

*“Strengthening women’s participation in local governance: Lessons
and strategies”*

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1. Introduction

Since our first democratic election in 1994, South Africa has made great strides in establishing a constitutional and legislative framework for building a participatory democracy. Institutional structures and mechanisms have been created at municipal, regional and national levels to facilitate public participation in processes ranging from local development planning and budgeting, to the formulation of national legislation.

Much analysis and reflective work has been done on assessing the effectiveness of these mechanisms, and highlighting their deficiencies in truly connecting citizens’ voices with state decision-making, beyond cosmetic, compliance exercises in public relations. A gap in studies thus far reveals the need to examine to what extent current participation mechanisms accommodate equity issues by enabling marginalised or vulnerable groups to participate in governance, and women living in situations of poverty in particular.

South Africa’s approach to economic development, while spawning a new super-elite and burgeoning middle-class, has failed to halt and address worsening poverty, with South Africa’s declining development

indices revealing an increasing gulf between rich and poor. Women unquestionably bear a disproportionately high burden of poverty, experienced 'not just as material deprivation, but also as marginalisation'. This results in those women living in poverty having 'no, or little opportunity to influence the political, economic, and social processes and institutions which control and shape their lives and keep them trapped in a cycle of poverty', and perpetuates gender inequality (Oxfam 2008, p1).

It is clear that interventions are required at participation policy design and implementation levels to create channels for active engagement between women's lived experience and knowledge, and state policy and programmatic responses. This would yield more equitable policy outcomes and challenge gender stereotypes and 'the unequal and ultimately unsustainable economic and social systems in which we live, and ... secure the essential resources [women] need for dignified and rewarding lives (*Ibid*, p2).

To what extent do existing municipal public participation mechanisms enable meaningful participation in development planning and local governance by poor or marginalised women? What interventions or alternative approaches are required to address this? This paper seeks to explore the extent to which existing participatory mechanisms enable active participation by women in municipal processes, and possible alternative approaches and models to strengthen this. The paper commences with an assessment of the existing policy framework for public participation, then, drawing on literature and case studies on approaches and models for strengthening women's participation, puts forward recommendations in this regard. The paper concludes by identifying possible additional research required, to address this critical gap in South African policy and practice.

2. Participation in local governance

2.1 Policy framework

South Africa is a multi-party, representative democracy, under a constitution which is sovereign and which entrenches human rights. Despite being a representative democratic system, the South African Constitution, supplemented by policy and legislative components, complements the power of elected politicians with forms of direct citizen participation, or public participation.

In the national and provincial spheres of government, this takes the form of public consultation by legislatures. The requirements for the local sphere are more stringent however, as Section 152(1) of the Constitution states that 'local government must encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government.' This implies going beyond the mere consulting of communities as an aid to state deliberation and decision-making.

In response, municipal interventions to fulfill this constitutional requirement take the form of a white paper policy framework, and legislation governing local authority structures and systems. In addition, the public service has committed itself to being more responsive, accountable and transparent in implementing government policy, through the 'first policy to be adopted relevant to public participation', in the form of the *Batho Pele* ('People First') policy of 1997 (Buccus et al 2007, p10). The purpose of this policy is to 'get public servants to be service orientated, to strive for excellence in service delivery and to commit to continuous service delivery improvement'. In the words of the policy, 'it is a simple and transparent mechanism, which allows

citizens to hold public servants accountable for the level of services they deliver'.

Further policy frames for public participation include the Municipal Systems Act, 2000, section 16 of which obliges municipalities to 'develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with a system of participatory governance. Read together with the Municipal Structures Act of 1998, this legislation details the architecture and process of municipal engagement with citizenry, through municipal integrated development planning (IDP), budget formulation and performance management systems.

In an attempt to consolidate and provide a conceptual framework for its approach to public participation in local governance, the then responsible department, the Department of Provincial and Local government (DPLG), issued the Draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation of 2005, trailing legislated provisions in this regard by some seven years.

As a framework outlining the state's approach to public participation, this mostly, in very general terms 'sketches the background to policy, such as identifying the assumptions underlying participation and the different levels of participation, outlining the legislative framework, identifying various initiatives which involve public participation, as well as listing the key principles of public participation' (*Ibid*). It is significant to note that no final policy on public participation, providing more substantive information on appropriate design or participation interventions, desirable processes, timeframes, or necessary resources and capacity, has been developed and adopted by the DPLG.

2.2 Existing mechanisms

Chapter 4 of the Municipal Systems Act details the participation mechanisms municipalities are obliged to put in place. These include: 'the receipt, processing and consideration of petitions and complaints lodged by members of the local community; notification and public comment procedures; public meetings and hearings; consultative sessions with locally recognised community organisations and (where appropriate) traditional authorities; and reporting back to the local community' (Piper and Deacon 2006, p3).

Of significance are the 'imperatives to public consultation around the annual budget, the IDP review process, the Performance Management System, service delivery contracting and all by-laws, amongst others' (*ibid*). Likewise, the Local Government Municipal Finance Management Act (56 of 2003) contains detailed requirements in respect of public participation during the budget process. 'These bring community participation to the foundational activities of local governance' (*ibid*).

As outlined in the White Paper on Local Government of 1998, the Municipal Structures Act and the Draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation, the key vehicle for citizen engagement with these municipal processes is the ward committee. The primary function of this structure is through community-based planning to develop a ward IDP, and facilitate input of community issues, through ward councillors, into council deliberations. Subsequent DPLG documents provide greater detail in the establishment, structure and operation of ward committees, notably Notice 965 issued by the Minister of Provincial and Local Government in 2005, which sets out guidelines in this regard.

It is clear that ward committees are 'at the centre of national government's thinking on public participation in local government at this time' (Buccus et al 2007, p11). Chaired by the ward councillor, ward committees are intended to consist of up to ten people representing 'a diversity of interests' in the ward, with women 'equitably represented'. Importantly, however, these structures are clearly intended as 'advisory bodies to ward councillors to assist in communication and mobilisation functions, and cannot be delegated significant powers' (Piper and Deacon 2006, p3-4).

2.3 Participation system weaknesses

A recent review of key public participation policy reveals that 'by design, public participation in South Africa is mostly limited to public consultation' (Buccus et al 2007, p10). This included research into practical implementation of participation measures, which revealed the following serious flaws in design and implementation of participation mechanisms (*ibid*, p16-17):

- Generally, there is little or no public participation in the performance management systems of municipalities. While communities are invited to engage on this issue, in the form of customary satisfaction-style reviews, there is no clear role or structured process to facilitate meaningful review or input into what is treated as a technical and legal issue.
- Many municipalities convene *izimbizo* or public meetings on issues ranging from seeking input into by-law formulation, service delivery complaints, and budget. These interventions are notable in their top-down organisation in determining location and agenda items, lack of meaningful deliberation, and catch-all nature. While a good innovation in enabling direct

communication between state officials and communities, without effective design and follow-up, they remain questionable in their effectiveness.

- Many municipalities have been tardy in establishing ward committees, which are not fully functioning, lacking clarity on their role and function, plagued by political manipulation, under-resourced and lacking secretariat support, requiring capacity-building interventions, and convened only at the whim of the ward councillor. Despite one of the key roles of ward committees being to drive community based planning as part of the IDP process, this has not taken off satisfactorily, and municipalities have generally failed to incorporate ward committees in this regard.

2.4 Implications for public participation

While the existence of a strong constitutional and legislative framework augurs well for public participation in South Africa, it is necessary to assess how this manifests itself in practice. Is there genuine political will among power-holders for participatory governance? Despite its discourse of public participation, the state's practice of public participation reveals instead a tendency to consolidate authority and political party power, and close access to decision-making.

In addition, as outlined above, the state has failed to introduce adequate policy frameworks and practical guidelines for public participation; endow established units with sufficient authority and resources to drive public participation processes, and contrary to current practice; create meaningful platforms and opportunities for public dialogue, input and influence in decision-making processes. As outlined in research findings presented above, public participation

exercises remain cosmetic and peripheral. Dislocated from decision-making, they don't yet reflect a genuine attempt to solicit community input to inform policy-making, thus losing out on the opportunity to produce more relevant, responsive policy with a better chance of successful implementation..

It is also necessary to examine to what extent citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) engage with the state and take up opportunities for public participation. What level of capacity, and indeed interest, exists within CSOs and social movements? Many CSOs claim to speak on behalf of the 'voiceless', that is, the marginalized and poor, and to represent their interests in public decision-making processes. Increasingly, however, government agencies are rightfully asking on what basis such representation can be claimed. Very seldom are opportunities created for affected groups themselves to obtain information on proposed policy processes, reflect on proposals and options, articulate preferred options and mandate representatives to speak on their behalf, with measures created for accountability and feedback.

It is also critical to assess who participates in the decision-making arena, and whose voice is heard. In the South African context, the relative inaccessibility of information on government decision-making and the lack of resources and abilities required to engage in participatory processes, has resulted in the domination of such spaces by the elite – by those who are organised and have access to resources, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses and other similar interest groups. Groups who lack resources find it difficult to influence state processes.

Because existing public participation measures and processes are biased towards the organised and those with resources, the outcomes of these processes are of questionable legitimacy, as are their value and impact, in reality, access to these existing mechanisms is limited to the privileged few. Opportunities for public participation are not sufficiently publicised, nor are they accessible, particularly to marginalised groups such as women and refugee communities.

Participants in policy discussion forums assessing citizen participation, reported very mixed experiences of engaging with state participation processes. Feelings of being sidelined, marginalised, excluded and disempowered overwhelmingly dominate. These feelings were occasioned by: not receiving feedback on inputs made in processes; not seeing any recommendations being taken up or any impact from having participated; being co-opted into participating in a process with a predetermined outcome; being excluded from an 'inner circle' enjoying privileged access to decision makers and information, and; not being recognised as worthy of participating (Hicks and Buccus 2007).

Recent research has also revealed that even where 'fairly extensive participatory processes occur, these are often divorced from IDP resource allocation and implementation processes' (Todes et al 2007, p5). It is clear that current approaches to participation and mechanisms put in place to facilitate this at the local government level are failing dismally to connect citizens' voices and concerns with decision-making processes related to policy, planning, development and governance.

3. Strengthening women's participation: approaches and debates

3.1 Women's representation and quota systems

In the context of a flawed approach to participation and implementation of current mechanisms, questions are emerging in relation to their ability to enable marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as women, youth and people with disabilities to participate equitably. Upon examination of the ward committee system, as the primary driver of public participation at municipal level, there appear to be a number of anomalies in their composition, 'particularly with regard to women, traditional leaders, youth and overall number of committee members' (Piper and Deacon 2006, p14).

The Municipal Structures Act stipulates that ward committees must include 'equitable representation of women and of a diversity of interests in the ward'. In application, however, municipalities have tended to understand this as, after ensuring representation of geographical components of a ward, including 'one member from each sector representing women, youth, business, religion and the disabled' (*Ibid*).

*There is a distinct difference between 'equitable representation of women' and women being represented as one amongst many sectors or interest groups. In fact, the wording and import of the 2005 Ministerial Notice... makes reference to women, insisting not only on 'equitable representation' but also on 'an even spread of men and women', and lists 'women' among some 20 specified interest groups (Notice 965 of 2005: 8). It is clear that women are to be both 'evenly and equitably represented' and treated as an interest group. In this light, women ward committee members are a grossly under-represented minority (*Ibid*).*

It is apparent that as a starting point, participation mechanisms have failed to adequately address issues relating to quota and women's representation. Internationally, other considerations have been put

forward in debates on equity, representation and the use of quota systems (Phillips 1995), such as the creation of dedicated forums for women, which may be of interest in addressing women's equitable involvement in participatory processes in South Africa.

However the issue of representation, is just one important element of the broader component of women's *participation* in governance processes. It must be acknowledged that to ensure the advancement of gender-sensitive and responsive policy options requires more than the numbers approach offered by a quota system. In addition, design of participatory mechanisms themselves is a critical consideration. In understanding the participation of women (and other marginalised groups) in policy processes, it is also critical to bear in mind that no political or civil society space is 'neutral'.

When participatory spaces are created, they are 'infused with existing relations of power', which 'reproduce rather than challenge hierarchies and inequalities' (Cornwall 2004, 81). This means that established patterns of behaviour, perceptions and stereotypes that exist between groups and classes of people will 'follow' these people into a participatory space, and subtly influence the decision-making process underway.

These spaces need to be transformed by introducing new rules, techniques and processes to avoid reproducing the status quo. This can be done, for example, through language-use choices, seating arrangements, rules for engagement and decision making, and by building on existing spaces where people are already engaging (Cornwall 2004). Further considerations such as the time at which such spaces are convened, to ensure women are able to manage domestic or working responsibilities and participate, as well as transport

arrangements to ensure women's safety in travelling home in the evening (Beall and Todes 2004).

3.2 Interventions to strengthen women's participation

Against this backdrop, it is worth considering what initiatives have been implemented in recognition of women's under-representation and participation in local governance in South Africa, and in engendering local development planning and service delivery. As a positive step, largely addressing this latter component, the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) launched its Gender Policy Framework for Local Government 'to provide guidance and support to the sector around gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment' (DPLG 2007, foreword).

This policy outlines a comprehensive institutional arrangement to address gender, in accordance with a detailed Gender Management System. This comprises the following established and envisaged gender structures within municipalities (*Ibid*, p41-42):

- *Gender Equality Committee in Council*: Comprising male and female councillors, this committee would provide political oversight to the task of gender mainstreaming.
- *Multiparty Women's Caucus*: This existing committee would continue to provide a forum for mobilising and empowering women councillors from the various political parties represented within a municipality.
- *Gender Focal Points (GFPs)*: These posts would be appointed in each of the key departments, at a sufficiently senior level to influence decision-making. A primary function would be to

identify the gender issues in their area of work, and develop an appropriate action plan and set of indicators.

- *Gender Manager*: This envisaged post would coordinate the work of GFPs and oversee gender mainstreaming generally, and would be located in the office of the mayor or the municipal manager, at a sufficiently senior level to engage with management processes and stakeholders. In addition, gender mainstreaming is envisaged as being included in the performance agreements of all senior managers.
- *Gender Forum*: This would be coordinated by the Gender Manager, and comprise the Chairs of the Gender Equality Committee, Women's Caucus, and GFPs. An internal structure, its primary function appears to be the facilitation of gender equality training and awareness, development of surveys and reports, contribution to internal gender equality policy processes, and monitoring of gender policies and programmes.

However, research reveals that within local government, despite the creation of this elaborate gender machinery and provision of guidelines on mainstreaming gender within IDPs, initial indications are these are largely not followed and gender remains a 'side issue'. The extent to which this picture has changed, allowing for meaningful implementation of this policy framework, would need to be assessed.

It is apparent that although many of the 'everyday needs' of women may be met through IDP and service delivery, these tend to be considered 'in a gender-blind manner, and attention is needed to ensure that they are implemented in a gender-aware way' (Todes *et al*

2007, p5). This is further aggravated by the fact that development agencies tasked with implementation,

...are not, on the whole, generally aware of arguments for a gender-sensitive approach to project implementation, nor do they necessarily have the skills to respond in this way. And women are not sufficiently organised at the local level in most communities to make this a real possibility. These issues will affect the prospects for the development of programmes which empower women, but they may also affect the choices that are made in communities regarding priorities for the development of particular services and facilities (Todes 1995, p333).

It is apparent that limited interventions have been implemented to bring about gender transformation:

...the focus has been limited mainly to the representation of women as councillors and within management, rather than on informing and transforming the work of municipalities... Even when women are represented in a council or are part of the management, they do not necessarily take gender issues forward. Structures to deal with the needs of vulnerable groups, including women, have been established in some local governments, but for the most part they are marginal and have little impact (Todes et al 2007, p5).

However, despite the inaccessibility of IDP processes to smaller community organisations providing critical services to local women, many of which are lead by women, the researchers note that:

... women are very involved in municipal projects concerning poverty alleviation, basic service delivery, development of community facilities and infrastructural development. This is partly the effect of national guidelines that insist on women benefiting. Project managers, councillors and communities now see women's involvement as normal and even desirable. Although quotas and the like are blunt instruments, they help to ensure that women are represented on committees and that they benefit from the work generated by projects. Women's increased involvement is also because many projects relate to what are seen as women's responsibilities, an extension of their

'normal' roles as carers and homemakers. In some cases, the income from working on these projects is too low to entice men (Ibid).

The researchers conclude that despite women's participation and role being largely tokenistic and marginal, and worryingly absent in some of the larger 'flagship' projects, their participation in municipal projects does 'contribute in some way to reducing the vulnerability of poor households and improving quality of life at a basic level' (Ibid).

In addressing the quest to engender local planning and service delivery processes, one suggestion that emerges includes the convening of a 'specific gender planning procedure', which might 'provide a more systematic approach to the identification of needs. The specific requirements of particular groups of women - for example, the aged - and the different experiences of women across race and class' could be highlighted through such a process (Todes 1995, p335). Other positive spin-offs would include raising awareness on gender issues among officials and development agencies, as well as bringing more women's organisations into the planning process (Ibid).

It is apparent from the above that strengthening women's participation and addressing gender equality in local governance comprises three components: Increasing women's representation in political and bureaucratic structures; engendering developmental planning and implementation processes; and increasing women's direct participation in planning and decision-making processes. This latter component appears to have been neglected by the Gender Policy Framework and current practice, and requires examination. The question that clearly emerges, is how can women be brought into these processes, in a more equitable and empowered manner that

enables them to articulate and engage with policy choices and deliberations?

Such mobilisation could place a pressure point on the gender mainstreaming architecture and project of municipalities, to ensure that development planning and service delivery respond directly to and address developmental needs from a gendered perspective. Significantly, if supported by tailored capacity-building interventions, this could build women's skills and confidence to engage with local governance processes. A possible further consequence could be a resulting increased willingness on the part of women to be more active in this arena, such as stand for election at the local level, volunteer to assume leadership roles in community development forums, or take up positions within municipalities and development agencies. As research reveals, 'it can be argued that the participation of women in public affairs in the rural areas is a necessary step towards the realization of their citizenship' (Hemson 2001, p19).

4. Strengthening women's participation: a new approach

Authors have noted that in local development processes, 'participation by women is variable and even where women dominate in numbers, they are not necessarily able to achieve "voice" due to power relations within institutions' (Beall and Todes 2004, p304). In this light, emerging models of citizen participation at the service delivery level, which have provided women with powerful platforms to influence local planning, present alternative approaches to the interface between local municipalities and communities, and possible models for more accessible and empowering mechanisms for women's inclusion.

It is interesting to note an approach adopted in this regard, to bring women into service delivery planning, to assess the effectiveness of this approach as a possible vehicle for strengthening women's participation. An initiative of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, community structures in the form of water committees were established, to bring community members into planning and implementation of service delivery (Hemson 2001). As an official stakeholder group recognised by DWAF, these structures enjoyed semi-official legal status, and were supported by training and support interventions. The design of these committees actively promoted women's participation, with an initial quota of 30% women's representation later increased to 50%. The creation of water committees and women's participation in this initiative provided an immediate intervention that brought about an improvement in women's quality of life, in addressing health and domestic burden issues related to access to clean water (*Ibid*).

The training component proved to be critical to women's confident and full participation in this initiative, so that they could grasp critical technical knowledge, and not be intimidated by jargon. Strengthened by this knowledge, women were equipped to articulate issues relating to the provision of water service delivery in public spaces occupied by men and women, and government officials (Hemson 2009).

However, this model revealed a discrepancy between women's *representation* and their *participation*. The study revealed that while women did participate in committee processes, they did not assume leading positions in these structures, but rather assumed more administrative roles: 'Research demonstrates a general low level of women's participation as rural communities have a strong patriarchal character. Women are found on the water committees but almost

universally have subordinate positions and a low level of verbal participation in decision making' (Hemson 2001, p5-6). In addition, 'there is often a lack of support among women for women who take leading positions in the mixed gender water committees' (*Ibid*).

This apparent tendency to defer to male leadership is reinforced by research findings of Beall and Todes, who note that in a local development planning initiative, while women 'played an active role in committees and were sometimes dominant in numbers (an estimated 40% of development committee members comprised women overall)...Ironically, however, women often put men forward as leaders, reflecting more general patterns of deference or strategy' (2004, p 206).

This community-based model has since been replaced by a municipal delivery model, with project committees falling under the operation of municipalities. The lead researcher on this project wryly notes that when the project was conceptualised purely as a water project, this was regarded as a 'women's issue', and an arena where women could be active. Now that this has been re-conceptualised as a 'development issue', "...men have taken over" (Hemson 2009). As captured in the study findings, although 'women have the responsibility of providing water in the home, the provision of water and sanitation through projects has been a male dominated process' (Hemson 2001, p6).

5. Conclusion

It is argued that 'women have the right to participate in projects which profoundly affect their lives, that their participation can make the difference between success or failure of these projects, and that participation gives confidence to marginalized groups previously

voiceless in the community' (Hemson 2001, p19). It is clear that further research and intervention is required to ensure the development of appropriate mechanisms to support such participation, addressing the issues related to power relations and limitations to women's full participation presented above.

What the above analysis of existing participation mechanisms reveals is that considerable intervention is required at the level of design of participation mechanisms to ensure that these enable women's participation. As noted, this component is lacking in the DPLG Gender Policy Framework. The current design and operation of ward committees in itself does not enable meaningful citizen deliberation of developmental and planning issues, let alone women's full participation in this sphere.

What analysis of the service delivery water committee model reveals is that it is possible through structure design, and positioning, supported by training interventions, to enable women to participate in technical local governance processes from an empowered position, and articulate their needs and preferences within the context of such a forum. However, the fact that the inclusion of men in water committees resulted in the marginalising of women, and a deterrent in their assuming more significant leadership roles in these structures bears consideration in motivating for women-only forums. Findings indicate the following in this regard: 'In all-women committees it appears that women overcome their inferiority complex because they do not have to perform in front of men. They are reported to feel comfortable when surrounded by women and able to express themselves without fear of reprisal or embarrassment. The difficulties arise in the presence of men, a factor which leads to a dramatic inhibition of women's confidence and participation' (Hemson 2001, p16).

Is there scope for the design of a self-regulated, recognised stakeholder deliberative forum for women, formulated as part of the participatory architecture of municipalities, that connects in a meaningful way with municipal decision-making? It appears as if two strategies are required to enable full and meaningful participation by women in local governance processes: first would require the creation of women only forums, supported by training interventions, to enable women to caucus, deliberate and develop positions and recommendations on developmental issues and needs; second would require the input and assertion of these positions and recommendations in formal participation structures and processes, such as ward committee or IDP deliberations.

This latter component would in itself require careful design considerations to ensure that women's voices are heard and their inputs logged in these processes. It would be critical to ensure that these two strategies are formally conjoined, since failure to do so would result in a dislocation between planning dialogues and political processes where decisions are made and resources allocated. This would require receptivity on the part of the bureaucracy to accommodate and facilitate such an intervention, to ensure its success.

Considerations that would therefore require further research and experimentation would include the location of a women's forum within municipal decision-making and other participation processes. This would require fundamental decisions around whether such a forum would be constituted as a formal component of the municipal participation architecture, or as a civil society forum. Would the forum have any decision-making powers, or would this assume the identity of

a 'prequel', or 'pre-participation' forum, to enable women to prepare to participate more fully in broader participation processes?

In other words, would the value of the forum in itself be to provide a space for women to organise outside the institutional space, in order to play a more strategic role in the formal process? How would their recommendations best be fed into municipalities' community participation processes? Existing Gender Forums and participation structures and processes would need to be critically assessed to determine how best these can be remodelled to fulfil this purpose and address these questions.

What participation literature reveals is that higher levels of community consultation result in better service delivery and higher levels of community satisfaction. This can only lead to improved quality of life and enhanced social capital. Positive spin-offs for women as a result of their more direct and significant participation include the potential to reduce the domestic burden on women, and address a myriad of development needs through more responsive policy, planning and service delivery. Not least is the recognition of women's input and knowledge in addressing challenges of poverty and development, and growing women's agency and citizenry through practice.

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