Unblocking Service Delivery Backlogs through Effective Citizen Participation: A Case of Municipalities in Gauteng, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an assessment of the effectiveness and functionality of citizen participation mechanisms that have been initiated at local government level to ensure effective delivery of services to communities. The local government sphere in South Africa uses various forms of citizen participation mechanisms, such as Ward Committees; Integrated Development Plan (IDP) Forums; Local Economic Development (LED) Forums; as well as Community Development Workers (CDWs), in order to ensure that the needs of communities are addressed and met. Service delivery, or rather a lack thereof, has recently been making news headlines, especially during a period when the citizens are expected to participate in the local government elections. Critical backlogs in service delivery were created during South Africa’s democratic transition in the early 1990s. This resulted in many communities, especially black communities, being deprived of access to basic services, such as housing; water; sanitation; and health services. Recent protest marches over service delivery in the Gauteng province and other parts of the country have raised many questions on the effectiveness of the local government in realizing its Constitutional mandate. The debate on poor service delivery tends to focus mostly on the effectiveness of local governments and often neglects the role of citizen participation in assisting and enhancing local government capabilities. This paper identifies challenges and successes of these citizen participation mechanisms, draws conclusions and proposes recommendations for unblocking service delivery backlogs.

Key words: Service Delivery Backlogs, Citizen Participation, and Local Government

Introduction
The people shall govern, or shall they? This evocative corruption of the Freedom Charter clause by Xolela Mangcu speaks volumes about the need for genuine and meaningful citizen participation in the governance processes, more especially at local government level. Meaningful participation resonates with Abe Lincoln’s legendary Gettysburg Address, when he stirringly declared that ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth’. Empirical evidence suggests that the majority of South Africans feel alienated, hence the recent violent protests in a number of communities around the country. The protests have been defined, correctly so, as service delivery protests. Therefore, it will not be entirely incorrect to define the protests as ‘protests of the voiceless’. In other words, the protests might have been fuelled by the absence of effective avenues for the citizens to express their views.

The recent service delivery protests in the Gauteng province and other provinces have raised many questions on the effectiveness of the local government in realizing its Constitutional mandate. For example, Mncendane (2009) states that the rate at which service delivery protests are taking place across Gauteng is an indication that local governance has failed and that an improvement is needed. However, the debate on service delivery protests tends to focus mostly on the effectiveness of local governments and often neglects the role of citizen participation in assisting and enhancing local government capabilities. Research suggests that there are significant service delivery backlogs across all the municipalities in the country. This paper advocates effective citizen participation as a means that can be used to unblock service delivery backlogs, using municipalities in the Gauteng province as a case study.

Methodological issues

The primary method adopted for this article is the case study. The paper presents the results of a case study of service delivery protests in the Gauteng province. It highlights the extent to which the province has been plagued by service delivery protest and reflects on reasons provided by the citizens for engaging in protests, which are violent in some cases. The secondary methods took the form of literature and media review, content analysis, and analysis of the Municipal IQ Hotspots Report, 2010. Furthermore, the paper is premised on the African National Congress (ANC) 2009 Elections Manifesto, as it states that:

We are committed to a service delivery culture that will put every elected official and public servant to work for our people, and ensure accountability to our people. We
will continue to develop social partnerships and work with every citizen. We will manage our economy in a manner that ensures that South Africa continues to grow, that all our people benefit from that growth and that we create decent work for the unemployed, for workers, for young persons, for women and for the rural poor. We will remain in touch with our people and listen to their needs. We respect the rule of Law, human rights and we will defend the Constitution and uphold our multi-party democracy (ANC, 2009).

Drawing from the above statement of the ANC 2009 Elections Manifesto, the primary research question that this study was set out to address is: what role does citizen participation play in unblocking service delivery backlogs? The aim of the study was to assess the effectiveness of the citizen participation mechanisms in the Gauteng province, in the light of continuous service delivery protests. The limitation of this study is that it is strongly focused on the Gauteng province. The justification of confining this study to Gauteng is that empirical evidence suggests that the province has experienced the highest number of service delivery protests in the country between the years 2007 and 2011, as will be illustrated in section 3 of this paper.

**An Overview of Service Delivery Protests in Gauteng**

“In the end there will be violence. We will fight and we blame the municipality for that” (Stephen Phelani, a protester quoted by News24, 15 March 2011). Phelani’s statement represents the sentiments of the citizens who engage in service delivery protests across South Africa. The Municipal IQ 2010 Hotspots results indicate that 98 metro and local South African municipalities have been the site of protests since 2004. Figure 1 serves to demonstrate the average monthly service delivery protests trends in South Africa between 2007 and 2011.
Figure 1 illustrates the increased frequency with which community protests have occurred, and the subsequent decrease in protests across the country. Cooperative Governance Deputy Director-General, Yusuf Patel, informed parliamentarians that analysis showed that the bulk of service delivery protests were taking place in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and the Western Cape. Patel said the reasons for the protests vary from a growing demand for infrastructure and housing to rising electricity costs (Presense, 2010). In addition, drawing on an analysis of 14 of the 2007 protests, Booysen (2009: 128-129) suggests that, while the ‘service delivery protests’ continued to be ‘grassroots’ actions, the triggers were increasingly national-level responsibilities, including housing, land, and jobs. Figure 2 further illustrates the pattern of service delivery protests on a monthly basis, from 2007 to 2011.
As Figure 2 demonstrates, monthly protest figures show an upward trend in the frequency of community protests, followed by a downward trend beginning in mid-2010. This upward trend ended in June 2010 as the frequency of protests fell dramatically. This change in trend coincided with the arrival of the FIFA World Cup in June 2010 (Karamoko and Jain, 2011: 6). The SABC (2011) reports that Gauteng and the Western Cape are particularly vulnerable to protests, given their rapidly urbanizing populations. Since 2004, some 48% of protests on the Hotspots Monitor have been recorded in metro areas.

A disaggregation of Figure 1 and Figure 2 suggests that Gauteng remains the worst-hit province when it comes to service delivery protests. Gauteng accounted for 29% of the protests across the country in 2007, increasing to 34.7% in 2008, declining to 29, 11% in 2009, only to increase significantly to 39.8% in 2010, while an increase of 31.4% was registered for the period January to April 2011. The Municipal IQ 2010 attributes Gauteng’s prominence to a function of the number of metro areas in the province, all of which are prone to service delivery protests, especially in informal settlements. The lack of service delivery creates a situation where citizens revolt against the government, especially when these services have been budgeted for by the National Government.
While Figures 1 and 2 indicate a decline of protests in South Africa in 2011, the Gauteng province has seen increasing trends. In Gauteng, sporadic protests have been experienced across the province. Protest hotspots are Schubart Park, Mamelodi, Attridgeville, and Bronkhorstspruit (Pretoria); Rabie Ridge, Phomolong, Reiger Park, Daveyton, Thokoza, and Tembisa (Ekurhuleni); Protea Glen in Soweto; Thembalihle, Ennerdale and Orange Farm (south of Johannesburg); and Zandspruit (west of Johannesburg). Figure 3 illustrates a recent violent protest that erupted in Zandspruit.

Figure 3. Service delivery protests in Zandspruit, Gauteng

In an interview with the SABC in March 2010, the then Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs Minister, Sicelo Shiceka, said in Pretoria: “we find that government has been lethargic at most and (at) worst doing nothing. What we have discovered was that in all the protests people have spoken to government in one way or the other... whether through a memorandum, a march, or anything.” An analysis of Figure 3 and Shiceka’s response suggest that the citizens use a number of mechanisms to communicate or speak to the government. A point of contention is that there are blockages and backlogs in service delivery, which lead to
service delivery protests. The question that this paper seeks to answer is: what are these citizen participation mechanisms and how effective are they? But before discussing mechanisms of citizen participation, it is important to revisit the concept of ‘citizen participation’ in the local government context. The starting point would be to note that the terms ‘citizen participation’ and ‘public participation’ are used interchangeably in this paper. This practice is common in the literature. Therefore, it becomes necessary to revisit the concept of ‘public participation’ and its relation to the local government, before discussing citizen participation mechanisms.

**Public Participation in Local Government**

Public participation is a critical element of the integrated and sustainable development and governance in a democratic South Africa. The Public Service Commission (2008: 9) stresses that public participation is an involvement of the citizens in initiatives that affect their lives. Protagonists of public participation provide several key reasons for its necessity. Firstly, it is reasoned that it provides an equal opportunity to influence the decision-making process, secondly, based on popular sovereignty, it ensures that the government is sensitive to the needs of the people, thirdly, it counter-acts the sense of powerlessness in the poor (Monyemangene 1997: 29). Arnstein (1969: 216) states that citizen participation is citizens’ power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens presently excluded from the political and economic processes to be deliberately included in the future.

Section 152 of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996, mandates local government to provide a democratic and accountable local government and to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in matters of local government. Therefore it is the responsibility of municipalities to ensure effective participation of the citizens and communities in matters of local government. In responding to the constitutional mandate, measures were introduced to entrench community participation and to transform the local government function with an emphasis on development rather than regulations, as was the norm in the previous dispensation. In order to affect its constitutional mandate of public participation, the South African local government sphere has adopted a plethora of citizen participation mechanisms.
Citizen participation mechanisms

It is increasingly recognized that development is a multi-dimensional process incorporating quality of life objectives, which can only be successfully delivered through direct participative governance and cross-sectoral partnerships (Meldon et al., 2000: 3). In South Africa, the local government sphere uses numerous forms of citizen participation mechanisms, which include Ward Committees, Integrated Development Plan (IDP) Forums, Local Economic Development (LED) Forums, and Community Development Workers (CDWs), to address the needs of the citizenry. As a starting point, the local government legislations made a provision for local authorities to establish a system of participatory democracy at the local level in the form of Ward Committees (Houston et al., 2001: 206). These Ward Committees were introduced in municipalities as community structures to play a critical role in linking and informing the municipalities about the needs, aspirations, potentials, and problems of the communities.

Ward committees

Ward committees are a creation of legislation, that is, Chapter 4 of the Municipal Structures Act, 1998, which gives effect to Section 152 of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996. Furthermore, Section 17(2) of the Municipal Systems Act, 2000, stipulates that a municipality must establish appropriate mechanisms, processes and procedures to enable the local community to participate in the affairs of the Municipality. It further calls for municipalities to develop a culture of municipal governance that works hand in hand with elected representatives with a system of participatory governance.

Ward committees are community elected, area based committees within a particular municipality whose boundaries coincide with ward boundaries. A ward committee is meant to be an institutionalized channel of communication and interaction between communities and the municipality (Bolini and Ndlela, 1998). The role of ward committees is to facilitate participatory democracy, disseminate information, help rebuild partnership for better service delivery, and assist with problems experienced by the people at ward level. However, the spontaneous eruptions of service delivery protests in South Africa since 2004, and more especially in poor communities, are an indication that the citizens are not effectively participating in the ward committees.
As recently as 30 September 2011 and 14 September 2011, residents of Tembisa in Ekurhuleni and Zandspruit (west of Johannesburg), respectively, took to the streets in protest against lack of service delivery (see Figure 3 above which depicts violent protests in Zandspruit). Similar outbreaks were experienced in March 2010 in various parts of Gauteng, such as the Orange Farm in the Vaal, where the ANC Chief Whip, Mathole Motshekga, addressed community leaders. Motshekga is quoted by the South African Press Association (SAPA) on 03 March 2010 as stating that “... their demands are reasonable as you can see that projects are unfinished here and there is sewerage in the streets. The ball is in our court as the government to address the issue”. In essence, Motshekga was acknowledging that the ward committees are not utilizing effective citizen participation to unblock service delivery backlogs.

Local Economic Development and Integrated Development Plan Forums

While the Constitution (1996) places a great responsibility on municipalities to facilitate LED, the schedule in the Constitution that lists the functions of municipalities does not include LED. This has contributed to an interpretation that sees LED as an un-funded mandate for municipalities. Rather, there is a clear implication given the juxtaposition of the Constitution and its schedule that municipalities have a key role in creating a conducive environment for investment through provision of infrastructure and quality services, rather than developing programs and attempting to create jobs directly (DPLG, 2006: 9). This calls for integration of delivery at municipal level. The DPLG (2006: 20) notes that infrastructure development, service delivery, municipal financial viability, and local economic development are not mutually exclusive concepts. They are interdependent and government (municipalities in particular) should develop strategies and management practices that take on a holistic and integrated approach.

In an attempt to ensure that local authorities do, in fact, focus on LED as a priority area, it is now compulsory for all local authorities to draw up (among other things) an annual and five-year Integrated Development Plan (IDP), which must contain an LED strategy (Section 26 of the Municipal Systems Act, 2000). Furthermore, Section 16(1) posits that municipalities should facilitate the participation of the local community in all processes related to their integrated development plans (IDPs) and performance management systems, the preparation of municipal budgets and strategic decisions about the provision of municipal services. These are then the principal processes in which ward committees are expected to
participate. Moreover, the Act states that municipalities have an obligation to build the
capacity of local communities to participate in these processes, as well as the capacity of
councilors and staff to foster community participation. Section 17(2) notes that with regard to
all ‘mechanisms, processes and procedures’ for community participation, municipalities must
take into account the special needs of people who cannot read or write, people with
disabilities, women, and other disadvantaged groups.

Community participation in the local government is crucial in a multi-dimensional
and integrated development plans environment (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999: 5). This falls
in line with the objective of ensuring that communities own the process of development, and
people are enabled to make a meaningful contribution to the development of their own lives.
Development does not occur successfully if beneficiaries are not part and parcel of the
process of planning and implementation of the process (Parnell et al., 2002: 27). Community
participation can be a learning process only if the people really participate. Participation does
not mean that people should be brought into a project when physical labor is required. By that
stage people should already have been involved for a long time. There is no stage for people
to begin to participate than right at the start of the project. People should not only do, but
their right and ability to think, seek, discuss and make decisions should also be acknowledged
(Swanepoel, 1992: 3).

Community Development Workers

Community development workers - a concept introduced by the Mbeki government in
2003 - are multi-skilled public servants deployed in communities to help people access
government services and poverty alleviation programs. They work as community facilitators,
focusing on finding solutions to identified needs and blockages by interacting with national,
provincial, and local government structures. According to the South African Management
Development Institute (SAMDI, 2005), Community Development Workers (CDWs) are
officially mandated to ‘develop’ and ‘transform’ communities by, among other activities,

- informing them about, and assisting them to access, the services provided by the
government;
- determining the needs of communities and communicating these to the government,
- promoting networks between community workers and projects to improve service
delivery; and
• compiling reports and documents about progress and local issues.

In Gauteng, the work of CDWs is facilitated and coordinated by the Gauteng Department of Local Government and Housing. There are 442 CDWs which have been deployed to all the wards in the province.

The work of CDWs is centered on advocacy, in which they initiate and support government campaigns and facilitate the formation of intergovernmental service delivery forums; provide support to developmental projects, partnerships with various stakeholders; and provide necessary information to communities. In spite of all the work of CDWs in contributing towards creating a developmental state in South Africa, the following questions remain: How are the CDWs contributing towards bringing social cohesion in communities? What role are the CDWs playing in minimizing service delivery protests in their areas of jurisdictions, as well as in the province at large?

A Critique of the Citizen Participation Mechanisms

During elections, would-be councilors make various promises of service delivery to people at the grassroots level, yet they seldom keep such promises once they have been elected into positions of power. Faced by various forms of protests, as evidenced in 2005, officials and councilors alike often tried to justify the lack of service delivery in terms of a lack of human resource capacity to deliver such services. Yet this is precisely the capacity that they claim when they contest the elections for a political party (Williams, 2006). Gauteng, as the predominant site of community protests in South Africa, helps explain, at least partially, the phenomenon of community unrest. Municipal IQ has suggested that Gauteng’s significant contribution to the number of community protests nationwide demonstrates that the protests are largely an urban phenomenon, resulting from the ‘relative’ deprivation members of a community feel when compared to their more affluent neighbors.

Despite the legal provisions, it would seem that most community participation exercises in post-apartheid South Africa are largely spectator politics, where ordinary people have mostly become endorsees of pre-designed planning programs. They are often the objects of administrative manipulation and a miracle of reconciliation in the international arena of consensus politics, while state functionaries of both the pre- and post-apartheid eras ensconce themselves as bureaucratic experts, summoned to ‘ensure a better life for all’ (Williams, 2006: 2). It is from this perspective that Sachs (1993: 118) writes that participation can easily
be transformed into manipulative designs which in the end do not meet the people’s needs. The World Bank (1994: 4) explains that this form of participation is conducted in a disguised manner in order to substitute genuine participation. Meaningful involvement of the citizens as public actors by the government in decision-making and implementation of government programs can largely contribute to unblocking service delivery blockages, and reduce the rates of service delivery protests. Therefore the current citizen participation mechanisms need to be reviewed, revamped, and rejuvenated.

Until very recently, the main focus of most municipal LED initiatives was community economic development projects, the majority of which proved unsustainable once donor or public-sector funding disappeared, and so had no real long-term impact on poverty reduction (SALGA, 2010: 3). The failure of LED to achieve its objectives in many of South Africa’s poorest areas is a key issue behind much of the social unrest that we have seen over the past few years. As a result, government has realized that it needs a pro-active and structured approach towards LED (SALGA, 2010: 5). To date, such a structured approach has not been produced. This should be seen as an opportunity for the municipalities to constructively involve the citizens in LED initiatives. The DPLG (2006: 23) correctly states that a credible approach to LED must invest in the capacity of municipalities to manage in a way that inspires confidence in both constituents and the private sector. All local authorities accept the need for inclusion and participation in the development of LED strategies, but how they actually view who should be included, and how, differs considerably. In general terms, smaller local authorities tend to place a much stronger (sometimes exclusive) focus on ‘participation’ by marginalized communities, rather than the private sector and organized business. In contrast, most of the larger metros are working hard to build LED networks with private business (SALGA, 2010: 15).

Ward committees have been the focus of considerable attention by government as well as civil society, with substantial investment already made in an attempt to ensure that these structures have the necessary capacity and resources required for them to fulfill their envisaged roles as a ‘voice’ of communities. At the same time, questions have been asked about how effective these institutions actually are; whether they are useful conduits for community involvement in local governance; whether, as ‘created spaces’ for public participation, they are inherently capable of playing the critical role expected of them; and whether they create opportunities for real power-sharing between municipalities and citizens (Smith and de Villiers, 2009: 2).
A major concern has to do with the way representation on ward committees is constituted. In particular, the allegation often arises that ward councilors have a direct hand in picking ward committee members in line with their political affiliations. This has given rise to the charge that ward committees are often merely extensions of party structures and do not encompass the full range of interests in communities (Smith and de Villiers, 2009: 16). Himlin’s (2005) study of ward committees in the City of Johannesburg, for example, noted a sense of frustration on the part of ward committee members that many of their ideas and proposals for improvements in their wards were not being responded to by the council.

Community Development Workers’ impact on the communities they are supposed to serve is also not fully appreciated. A study undertaken on behalf of the Department of Local Government and Housing in Gauteng by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) in 2010 found that community development workers had very little impact in Gauteng. Only 12% of Gauteng’s residents were aware of CDWs in their areas and only 43% of these respondents knew what a CDW does. This means only 5% of the total sample knew what a CDW does. In addition, less than 3% of those surveyed ever received assistance from a CDW. Taking into consideration that there was a CDW in almost every municipal ward in Gauteng during the period under review, this impact is extremely low.

Again, CDWs are accountable to provincial government while dealing with local government and national government issues. Although CDWs have assisted a very small percentage of residents to gain access to basic services, the bulk of their time is used to assist with obtaining grants, important documents like IDs, accessing skills training opportunities and receiving assistance with community development projects. CDWs can merely report problems to municipalities, but do not have the backing or capacity to drive those complaints to a conclusion. Simply put, the CDWs, just like the ward committees and the IDP Forums, cannot justifiably be regarded as effective mechanisms of citizen participation.

**Conclusion**

The issue of participation, or the lack of it, has found its way on to national and international agendas. In many parts of the world, interest in research and development into participatory development approaches is increasing. It is now accepted that citizen participation in local development is the key to the equality, inclusiveness and sustainability of development (Meldon *et al.*, 2000:3). The present paper has focused on the citizen participation mechanisms used in the South African local government sphere, with specific
reference to Gauteng province. A critical analysis of the citizen participation mechanisms that include Ward Committees, IDP Forums, LED Forums and CDWs that are utilized in the municipalities in Gauteng was conducted to mirror citizen mechanisms in the entire South African local government sphere. While there is a well-developed citizen participation framework in South Africa, the country continues to experience sporadic service delivery protests. Gauteng province has experienced the highest level of service delivery protests.

This paper argues that the spate of community protests, or rather service delivery protests, can be attributed to ineffective citizen participation mechanisms. The paper strongly calls for an overhaul of the three citizen participation mechanisms discussed above, as well as the review of other public participation platforms, especially in Gauteng. To borrow from the Public Service Commission (2008), this paper concludes that citizens are not just consumers of services rendered by government, but are also critical role-players, with a stake in the election of governments and how such governments should run the affairs of the country. Given this, it is important that government ensures meaningful mechanisms for citizen engagement, especially in the development and implementation of government policies and programs. At the same time, however, it is important to appreciate that the nature and extent of public participation is context sensitive and different realities may thus require different modalities in engaging citizens.

References


