

Participatory Democracy & Service Delivery in the Context of Local Government:

Address by the MEC: Local Government and Housing to the Public Participation Conference (July, 2005)

Honourable Premier, Mr Rasool

Provincial Cabinet Colleagues

Guest speakers

Municipal delegates

Representatives of religious bodies and NGOs

Members of the press

Officials in my department and in other government departments

Comrades, friends, ladies & gentlemen

“Participation by citizens at various levels is essential to make democratic societies work – especially if the society in question is a developing society in the process of consolidating its democracy.”

This key point made by Ismail Davids in a recent publication “Voices from Below” is the cornerstone of my address to you today. It is an obvious point but one that is all too often forgotten or neglected. Your task at this conference is to find ways to enhance the participation in decision-making by ordinary citizens on issues that affect their lives. And in doing so, also to find ways in which I and my department can support you in this important undertaking.

Democratic government is not something that the people of South Africa should ever take for granted – this year, the fiftieth anniversary of the Freedom Charter is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the long, heroic struggle and of the supreme sacrifice made by many for the democracy that we enjoy today. Centuries of colonial oppression and Apartheid rule deliberately marginalised the majority of the people of our land from decision-making processes and also robbed them of the very land that sustained their livelihoods. It was only a little more than twenty years ago that women were forcibly separated from their children and shacks were deliberately torched during police raids on the people of Nyanga Bush, KTC and other informal settlements in the Lagunya areas.

As we all know, service provision during the Apartheid era was highly fragmented and geared towards the needs of the White minority – laws, institutions and facilities had been developed and built with the specific aim of sustaining racial segregation. The uneven distribution of human and financial resources was, on the one hand, reflected in a high concentration of resources and services in urban areas, where there were sophisticated municipal and health services, and on the other, in an under-provision of services in rural and peri-urban areas and informal settlements.

In 1994, on coming to power, the new democratic government set about correcting these imbalances. It had the enormous task of bringing the oppressed and marginalised majority of our people into meaningful decision-making processes and wealth-generating activities. Local government – that sphere of government closest to ordinary people – provides the essential lever for this task. Local government is the institution where the “Home for All” motto of the W.Cape government must be realised through participatory democracy and through the

alleviation of poverty. As Ismail Davids puts it in the publication I referred to earlier: “The defining feature of the new system of democratic local government is the space it offers to communities to participate actively in development decision-making”.

THE PRESENT REALITIES & PROTESTS

Even though we have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and our laws enable democratic participation at all levels, we in government need to acknowledge that a huge number of our people still live in wretched conditions. A few well known statistics bear this out: unemployment is at about 40% and the number of households living at below the poverty datum line is more than 30%. In the midst of this poverty we also have some extremely wealthy people; in fact South Africa’s income distribution measured by the Gini coefficient is the fifth worst in the world according to a 2003 World Bank report. These are causes for concern. Not only because too many of our people are living in abject conditions but also because poverty breeds frustration and frustration undermines the legitimacy of our democracy.

In addition to the unacceptable levels of poverty we also need to acknowledge that there are problems with service delivery. An audit that my department recently conducted has identified many legitimate complaints at the root of the recent protests. These include: the poor quality of many of the RDP houses; housing allocation processes; lack of services on privately owned land; significant in-migration and lack of planning for growth; serious hygiene issues as a result of lack of toilet facilities. This audit has ‘red-flagged’ certain areas and municipalities for immediate attention and my department has been instructed to follow these up as a matter of urgency.

However, the audit has also found that “a constant theme in almost all municipalities is the lack of communication between the Council and municipal officials on the one hand and residents on the other. In many cases, the municipalities have plans to address a specific delivery issue, but they have not communicated these plans to residents. In other cases, where the dominant issue is lack of housing, it would seem that the Council and officials would rather not go to communities to tell them the bad news. Councillors and officials need to understand that it is better to communicate bad news than not to communicate at all. Often, residents understand that housing delivery will take many years, but they have many other problems that can be addressed more easily and quickly. However, owing to a lack of communication channels such as public meetings, residents are not able to communicate this to the municipalities concerned.

In addition, some municipalities do not seem to be working closely with community structures when development takes place. For example, when communal toilets are installed, the community is not included in the planning process, and this results in a lack of ownership (and consequent vandalism) of communal ablution facilities.”

I believe that communication is key to developmental local government and participatory democracy.

DEVELOPMENTAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT, PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND SERVICE DELIVERY

The Local Government White Paper (1998) describes developmental local government as “local government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of

their lives”. Developmental local government therefore has two complementary thrusts: alleviation of poverty through service delivery and participatory democracy. I want to briefly touch on each of these in turn.

Alleviation of poverty through service delivery

The intent of the decentralization reforms initiated by the post 1994 government is to give significant responsibility for the socio-economic well-being of the people of South Africa to local authorities. Many of the critical day-to-day poverty issues such as housing, water supply, primary health, sanitation, refuse management and economic development projects are within the jurisdiction of local government. In fulfilling this mandate municipalities have the right to access national poverty relief and working-for-water funds and they may allocate scarce resources to meet their developmental mandate. Significantly municipalities may also enter into legally binding relationships with other entities such as private companies, NGOs, CBOs to fulfill their economic and service delivery objectives.

There are examples from South Africa, other African countries as well as from India and Brazil where economic and service delivery functions have been successfully initiated by non-governmental organizations and where local authorities and other government structures have developed effective and efficient working relationships with these organizations. The following are only a few examples.

- Tisane village is a remote rural village in the Limpopo province where water provision to households is managed by a community-based organisation.

- In Uganda a network of 500-700 community based organizations have been given co-management responsibility for fisheries resources along the shores of Lake Victoria.
- In Delhi (India) an NGO known as PLUS has facilitated community partnerships with local authorities to address basic service requirements such as the provision of water, sanitation and various livelihoods activities. Responsive local authorities have effectively mainstreamed the poor into city service delivery systems.
- In Bangalore (India) the City Corporation (Municipality) has formed a city level committee with NGOs to manage waste rather than simply dispose of it. This management includes separation of waste at household level, transportation of separated waste by paid and trained waste retrievers using tricycles to various localities where some waste is recycled and toxic material disposed of. The committee also oversees the training of health officers, engineers, doctors and nurses for effective disposal of biomedical and toxic waste.
- Parana (Brazil) is another example of an effective waste management program, 'EcoWaste', which is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. Through solid waste collection and recycling it provides income for informal waste collectors known as 'ecological agents'.
- In Nairobi (Kenya) over 3000 people are provided with jobs through a waste management program which includes recycling waste into organic fertilizer, polythene bags, plastic containers, metal sheets, briquettes and even cheap mattresses.

These examples cannot be simply replicated. I mention them in order to encourage participants to do some 'out of the box' thinking about local

opportunities for economically, socially and environmentally sustainable service delivery partnerships with other agents.

Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy is often contrasted with the idea of representative democracy. In the context of municipalities, representative democracy is the election of councillors by the citizens to act as their representatives in the decision-making structures and processes of the municipalities. These councillors are normally elected for a five year period. These elections are an important cornerstone of our democracy, but there is the danger – and it is an often heard cry of ordinary people – that the councillors only come to the people when they need their votes.

Participatory democracy is intended as a corrective – it refers to the ongoing process of debate, dialogue and communication between the local government authority and the community. But participatory democracy or community participation in decision-making is not without problems.

First and foremost of these is that the idea of participatory democracy has become devalued. For many individuals and organizations who advocate participatory practices the idea of participation has become little more than a mantra – the theory is not realized in practice. Expectations for meaningful participation in decision-making are created but these are not met. This is so because on the one hand there are real objective limitations and constraints to effective community participation and on the other participation it is not fully understood.

The limitations include the time and costs involved, the increased demands on municipal councillors, the surfacing of latent conflicts which

are not effectively managed, lack of understanding of the issues involved, lack of project management and financial skills by ordinary citizens.

Participation can mean a range of levels of involvement which is not usually understood. Pimbert and Pretty list seven types of participation:

- **Passive participation:**
Information given to the people.
- **Participation in information giving:**
People participate by responding to questions posed by researchers.
- **Participation by consultation:**
People are consulted and their views are taken into account but they do not have any role in decision-making.
- **Participation for material incentives:**
People participate by providing labour and other local resources in exchange for material incentives.
- **Functional participation:**
People participate by getting involved in activities to meet objectives of externally determined projects. The objectives normally involve the social and economic upliftment of the people.
- **Interactive participation:**
People participate in formulation of research and action plans. The participation is normally based on interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and involve learning processes. Local groups take control over local decisions giving the people a stake in action plans and structures to support these.
- **Self-mobilization:**
People take initiatives independent of any external agency. This self-

initiated action sometimes challenges existing distributions of wealth and power.

The ideal is 'interactive participation' but this is very resource intensive in terms of time, cost and skills and it is usually not necessary or desirable in certain circumstances. In many cases simply conveying information to people is all that is required, i.e., what Pimbert & Pretty call passive participation. The audit that I referred to earlier found that many problems could be avoided by the appropriate communication of plans, delays and problems. I repeat that communication key to of the effective functioning of participatory democracy.

Participative democracy and ward committees.

I am pleased to report that 20 of our municipalities have instituted ward committees. Only two municipalities, Breede River and George, haven't established ward committees and a further two, Laingsburg and Prince Albert, do not have demarcated wards and currently function on a system of representation. What is the role of ward committees?

The White Paper on Local Government (1998) makes it clear that the central role of ward committees is "the facilitation of local community participation in decisions which affect the local community, the articulation of local community interests, and the representation of these interests..." and the Municipal Structures Act makes it clear that the "object of a ward committee is to enhance participatory democracy in local government."

There are two points that need to be emphasised here:

- Firstly, ward committees are not the only vehicle for public participation in local government, but they are at present the most broadly applied and accepted model for ensuring participation.

- Secondly, even though the ward committee system is a key mechanism for enhancing public participation, ward committees do not have executive power. The operative words used in the White Paper and the Municipal Structures Act here are *facilitation* and *enhance*.

I stress this because there is a tendency for some ward committees (in this and other provinces) to assume that they have executive powers and therefore they can hold councillors accountable for the execution of decisions that the committees have made. Ward committees do not have any powers of binding decision-making with regard to the operations of municipalities. But because they are community-based structures concerned with the interests of different sectors in local communities they play an important advisory and facilitation role. A ward committee plays this role both to council and to the local community by advising the ward councillor regarding issues that need attention as well as helping members of the local community to know about structures and processes set up by local government to address their concerns. In essence ward committees play a key communication role and for this role they should receive logistical and other support from the municipalities.

Municipalities are required to make administrative arrangements to enable ward committees to function effectively (Guidelines issued by the National Ministry for Provincial and Local Government) and the Municipal Systems Act also requires that municipalities allocate funds for community participation and since it is the function of ward committees to facilitate local community involvement, these committees may legitimately lay claim to such funds. This does not mean that community members are to be paid to serve on ward committees – they are not municipal functionaries, but volunteers who feel passionately about

certain sectoral interests – but that the municipalities must budget for the operating expenses of ward committees.

Through the ward committees and other structures for participative democracy the national government has opened political space for public participation in decision-making processes. The opening of political space however, creates a vacuum. And just as vacuums in nature are soon filled by whatever opportunistic molecules are nearby, so vacuums in the political sphere are in danger of being filled by those who have the power and means to fill them – often to the exclusion of marginalised community members including women. Therefore the spaces need to be carefully structured – through attention to meeting times, transport arrangements, language used – to enable the disempowered members of local communities to get effectively involved. Let the political spaces opened up by government serve the poorest and most marginalised members of our communities.

CONCLUSION

My national colleague, Comrade Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi recently used the metaphor of a spider's web to describe the ideal structure and processes for service delivery in a developmental democracy. As you know, a web has many concentric circles around threads that emanate from the centre. The concentric circles can be thought of as ward committees, NGOs, CBOs and business entities that enter into contractual partnerships and other relationships with government to deliver services. And “it is the lines that cross the circles and come together in the centre that provide strength to the web and hold it together”. These lines are the national, provincial and municipal departments.

I have spoken at great length about the models, processes and structures in our young developmental democracy. I want to conclude with a thought on the role of the people who populate the lines and circles of the delivery web. There is no more appropriate model of behavior for these people, which includes all of us gathered here at this conference, than the model put forward by Jesus of Nazareth two millennia ago:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over the people ... this must not happen with you. The greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves. For who is the greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves. (Luke 22:24).