Deepening Democracy through Effective Public Spaces in Africa – Reality or Fallacy

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, there has been an increasing call for the deepening of democracy through the democratisation of governance processes across the continent, the extent to which this has been translated to practice through viable and authentic means needs to be further engaged. Democratic governance is in theory characterised by the existence of genuine public spaces that allow for a vigilant, strong and robust state and civil society engagement. This process ensures that government remains connected to the people and conducts its activities in a way that benefits the majority of the people. In theory, these ideals may exist but in reality, are these forums really available for community/citizen participation? Even when they do, are they able to significantly shift government policy? Or are they stage-managed, not been fully optimised or even hijacked by proxies who seek to ensure that the decision-making structures of society serve the objectives of the local elite?

The article reflects on the efficacy of selected public spaces or forums that are available to citizenry for making inputs into policy processes. Africa's record has been somewhat mixed, ranging from the disenfranchisement of civil society in democratic processes, the harassment of the media, suppression of public opinion and the high-jacking of public spaces. The article will draw on specific scenarios from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. It will identify and critique selected forums or public spaces, reflect on their value-added to democratic processes and lastly identify enabling or hindering factors for quality policy engagement.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of the process of democratisation in many countries is the presence of a strong local level democracy. This may have come about as a result of deconcentration

or devolution of powers from the centre of government in an attempt to bring government closer to the people. Ile (2009:24) describes devolution as "organizational re-structuring which allows for the decentralization of powers and functions from a central authority to augment the capacity to govern particularly at lower levels/spheres of government". Tordoff (1991: 282-283) notes that in Africa the "decentralization measures introduced (often with loud fanfare) in many states … have had precisely the opposite effect from that publicly stated to be intended; they have increased central control and reduced opportunities for citizen participation" as rural bodies have been abolished and replaced with stooges, in other instances they have been suspended, or stripped of some of their key functions. The picture that emerged over time was one that suggested that African governments placed more emphasis on political control than on political participation and subsequently, the shrinking of the political arena, public spaces and a consequent reduction in the levels of popular participation (Bienen 1974:64).

The key issue is that "civil society institutions have been repressed in many countries in Africa and it is time to reverse this trend" (Olowu 2000:167). With the need to rekindle democratic practices across the continent in the last few decades, the nature and form of civil society participation in most countries requires a closer scrutiny. In reality, the public in many African countries are disillusioned as huge promises made during elections are abandoned with expectations promised not being met in their lifetime. This has brought about high levels of dissatisfaction that in fact suggests the diminishing space for public relevancy and a sense of powerlessness of citizenry in certain quarters, as well as a noticeable upsurge of protests in others. This situation requires reflection on the part of the state but which unfortunately, has been equally matched with state high handedness (Tapscott 2009).

CONCEPT OF PUBLIC SPACES AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Public spaces may be viewed as sites or opportunities that allow for influence on formal political processes such as structured public meetings run by local councils. However, they may also be claimed or invented spaces that have come about organically. These usually may have evolved as a result of a pertinent need shared by citizens. Cornwall (2002); Brock *et al.* (2001) as captured in Hickey & Mohan (2004:35) suggest a continuum of spaces, which include:

- *Closed spaces*: These are public spaces with decision making possibilities that are closed to public and citizen participation. Here, the decisions are made by a number of actors without any pretence of inclusion on the part of the public or beneficiaries. It could be argued that citizens are not worthy of consultation because of their ignorance which incidentally could be a result of inadequate information and perhaps limited resources (including time) given that "…to participate politically and to become full citizens, people need resources" (Crick, 2002:65).
- *Invited spaces*: These are spaces that seem to demonstrate that there is some effort to widen participation through new or existing invited spaces i.e. citizens and end users are invited to participate by authorities, on a limited range of issues that may directly affect them. Navarro (1998) cited in Shah (2007:59) argues that even where

participation is fostered, citizens may focus only on narrow issues that affect them directly and may be unwilling to make trade-offs and the exercise may eventually exclude some groups. These invited spaces could be designed such that the public space is reused for regularised meetings on a continuous and agreed basis or they may be once off forms of consultations with citizens.

- *Claimed/created spaces/invented*: These are spaces that have been claimed usually by less powerful actors (but not necessarily always), with the urge to have their say on existing issues that they may or may not be happy with. Often, these emerge as a result of a common concern and may result in popular mobilisation for common pursuits, a situation which usually tests government's commitment to engage with the citizens.

It is, however, important to note that these spaces may be fluid. Power gained through the success of one space may be used to challenge other social relations. Thus a created space may gain legitimacy and become an invited space just as a closed space may over time, become invited spaces with facilitative processes from authorities. Given this fluidity, Hickey & Mohan, (2004:18) add that there should be an opportunity to transport experiences and transform socio-relations through spaces either consciously or unconsciously.

It is important to note that the identified public spaces discussed above, are in sync with Arnstein's (1969:3) conceptualisation of citizen participation known as *The Ladder of Citizen Participation*.

Figure 1 The ladder of citizen participation
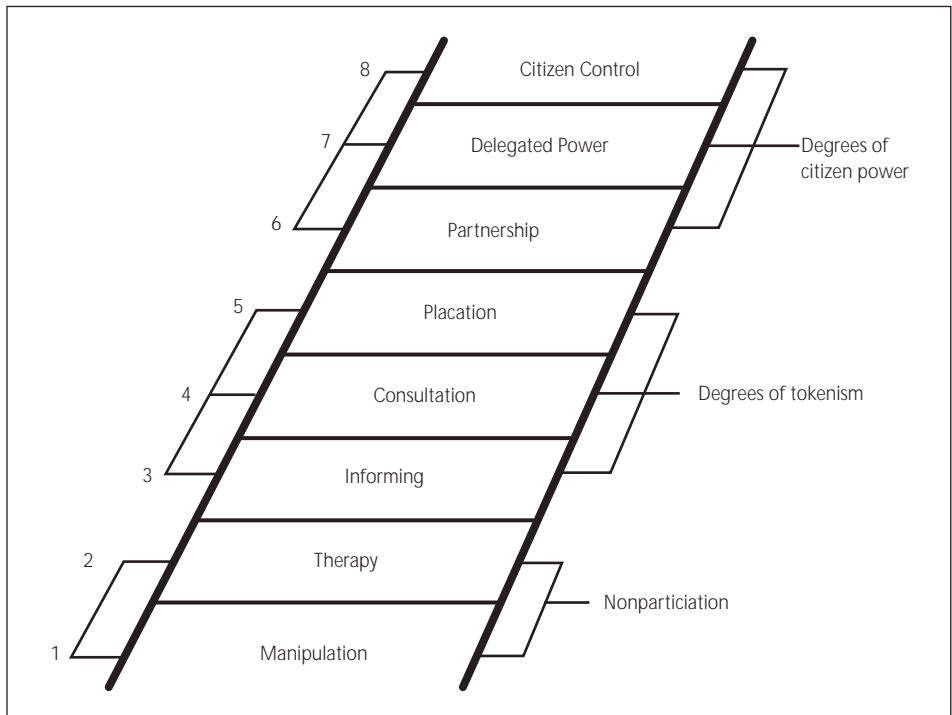
Where citizen participation varies from non-participation as in closed public spaces to tokenism as may be the case in particular invited spaces and total citizen empowerment as in created spaces.

EFFICACY OF KEY PUBLIC SPACES ENABLING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation is one of the key components for measuring the quality of governance. Huther and Shah (2005:39-41) argue that quality community participation ensures that services are closely matched with citizen's preferences as a way of moving governments closer to the people that they are intended to serve, thereby ensuring greater accountability of the public sector. This requires some level of political freedom that allows citizens to take advantage of invited public spaces (and perhaps even create more spaces). It thus endeavours to influence the quality of services they receive, their ability to participate in governance decisions and the continuity of quality citizen participation. Such quality public spaces would propel bureaucratic efficiency and ensure that corruption is kept at a minimum rather than situations where politicians and officials misuse government resources to enrich themselves and their loyal supporters. So, what options are open to the citizens to make their voices heard and ensure that African governments take citizen views seriously and conduct their affairs in a responsive and accountable manner?

The following discussions on some arenas for citizen engagement in selected countries demonstrate the reality of participatory public spaces or the lack thereof.

- *Elections*: This is the primary avenue for popular participation in democratic governance. However, many elections in Africa, most recently in Zimbabwe, have been perceived as having been manipulated by the ruling Party and therefore do not represent the people's view. South Africa, has staged one of the more credible elections in the continent, yet there are challenges. William (2006:2) notes that in South Africa, especially during elections, councillors would promise an improvement of "service delivery to people at the grass root level, yet they seldom keep such promises once they are elected to positions of power". The situation in Nigeria prior to the 2011 elections were no different, with several promises un-kept and with little or no participation in governance (by the electorate), they begin to feel that they are getting a *raw deal*. The non-participation may be primarily because there are no or limited invited spaces for engagement or due to the fact that they lack trust in the existing avenues given their inefficacies over the years. In time, there is either an increase in the number of public service related protests (as is the case in South Africa) or citizens seem to be apathetic with any process of engagement as they do not envisage any change as is the case in Zimbabwe or there is a renewed or increase in participation as is the case in Nigeria prior to and following the 2011 presidential elections.

- *Community meetings /obudo gatherings/ Izimbizo:* These can be viewed as an important public space for inputs into government agenda. However, it struggles to fully actualise its potential. One would have liked to see such spaces being more effective precisely because this is in sync with most African traditional governance. These meetings usually comprise a complex multi-stakeholder gathering that

endeavours to facilitate participation (such meetings might include public officials, private sector, community leaders, independent organisations and individuals). It is usually broad in focus and this arguably may be one of its limitations; as it may become a listening channel that may not necessarily translate into action.

- *Trade unions/interest groups*: While there are a range of interest groups in society, some have remained neutral to politics and focused on philanthropic and other activities, others have sought visible avenues for policy engagement. In particular instances, interest groups have clearly aligned themselves to various political parties and ideologies. There are a number of visible groups such as organised labour and student unions. In South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and students unions such as SASCO (South African Students Congress) have been visible and have participated in invited spaces or sought to create spaces for engagement. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Nigerian Students Congress have continued to engage the government on some of the pertinent issues. Likewise, in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) have equally sought to provide opportunities for state-society engagement. Admittedly, their participation in public spaces has forced governments to reconsider some decisions as they have tried to make their voices heard through boycotts, demonstrations, strikes and picketing. However, these groups need to be watched closely as they are not immune to manipulation for political purposes.

- *Religious associations*: In tracing the involvement of civil society in African governance, Tordoff notes that "in the early colonial period, when opposition to colonial rule was either impossible or ineffective, religion became a vehicle for the expression of African dissent" (1991:53). This dissent was notable in various Muslim populations and also in the Christian populations. In South Africa for instance, some churches played a visible role in dismantling the Apartheid state. In Zimbabwe, attempts at creating a one-party state in the early 1980s by the ruling ZANU (PF) led to an outcry by various civic groups, especially church-related civic organisations, such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP). However, in certain instances, religious groups have been regarded as "front troops of government to soften the hearts of the people…" (*Ibid*). Unfortunately this trend has continued. In Nigeria, for instance, churches have in particular instances been identified as publicly endorsing politicians with questionable characters and in other instances, are perceived as collaborators, having benefited from the ill-gotten wealth of influential persons through *presents* to the churches.

N*GO's /community based organisations*: There was a spate of new NGOs at the time of independence in most African countries and these organisations have continued to grow in the post colonial era (Bratton in De Beer & Swanepoel 2007:39). While these have mushroomed, they have had a mixed result with some remaining in the philanthropic realm, others actually promoting popular participation and others using their base as a political tool to manipulate and access resources for their own benefit. There is evidence that democratic decentralisation may simply have opened up spaces for the empowerment of local elites (who lead these organisations), hence few gains have been made by the poor

(Gaventa 2004:32). For instance, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, specifically in the Ogba community, the leaders of the community based organisations (e.g. youth, women, chiefs, and clans) have continued to exploit their positions and constantly engage directly with political leadership and the oil companies, for their own personal benefit. What exists is a variety of self advancing *leaders* said to be representing various constituencies of the community. The truth is that while, these organisations have the potential to strengthen democratic governance, they also pose a danger as they litter the landscape and masquerade as community agencies while seeking personal gains.

The inefficacy of some of the public spaces suggests the suppression of public opinion (including the harassment of the media) and its manipulation by more powerful actors. A plethora of issues contributing to this situation and limiting the development of quality public spaces are identified below:

- lack of resources (such as financial, time, skills, technology);
- lack of information including financial transparency;
- lack of leadership;
- ethical challenges of corruption, patronage, nepotism, protectionism and blatant reward of supporters through political appointments;
- a weak culture of citizen participation /poor organisational skills;
- intimidation of positions contrary to that of government /powerful local elites;
- abuse of public space – including manipulation (disruption of public meetings);
- lack of accountability and transparency;
- lack of confidence in the controlling institutions of government including the judicial system, as officials and influential persons are perceived as being above the law;
- inefficiency of the public service and lack of confidence in the system;
- lack of awareness around invited spaces/tokenism as public views are not considered beyond the meeting;
- perceived indiscipline of officials/evidence of thuggery in the various arms of government; and
- perceived lack of commitment, i.e. the inability of narrowing the gap between what leaders profess and what they actually do.

ENABLING FACTORS FOR QUALITY ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC SPACES

- *Education and Awareness*: This is essentially the reorientation of the machinery of government to recognise the importance of the public in all matters. This will require sensitivity to the fact that they are to serve "public interest rather than the interest of those who wield executive political power" (Olowu 2000:167)
- *Insistence on high standards and non tolerance for unethical conduct amongst community leaders and government officials.* All countries could do with credible leadership across all the facets of society and particularly in government. Olowu (2000:171) notes that this can be boosted by promoting meritocracy and the adherence to the applicable codes of conduct. At community level, citizens need to be more vigilant and hold leaders accountable for the abuse of public spaces.

- *A viable parliament that holds the executive accountable and renders high quality oversight functions*. In most African countries the executive is still all powerful. Very often, the legislature that is supposed to hold the executive accountable falls short and ultimately fail the citizens who voted them in. There is value added to governance if viable legislative committees such as the public accounts committee and other related committees actually seek to monitor the activities of the executive from a legislative viewpoint. The oversight function needs to be emphasised as this must transcend beyond party lines and loyalties. Olowu (2000:168) concurs and suggests that the following steps are vital in order to achieve this:
  - assert the constitutional position of the legislature as a separate branch of government – complete with its own resources (personnel, infrastructure and systems);
  - the legislature should take its responsibility very seriously and review any laws that may be constraining their effectiveness;
  - adopt training initiatives to further develop the capacity of the legislature to ensure that their capacity is comparable to those of officials in the executive; and
  - revitalisation of key committees such as the public accounts committee and audit committees with capacity to institute sanctions when and if necessary
- *The independence of the judiciary and other controlling institutions*. When the public feels aggravated by the conduct of the executive and argues that the legislature has failed them, they should consider other alternatives such as controlling agencies and the judiciary, which are *independent*. However, over the years there are increasing concerns that even the judiciary is becoming highly politicised and might compromise the ideals of a viable democracy by not holding people accountable. With regard to controlling bodies across the levels/spheres of government, there should be effective internal committees that monitor and have the ability to sanction.
- *A re-newed culture of participation and accountability*: It should be understood that for a democratic society to be strengthened, there should be a strong and vibrant civil society. This will require a more organised civil society that tries to obtain integrated networks, coalitions and partnerships to deal with some of the key challenges. Furthermore, governments across the continent need to be proactive and far-sighted by investing in the development of the right set of values that enable civil society to participate by holding government accountable for non-delivery on standards agreed upon. In time, such a tradition would be grounded within African democratic governments as the levels of accountability would increase over time.

CONCLUSION

The discussion reflected on the nature of public spaces in democratic governance. There are a few variants of public spaces, as identified. Ranging from non participation due to closed spaces, poor quality public spaces which seem to suggest tokenism on the part of government but are actually poised to push specific agendas (that may be biased towards specific groups, loyalties or those with strong connections to government) and lastly public spaces invented by empowered citizenry that endeavour to participate in governance and

hold government accountable. While Africa's record has been somewhat mixed, ranging from the disenfranchisement of civil society in democratic processes, development of invited spaces for participation, the harassment of the media, suppression of public opinion and the high-jacking of public spaces, the factors responsible for this situation were identified and enabling factors for quality policy engagement were also discussed.

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