Community Participation

Overall, there is a wide variety of opportunities that exist for inclusive participation and decision making in planning processes. Bunk (2002:116), observes however that most of these opportunities include various dimensions like institutional prerequisites, use of structures and practical benefits for both the community and local government. Furthermore, most of these opportunities are not used to their full potential, some are misused. The existing legal provisions such as the Municipal Systems Act, (2000) which informs the compilation of IDPs provides a broad framework for the participation of communities in local decision making processes. Additionally, in a democratic country like South Africa a variety of formal as well as informal participation structures are in place to influence decision making processes of local government (Bunk, 2002). Through collective and informed community participation processes considerable capacity building, empowerment and transfer of skills to beneficiaries or community members can be achieved.

Furthermore, a cooperation of local government and community members allows for more flexibility in development approaches by ensuring the relevance of initiatives to people's problems and giving people at least shared control over them. Past experiences of the creation of "white elephants" due to lack of involvement of the affected community and consideration of their needs and priorities can now be avoided due to the increased scale of participation. Community activities often serve the empowerment and self-assertiveness of the community to engage in planning processes by mobilizing and sharing all available human and other resources which supplements or even improve the utilization of scarce resources.

4.2 Limitations to Community Participation

Hindson and Swilling (1994:12) state that development introduces scarce resources into resource starved communities and focuses the power struggle in these communities as individuals or organisations controlling resources command political allegiance. This statement indicates that there are often limitations to community participation. These limitations are often as a result of factors such as misunderstanding, mistrust, intolerance and conflict. A good example to support the above statement is by looking at the current social landscape in South Africa which is clouded by mass service delivery protests around the country. The poor people are raising their frustrations through these protests to indicate their dissatisfaction with service delivery.

On the other hand, some of the community members can also act as obstacles themselves in the development planning process. Central to this problem is the issue of leadership some community leaders can create tensions which could result in possible divisions and factions within communities. Self centered community leaders who look to pursue their own interests by keeping crucial information to themselves due to corruption, inefficiency and political motives could also lead to disintegration of planning and decision making (Burkey, 1993)

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is without a doubt that, if the livelihoods of the poor are to be improved drastically in the South African context. The first requirement implies community involvement in planning and management of local development. Drawing from the research conducted on this paper, it is also quite clear that the developmental processes of today require in depth participatory planning approaches from all stakeholders involved and affected if a significant impact on the lives of the poor is to be made. There is also a greater need for planners to apply strategic planning processes in dealing with the conditions of uncertainty that we face today arising from globalization and the unprecedented urbanisation of poverty. For planners of today, these challenges demand for the intensive use of all the available legislation, tools and techniques in order to develop new strategies for urban management and innovative methods to improve and sustain the physical environment and infrastructure.

While acknowledging the identified limitations to community participation, inclusive participatory planning approaches remain critical to ensure that all affected groups participate in decision making processes that affect them.

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