COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PLAN: A CASE STUDY OF GOVAN MBEKI MUNICIPALITY

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ABSTRACT

In order to eradicate the legacy of the past, the South African democratic government adopted a developmental approach to local government. This necessitated a commitment on the part of local government, through the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), in facilitating community participation by finding sustainable ways of meeting their social, economic and material needs and improving their quality of life. A study of the role of community participation in the IDP process in the Govan Mbeki Municipality revealed that the community had participated in only the first of five phases of the IDP, i.e. needs identification. The study concluded that the municipality had not created an enabling environment for meaningful community participation, and had consequently limited the impact of community engagement on the IDP. Guidelines are proposed for community participation in all the phases of the IDP process.

INTRODUCTION

In addressing the injustices of past development efforts, the South African government adopted a people-centred approach (Davids, 2005: 18). Theron (2005:120) describes this approach as a shifting of interventions towards the public and away from objects, delivery and production. This approach aims at enhancing the public's skills and capacity by encouraging their participation in their own development process (Theron, 2005:120). The *White Paper on Local Government* (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1998:17) defines

developmental local government as government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways of meeting their social, economic and material needs and improving their quality of life.

Within this developmental framework, community participation is an essential aspect of democracy and thus forms an important element of South African policies. There is, however, no universal agreement on what community participation entails. A community can be defined in terms of geographical, functional or geographical-functional elements (Lombard, 1992). In the context of South African local government, a community is defined by a ward system, which is a geographic area into which a municipality is divided for, amongst other purposes, those of election (*Local Government Municipal Systems Act*, 2000 (32 of 2000)). Within this context, participation refers to people's involvement in processes that affect them. This article reports on the findings of a study on the role of community participation in the IDP of the Govan Mbeki Municipality (*cf.* Tshabalala, 2006).

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Community participation is a means of empowering people by creating the space for them to engage in developing their skills and abilities to negotiate their needs in the face of forces that often appear to obstruct and discourage them. Community participation does not take place in a vacuum, but is subject to the political, social and economic influences within which it occurs. Consequently, to ensure meaningful participation, procedures for democratic decision-making should be created at the local sphere. This would enable the community to engage in and contribute to decisions affecting them. The developmental approach, therefore aims to re-direct municipalities away from the silo approach of only upgrading physical infrastructure to one that addresses community needs in an integrated manner, as intended by the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) (RSA, *Municipal Systems Act*, 2000).

The IDP provides an opportunity for both the community and the municipality to deliberate and interact on issues of local development. At the level of the IDP, interaction centres mainly on local development, which affects the social, economic and physical conditions in which a given community exists.

The IDP involves a process comprising five phases. Starting with an analysis of local needs, these progresses through the establishment of priorities, defining the local vision, designing projects to meet the needs and integrating these projects with other programmes, to finally adopting the IDP. The IDP is also an outcome of consultation with community members, which is documented and endorsed as a planning document. The *Municipal Systems Act* (2000) regards the community as a key role-player in the IDP process.

A benefit of community participation is that development is seen to address the people's needs. Despite this, the consultative process is a challenge to integrated decision-making. Communities are not homogeneous, which makes it difficult to reach agreements on aspects of needs and vision, and ways of addressing them. Given the various community needs, which may range from infrastructural development such as housing

and water, to economic development in the main employment creation, the question is: What is the role of community participation in the IDP process?

The aim of the study is to determine the role of community participation in the IDP process of the Govan Mbeki Municipality with a view to proposing guidelines for community participation in the IDP process.

The research question in this study is guided by Mohamed's (2000:2) statement:

> *[W]hile community participation and deepening democracy are often spoken about, strong political leadership to ensure this happens has often been lacking. Building and mobilizing community co-operation and collective action to meet societal problems and enhance the development process have taken a back seat to technocratic approaches focusing on administrative reform.*

The research questions guiding the study are:

- What is the role of community participation in the IDP
- process in the Govan Mbeki Municipality?
- What is the extent of and how effective is community participation in the IDP?
- What role does decision-making play in the IDP?
- Who are the role players influencing decision-making in the IDP?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study was exploratory, employing a qualitative approach and a single case study as research design, which was aimed at describing and investigating a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 1994:13). The research design focused on the process of community participation rather than on the outcome (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Data collection took place in two phases. In phase one, data was collected from existing municipal documents for the purposes of a document study (Strydom & Delport, 2005). Phase two consisted of semi-structured focus group interviews (Greeff, 2005).

Documentary research is concerned with the use of written archival records (Calvert 1991: 117) as a source of information. For the documentary analysis, Govan Mbeki Municipality's records of the IDP document, minutes of meetings with the community, invitations to the various community representations and attendance registers were used to assess the extent to which the community had participated in the IDP process. Analyses of archival data revealed that the documents perused were incomplete, as they provided insufficient information on how decisions had been taken and the level of community consultation. There was no list prioritising community needs.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with two respondent groups, the municipal representatives working in the Govan Mbeki Municipality and the community representatives who had been involved in the IDP process.

The key stakeholders in the IDP process in the Govan Mbeki Municipality were the heads of the Departments of Finances, Technical and Engineering, Environmental

and Tourism, Public Safety, Health and Community Service and Corporate Service; the political representative, ward councillors; the office of the speaker and the chief community developer. Three of the municipality respondent categories, i.e. the political representative, the office of the speaker and the chief community developer, consisted of only one representative and were thus automatically included in the sample.

For the other categories, a stratified sampling method was used in a simple random selection of the municipal respondent group according to the following criteria. Respondents had to be

- in the employment of the municipality and experienced in the field of IDP processes and community participation; and
- representative of race and gender.

At the time of the research, the position of the IDP manager was vacant and the head of department who was acting as IDP manager was unavailable for participation in the study. This affected the commitment to engage heads of departments in the research. In turn, they being unavailable had an effect on the racial diversity of the sample, as all the respondents were black. The municipal respondent group thus consisted of six people.

Due to conflicting schedules, interviews with the municipality respondent group were conducted in two focus groups. The community respondent group was selected using a systematic sampling method (Bailey, 1994). The municipality attendance register was used to randomly select eight respondents from the community-based structure (Tshabalala, 2006).

Selection of community respondents had to meet the following criteria:

- members should have taken part in the IDP and the community participation process of the Govan Mbeki Municipality; and
- group diversity by way of gender, age and race.

One focus group interview was conducted with the community representatives.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the municipality respondent group, there were four female respondents and two male; one was in the age category 26 – 35, four in the category 36 - 45 years, and one was between the ages of 46 – 55. Four of the respondents had 5 years' experience, while two had less than a year's experience. Of the community respondent group, five respondents were female and three were male. The age distribution varied from 18 to 55 years: one respondent was in the 18 – 25 years category, two in the categories 26 - 35 and 36 to 45 respectively, and three were in the 46 - 55 category. As a group, the community respondents had a total of 25 years' experience of community involvement in the IDP (Tshabalala, 2006).

The research findings revealed that similar thematic patterns emerged for both the community and the municipal respondent groups. This will be discussed as follows.

Theme 1: Needs identification

Both the municipal and the community respondent groups acknowledged the role of community participants in needs identification and listing of priorities during the initial phase of the IDP process. Both respondent groups agreed that community participants in the IDP process were crucial to providing information about the needs they would like addressed. This finding concurs with that of Gaunt (1998: 291), who points out that, within municipalities, only an informational or review process of citizen (community) participation is accepted as adequate.

Sub-theme 1 – Needs prioritisation

As far as the community's involvement in the prioritisation of the identified needs was concerned, the community respondents were of the opinion that the process was performed at the sole discretion of the municipality and was therefore not all-inclusive or participatory in nature.

The municipal respondents held conflicting views on whose role it was to prioritise the needs of the community. Some municipal respondents maintained that, in the Govan Mbeki municipal area, the communities themselves were responsible for prioritising their own needs. Other municipal respondents held that needs prioritisation was a municipal function because the municipality had the ultimate say in how the resources would be allocated to address community needs.

Theme 2: Mechanisms for participation

Regarding the mechanisms in place for community participation, two sub-themes emerged:

Sub-theme 1 – Ward committees

The municipal and community respondents unanimously agreed that the ward committees were the sole mechanism established to enable community participation in the affairs of the municipality. The establishment of these committees is described as a participatory process decided on by the community through the electoral system.

The community respondents perceived the ward committee system as an opportunity for communicating concerns demanding municipal attention. Nevertheless, they expressed misgivings about the diminishing role of ward committees in the community, attributing this to the absence of a flow of information from both the municipality and the councillors, particularly in response to queries from the community, as voiced in the following comment:

> *The lack of flow of information from the municipality to the ward committees has created frustrations amongst ward committee members as they are losing the community's confidence.*

The community respondents consequently questioned the ward committee's role in the following statement:

[T]he role of the ward committee, the way it was explained and looking at the way things are happening, yes, you can say we are ward committees just by name. We are not given a chance to play the role we are supposed to play in the community. It was supposed to be us who take the problems of the community and when there are meetings, they [municipality] should call us and explain that we want to solve these and how can we do so collectively? So at the moment, we are ward committees by name, our role is not visible and possible [to perform], I do not want to lie about it.

The community respondents agreed that the role of ward committees was negatively affected by the municipal failure to keep the committee informed on issues they had reported to them. Kellerman (1997:53) concurs that, if members are to participate meaningfully, the community must be informed and should be able to transmit its views, wishes and interests to all bodies charged with managing the development project. The free flow of information is, therefore, essential to securing informed planning and decision-making. Gaunt (1998:279) notes the importance of a flow of information commenting that at the heart of citizen [community] participation lies a structure of information exchange.

Contrary to this view, the municipal respondents did not necessarily perceive the current flow of information as limited or exclusive of ward committees, because they felt they were complying with the statutory requirements. This finding revealed conflicting perspectives on the current flow of information from the municipality, the councillors and the ward committees. The discrepancy emphasises the gap between the provisions made in the policy and what is taking place on the ground. This gap reinforces the question: When is community participation real participation? The authors premise is that the community's experience of the participation process, their concerns and their inputs actually define community participation. Legislation is meaningless if it does not translate into fundamental actions and commitments acknowledged by all involved stakeholders.

Sub-theme 2 – Meetings

Both the community and the municipal respondents explained that community meetings were used for communication purposes. Both respondent groups noted that attendance at meetings varied, which could be attributed to various factors. One municipal respondent pointed out that attendance at meetings was influenced by community concern, as illustrated in the following statement: …sometimes you have a good attendance especially when there are pressing issues…

The municipal respondents, on the other hand, differentiated between those who could and those who could not afford payment of services when it came to attending meetings. Where low levels of service delivery were evident, the municipal respondents observed an increased attendance of meetings by those who could not afford to pay for services, as opposed to attendance by those in affluent areas. They expressed their views as follows:

Those who still attend are those who are desperate for some issues and they do attend. …most of the people who do not attend meetings are those

whose needs are met, who can afford to pay for services and so what… why should they attend?

The community respondents cited lack of confidence in the municipality as a reason for poor attendance at community meetings. Community respondents perceived the failure of development initiatives to transform community needs into tangible benefits as a discouraging factor that affected people's attitudes to meetings. This view was captured as follows:

… people do not come to meetings saying what is the use? I always go there and my needs are not being met.

This comment reflects Makgoba and Ababio's (2004: 278) finding that municipalities sometimes fail to respond to community needs and expectations owing to lack of finances, and that this could be seen as the municipality's failure to address their problems. The result was that the community in question dissociated itself from its municipality.

In summary, the findings on the mechanism for participation revealed that the two respondent groups were in agreement that the real effect of community participation was influenced by poor attendance at meetings.

Theme 3: Decision-making

The development of the IDP requires significant decision-making with municipal stakeholders, amongst others, the community. There were, however, different perceptions as to when and by whom decisions should be made. This finding revealed disagreements between the two respondent groups. The community respondents perceived the process to be top-down, which meant that the community was unable to influence decisions.

The community respondents' comments indicated their sense of being left out. They thus perceived their participation in decision-making as unimportant, nothing more than compliance with legislation. One respondent voiced this viewpoint:

I think both the municipality and councillors or I will say authorities, they know that from the national government they have to use ward committees.

Staples (2004:199) confirms the community respondents' sentiments, commenting that an inefficient process usually produces a less than satisfactory decision and a "rush to judgement [which] almost guarantees a product that will not be widely embraced". The municipal respondents, on the other hand, viewed representation by the councillor as equivalent to talking to the community, because they assumed that the councillor would be informed by the community. Hence, they equated decision-making in the presence of the councillor as decision-making with the community. One municipal respondent expressed this sentiment in the following words:

Actually the community is present and represented by the councillor because immediately you take decisions the councillor should report back. As I was

saying people do participate but via the councillors and ward committees and it [their participation] does affect the decisions that we take.

Another municipal representative explained that representatives had been appointed to lead the community, and one aspect of their responsibility was to occasionally take decisions on behalf of the people.

Yes I can say that it does affect [community participation does affect decision making] but as the leader of the community, you should lead from the front… [because] at the end of the day they have elected you so that you can lead. These are some decisions that you have to take on their behalf and of which those decisions may not go well and those could be one of them.

The municipality's respondents perceived representational participation through the ward councillor as identical to participation by the community. They felt there were certain decisions that were within the powers of the municipality, who therefore had the right to take such decisions. Gaunt (1998:293), however, rejects this view, maintaining that communication is minimised if the only means of information exchange is through a representative on the governing body.

This finding revealed conflicting views on the part of the two respondent groups. The community respondents viewed decision-making in the IDP as being performed solely by the municipality, and thus outside the community's participation and influence. The municipality, on the other hand, viewed the current method of decision-making as the result of a consultative process with the community through the representation of the ward councillor.

Theme 4: Empowerment of ward committees

Both respondent groups agreed that there was no empowerment of ward committee members. The community respondents were of the opinion that ward committee members were not empowered to participate fully in the IDP process owing to there being none of the comprehensive training that would prepare them for their responsibilities. They regarded training as an essential, in fact, crucial aspect of capacity building, which would allow informed participation in the IDP. The need for additional task-related workshops and other training sessions were described as fundamental to their empowerment, although they pointed out that, at present, such training was rare.

The community respondents claimed that they had never received training on the IDP and its processes. Those community respondents who had served in the previous ward committee system confirmed attendance at some training courses, although they regarded these as inadequate as far as increasing their capacity to carry out their functions, particularly in the IDP, was concerned. A long-serving respondent indicated:

…we have not been taught about the IDP, its functions… and this and that about it. That is why I say it is my first time to have a workshop on the IDP

with the ward committees. I started working in the community in 1994, when the government of Mr Mandela took over. We knew that, if you volunteered and worked in the community, you work by telling them [community] to pay for services, etcetera. It was not about the IDP, it was not workshopped around the IDP and the purpose thereof and that is why I say … it is for the first time. It was not clear as to what is the work [purpose] of the IDP, budget or even where the municipality and the budget coincide.

This comment indicates that the community respondents were not satisfied with the content of the workshops they had attended. This was particularly applicable to enabling them to participate as a community in the IDP. They viewed the content as limited and, at the most, only equipping them to monitor municipal services at the community level. In line with Ife's (1995: 214) view that training is most effective when the people themselves have identified a need for it, it is important for the training programme to be based on the community's need to ensure that ward committee structures effectively engage in community participation initiatives.

With regard to the empowerment level of the ward committees, it was also observed that the community respondents had a narrow understanding of the purpose of the IDP document (Integrated Development Plan Updated Revision, 2005/6), its processes and their role in implementing it. They confirmed this as follows:

Myself when coming to the IDP, I do not know what it is and what purpose does it serve.

… the problem that we have is that, we do not know what an IDP exactly entails.

These remarks reveal that the community respondents had to participate in an IDP process of which they had neither or litle understanding. Nor were they aware of what community participation aimed to achieve.

The community respondents nevertheless pointed out that, subsequent to the 2006 local government elections, the municipality had embarked on empowerment sessions for the ward committees and that it was anticipated that these would contribute to building capacity and confidence when participating in the IDP. Attesting to the benefits of empowerment, Rubin and Rubin (2001:77) note that empowerment is a psychological experience on the part of individuals when they believe they can accomplish chosen goals. It also increases political organisational strength, enabling people to carry out their will collectively.

The municipal respondents agreed that empowerment of ward committees had been neglected, as one respondent admitted:

…in the past, in the last term they did not get much attention [regarding training and empowerment], they were just elected and did not know their scope and sometimes you would find them talking about issues that they are not supposed to be concerned about.

Both respondent groups testified that the empowerment levels of the ward committees were low because of previous neglect. They acknowledged, however, that the matter was receiving attention from the municipality and that there was hence promise for the future.

CONCLUSION

Although community participation in the IDP process is critical in forcing development planners to respond to the needs of the community, it cannot be limited to needs identification only. Emmet (2000: 508) asserts that the lowest form of participation is centred on and limited to the identification of needs and gaps and that this could potentially create attitudes that view the community in a negative and prejudiced manner.

Other than in phase 1, the community's role in the IDP process is limited and unclear. If community participation in all five phases of the IDP is not properly comprehended, this impedes the successful implementation of the IDP, because the community does not take ownership of the *development* imposed on them by the municipality. Further, the lack of community participation creates a perception of dependency on the municipality. This discourages communities from engaging in finding solutions to their current problems.

The success of community meetings should not be measured according to mere attendance but rather on their ability to transform needs and wants into tangible solutions. A community would become committed to participation in the IDP process if their participation were to yield results. In this case, participation should translate into meeting the community's needs.

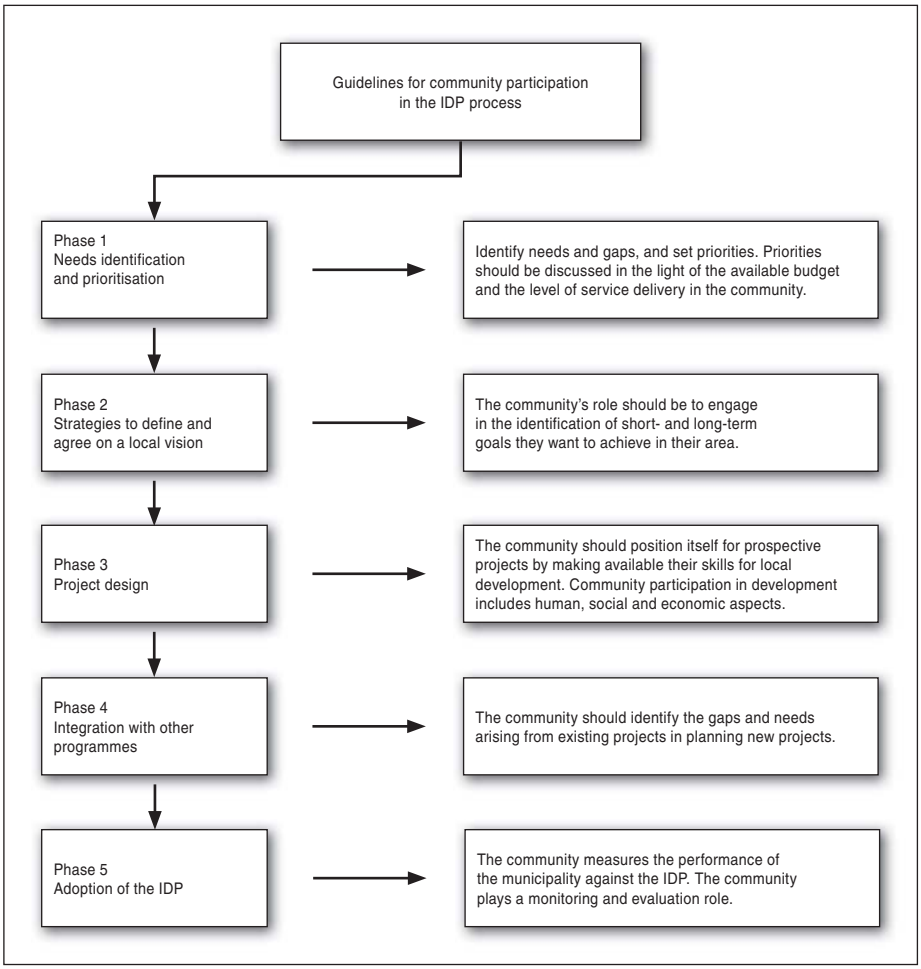
The current decision-making process does not allow the community an opportunity to directly inform the IDP processes. Instead, the municipality accepts representational participation through the ward councillor as adequate. The effective implementation of an IDP depends on community participation in all its phases.

The role fulfillment of ward committee members in the IDP process of Govan Mbeki municipality is unsatisfactory. Members seem unaware of their role in issues that are of primary concern to the community, and are certainly restricted in playing these roles. The municipality does not create an enabling environment for meaningful community participation. Not being informed at all, or being ill-informed, amounts to a limited understanding by the community of the IDP and their roles and responsibilities, particularly regarding where their participation begins and ends. This imposes limitations on any influence that community participation might have on the IDP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local government is obliged to create an enabling environment that addresses both the institution, and allows space for communities to interact with the municipality on an equal footing. In view of the above conclusions, the following recommendations are aimed at enhancing community participation in the IDP:

- *IDP meetings*: The municipality should structure the IDP meetings so that they give a hearing to those community-related issues that draw interest from the middle and working classes of the community. They should not appear to be meetings for the *poor*. Although the current status of the infrastructural development in the so-called black residential areas is such that these issues should be given priority, a broader view could be adopted.
- *Enhancing participation:* This might entail elevating other developmental aspects, such as the building of human capital, local economy, and social capital to achieve the goal of social development and a better life for all in South Africa. If this were to be carried out, the holistic and integrated effect to which the IDP aspires could be achieved.
- *Prioritisation of needs*: The municipality should streamline the needs identification and the needs prioritisation phases of the IDP processes so that the community can participate directly. This prioritisation phase of the process should run concurrently with the community-needs identification phase. It is crucial for the community to inform this process so that they begin to identify with development in the area as and when it unfolds. Obviously, this carries the risk of creating expectations about addressing the concerns already raised. The responsibility of openly discussing the financial implications of such priorities lies with the municipality.
- *Decision-making:* The municipality should create a platform for the community itself to be present when decisions by a particular ward are discussed and ultimately taken. This would be helpful in clarifying the constraints that a municipality encounters when delivering services to the community.
- *Empowerment*: In order for community participation to have an impact on the IDP process, it is essential for the community participants to be well informed. It is therefore recommended that capacity-building workshops be purpose-centred and responsive to any gaps in capacity revealed by community participants. It is further recommended that external service providers, for example, academic institutions be engaged to conduct this training. This would add to ensuring that the power imbalance between the municipal officials and the community respondents is eliminated. As part of empowerment, it is strongly recommended that both the community and the municipality assess the impact of the training offered and the learning gaps. It is further recommended that the municipality allocates funds and adequate time to the process of empowering ward committee structures and that this process take place at regular intervals, not at pre- or post-election periods only. This would ensure that empowerment became progressive and opportunities to address capacity gaps were created.
- *The role of the community*: Given the essential role played by the ward committees in reporting community problems to the municipality, the ward councillors who represent the municipality at the community level should, prior to providing feedback to the community, also provide municipal feedback to the ward committee on issues at hand, as well as possible ways of dealing with them. This would avoid the impression that the ward committee is a problem-raising entity without any influence on outcomes or solutions on the part of the municipality. A joint problem-solving mechanism should be adopted.



- *Guidelines for implementation:* The authors propose a framework which provides broad guidelines for community participation in the respective phases of the IDP process.

Finally, it is recommended that these guidelines for community participation be integrated and implemented by engaging all racial groups in the current IDP process of the Govan Mbeki Municipality and that the guidelines be evaluated by means of active participatory research.

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