

REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is nearing its 14th year of democracy during which significant advances have been made en route to realising its development objectives. However, since sustainable development implies a continuous process in which fairly limited governance models exist, certain problems often occur. In this article the issue of community participation in the context of good governance finds scrutiny. The researcher reflects upon certain issues and aspects associated with community participation and poses certain suggestions, drawn from practical public administration experience. Specifically, the concepts of community participation, stakeholder involvement, negotiation, capacity and consultation are considered against the picture of an ideal democratic system of governance. It is hoped that the thoughts contained in the article would serve to stimulate a debate, which may lead to a critical re-thinking of the way ahead for South Africa and other young African democracies.

INTRODUCTION

In a functional system of democracy wherein practices of sound governance occur, community participation is seen as an avenue where needs articulation by communities is actively facilitated. The policy of community participation necessitates a process of comprehensive engagement with communities and where divergent opinions, needs and expectations exist, some form of negotiation should often be entered into. Also, it is necessary to institutionalise a process where communities as stakeholders in their own development are informed and made aware – even educated (Van der Wald & Knipe, 1998: 143 and Coetzee, Graaf, Hendricks & Wood, 2001: 473) – on the basics of what developmental government could afford them.

Undeniably, many vexed questions regarding development still remain and much criticism is constantly voiced by communities as far as governance practices are concerned. In this article the researcher, as an active participant in public administration, reflects on certain current issues of governance and community participation and viewing stakeholders as partners, which may warrant debate and consideration as South Africa prepares to enter its 14th year of democracy.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION BY STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders are important participants in the process of good governance. Van der Wald & Knipe (1998: 143) quote Paul (1987: 2) in defining community participation as “an active process in which the clients, or those who will benefit, influence the direction and implementation of a development project aimed at improving the welfare of people in terms of income, personal growth, independence and other values regarded as valuable”.

In view of the above definition, in a public management context, Fox & Meyer (1995: 122) define a stakeholder as “...a person or group of people, such as shareholders, employees, customers, creditors, suppliers, trade unions, government and the community, who have an interest in the operation and outcomes of the organisation”.

It can therefore be deduced that stakeholders are those whose existence may somehow be impacted upon by decisions and actions taken by particular (public) institutions and who, in turn, may through their actions impact on the functioning of such institutions. In some documents, such as in the Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act 32 of 2000), the term stakeholder is not employed to refer to the above individuals or groupings. The Act rather uses the word community and refers to community participation to encapsulate the spirit of involving the community in the activities of local government and governance.

Specifically in a local government context, the Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act 32 of 2000) calls for the creation of a culture of community participation in local government. This reflects a policy of government, which emphasises the importance of optimal community involvement in the decision-making activities that form part of governance activities. However, to merely strive towards community participation may not be sufficient to attain the objectives of developmental government, especially from a sustainability point of view. Beckenstein, Long, Arnold & Gladwin (1996: 3) argue that community participation/consultation – also referred to as regulatory processes – in developmental projects may merely be an element of a bureaucratic structure that may impede decision-making. It may well be that this is part of a “going through the motions”-process to legitimise the actions of any particular party which do not embrace the true spirit of partnership and co-operation. In other words, a de facto retaining of a paternalistic approach towards development.

Van der Wald & Knipe (1999: 144) view community participation as a very involved process and specifically mention the problem-solving nature thereof. However, it should be noted that community participation may present some practical problems, inter alia: (a) the negotiation processes associated with managing projects where certain community members and groups may frustrate progress; (b) pressure on public officials as the process of participation and consultation requires additional human resources capacity; and (c) the unpredictability associated with dealing with community groups.

According to Beckenstein et al. (1996: 3) the stakeholder concept is critical to sustainable development. Dialogue and negotiation among stakeholders are the vehicles through which the principles for sustainable behaviour are established, implemented and monitored. This form of community participation is far removed from the more traditional regulatory processes that claim to include community participation when Government institutions invite comments from stakeholders. Typically the inputs are then reviewed and incorporated into programmes and projects that balance legislative intent with the concerns of the stakeholders (Beckenstein et al., 1996: 3).

NEGOTIATION AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Concerning the concept of negotiation, Spoelstra & Pienaar (1996: 3) define it as “a process of interaction between parties directed towards reaching some form of agreement that will hold and which is based upon common interests, with the purpose of resolving conflict, despite widely dividing differences”. The interactive act of becoming aware and being informed and becoming educated often calls for some form of negotiation process between such stakeholders. The Brazilian educationist and philosopher, Paulo Freire, terms this process conscientisation (Coetzee, Graaf, Hendricks & Wood eds., 2001: 473).

Swanepoel & De Beer (1996: 16) mention that there are essentially three possible causes of conflict while managing community development projects: (a) clashing interests; (b) clashing personalities; and (c) misunderstanding. Each of these should be managed through a process of negotiation and by focusing on the causes of the conflict. Spoelstra & Pienaar (1996: 12) continue to classify the types of negotiation, two of which are important for government stakeholder negotiations: Firstly, co-operative negotiation. In this type of negotiation winning or losing is irrelevant. Conflicting views are discussed and converted into co-operation. Secondly, continuous negotiation is a process which involves entering into an on-going relationship between the parties. This relationship is maintained throughout the negotiations and into the future.

Spoelstra & Pienaar (1996: 3) emphasise the nature of negotiation as being that of a process and not an event. An element of continuity therefore forms its basis. In addition, it is also important in this regard to

note that negotiation involves an element of information exchange. From the point of view of local government, information dissemination could have the advantage that it assists in attaining the objective of transparency and that it may result in educating some communities in aspects related to their environment.

Stakeholder negotiations in governance processes are not only reserved for communities or community based organisations. Stakeholder negotiations may occur between other stakeholders as well, for example between business and government, between local and district municipalities or between different spheres of government (e.g. district municipalities and provincial authorities). Other forms of stakeholder negotiations are to be found on an intra-institutional level where different municipal departments may find themselves competing and therefore eventually negotiating for the same resources. Only in this way will true partnerships develop and can the principle of co-operative governance (in an inter- and an intra-institutional context) really manifest.

FOSTERING IMPROVED COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Tsenoli in Reddy ed. (1995: 34) sounds a warning that democratic government and sustainable development can only be realised if facilities, resources and technical skills are provided to ensure that all development is people-driven. Swanepoel & De Beer (1996: 16) confirm that development "is about people participating in decision-making and implementation that will affect their position and their future". In view of the above, the community as stakeholders in governance should therefore actively become involved throughout the process, and be involved in all planning and implementation processes on different government spheres, as elucidated previously. To achieve this ideal, facilities, resources and technical skills amid sound governmental relations and co-operative governance should be available throughout.

Governmental relations often don't work in a practical context because of the possibility that too many layers of decision-making exist, and the red tape and unco-ordinated complexity of the system and imperatives hamper processes. This causes time delays, procrastination and inefficiency as far as public resource expenditure is concerned. This in turn may hamper co-operative governance. The key is to attempt to "streamline" all activities within this arena. The possible answer may be among others: less layers, fewer authorisations, simplified funding and budgeting processes and strict accountability to/by specific decision-makers, as well as improved communication and transparency. However, these issues should be explored as part of an honest process of governance introspection devoid of ideology and political correctness considerations. Also, the following issues may receive consideration as well:

- politticking in public administration causes ineffective service delivery;
- vested interests in all forms and manners stifle the ideal of community orientation and sustainable development;
- investment in human and other forms of capital is wasted if it cannot be retained;
- lack of commitment and unprofessional conduct by politicians and public officials lead to non-implementation;
- it is impossible to translate the laudable ideals as presented in the Batho Pele-document into practical action;
- policies are too abstract and officials do not have the ability to translate policies into action; and
- officials should not only be trained in, but should also be positioned to effectively implement programme and project management principles.

In general capacity issues similarly warrant constant debate and consideration. However, even though conventional truism dictates that in many cases in the public sector capacity does not exist and should be built, the simple truth is that this takes time, it should be done in a proper co-ordinated and focused way and that it should coincide with initiatives such as the Single Public Service-process. The problem which many analysts and practitioners seem to ignore is that South Africa does not have the time to delay service delivery and development up and until the stage when such capacity could eventually be nurtured and organically grown. The South African democracy is under threat as is clearly seen at grass roots level where the rumblings of dissatisfaction

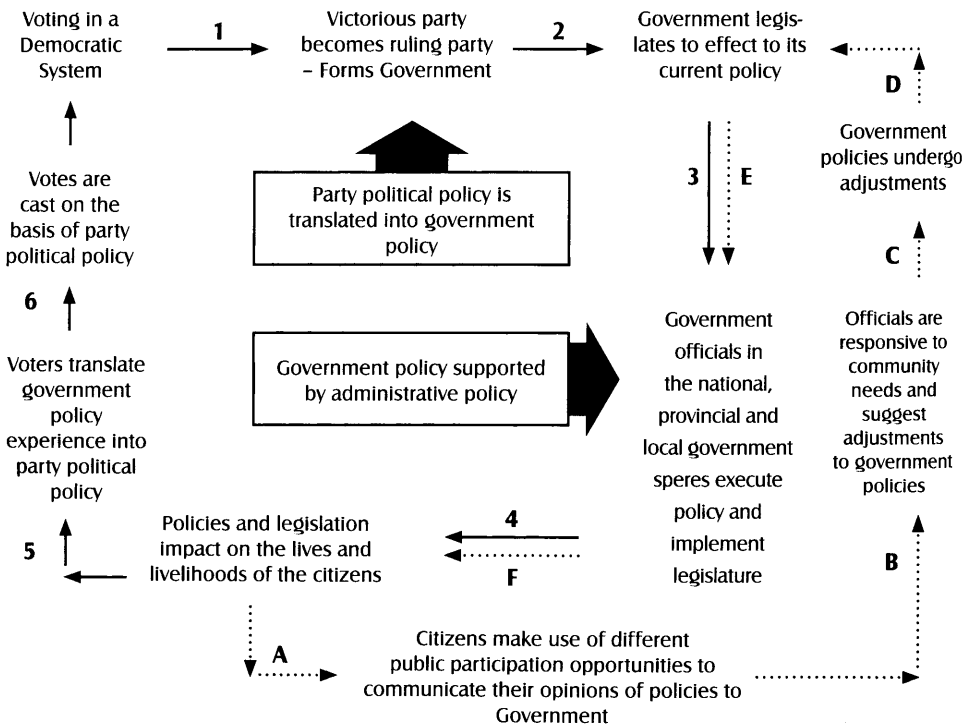
are becoming more evident as time passes. Intermediate strategies should be sought to make development strides to meet the immediate needs. It is conceded that the sustainability aspect associated with development may for the intermediate term be sacrificed to an extent, but the opportunity cost may prove worth the while.

The question thus arises as to how a system of governance within an ideal democracy should accommodate the inputs of communities as stakeholders and how such inputs may change and amend Government policies and strategies which are set for the purposes of development.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN AN IDEAL DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

In any democratic system, service delivery and good governance largely depend on the efficacy of the policies and supportive legislation that are introduced by Government. However, to understand the role and the integrated nature of government functioning, the following figure serves as a diagrammatical explanation of the stages associated therewith.

Stages 1-6 involve a clockwise flow of how policy develops and impacts on society. Stages A-F involve the counter-flow (counter clockwise) where the government measures, and responds to, the community's opinion of its policies and strategies (or performance in general).



Optimal service delivery and good governance rely on both clock-wise and anti-clockwise processes to run effectively on an integrated basis.

Figure 3: Integrated nature of government functioning and community participation

A description appears on the previous page of an effective system that functionally operates in a clockwise, as well as in a counter-clockwise direction. It could be stated that service delivery and good governance are dependent on, among other factors, the extent to which the integratedness, intergovernmental relations and community participation in the different spheres operate successfully. In a clockwise direction at least six essential phases are indicated, whereas in the counter-clockwise direction phases A to F are indicated.

In a democracy regular elections are held during which all eligible citizens have the opportunity to cast their vote. Theoretically, the voters scrutinise the respective political parties' election manifestos to ascertain which of these parties have the soundest party political policies. Practically, voters do not necessarily support the parties on the basis of their party political policies alone. However, it is assumed that in a mature democracy, party political policy will form the basis upon which voters choose which party to support. It should also be noted that the voters may not always agree with all the party political policies of any given party. Choices are then made as to which party would represent the most important issues or which party's policies the voter would tend to support mostly, in this regard. Once the ballots have been cast and the victorious party has formed the government of the day, it sets itself the task of translating party political policies into government policy. Often, the newly elected government finds that practicalities such as resource constraints or environmental factors necessitate some adjustment to the policies held by the party. Therefore, government policy may deviate from party political policy as originally contained in political party manifestos.

Governments would issue many different government policy documents to provide guidance to decision-makers as to what actions should be taken. In addition, such documents are intended to clarify government policy to the citizens of the country. Policy documents, for instance white Papers (such as the white Paper on Local Government, 1998), serve to indicate what should be done and are typically documents that project Government's vision concerning particular aspects. Policy documents even tend to be somewhat abstract and don't always define exactly the what, where, when, who and how of policy implementation. In addition, where implementation is concerned, mandatory actions and sanctions need to be stipulated. In most cases, policies do not elaborate on such aspects. Subsequently, legislation and a general regulatory framework need to be established in order to support the implementation of policies. Therefore superficially, it may be stated that policies tend to indicate that something should occur, whereas legislation indicates that something must occur as well as in what manner or fashion it should occur.

As a result, Government would give effect to their policies by passing legislation to support their objectives. The agents responsible for implementing policies and executing legislation are the officials who are deployed in the national, provincial and local government sphere. In order to support the officials to effectively implement policies and to execute legislation, administrative policy is developed by government departments. Such policies relate to aspects that pertain to human resources, finances, logistics, procurement, technology application and work methodologies and administrative procedures. Naturally, the above aspects require a regulatory framework to ensure its implementation and execution, as well. Hence, the issuing of legislation such as the Public Finance Management Act 1999 (Act 1 of 1999), the Public Service Act 1994 (Proclamation 103 of 1994), and other instruments such as Treasury Regulations.

It should be borne in mind that all government actions affect society. The effects may differ from positive (development and advancement) to negative (where certain communities or individuals experience discomfort or where their human rights are infringed upon). In a heterogeneous society, such as in South Africa, the government cannot address all diverse needs and aspirations equally well. The government needs to put mechanisms in place to ascertain what needs and aspirations different communities have and it should consult such communities on how services could be rendered effectively. In addition, in some

cases where policies are implemented, the effects thereof are only established after a while. For this reason, the extent of responsiveness of government in terms of the actions it intends to take as well as the actions taken are important.

Citizens may therefore utilise different types of participation opportunities to communicate their opinions of policies to government. Such opportunities may take the form of public hearings, written submissions on proposed legislation, personal liaison with officials or politicians, public debates, media debates, imbizos or mass demonstrations and picketing. In the event where the stakeholders or even segments of stakeholder entities indicate their concern regarding policies or legislation, such messages should be fed into the system for analysis and possible adjustment by expert officials and politicians. If it is found that such concerns hold merit, the system should make provision for adjustment and rectification. Eventually, the citizens will exercise their democratic right to vote to indicate how they feel or how they have experienced the government's service delivery and governance ability.

CONSULTATION AS A GOVERNANCE PROCESS

An important step in the governance process is to decide on the best approach to the modalities associated with consultation with stakeholders. When it comes to consultation, there is no ideal "recipe" that would satisfy all needs and circumstances. Consultation has to be tailored to meet the time frames, resource availability and nature of the issue(s) at hand.

A valuable approach to consultation could be to ask the following questions:

- **Who:** Who needs to be consulted: other departments, the Minister/MEC, other ministers, other levels of government, other jurisdictions, committees of Cabinet, various external client/stakeholder groups, general public?
- **What:** What should be the subject matter of the consultation: Whether to consult on issue identification, the range of options, the preferred options, the assumptions, the principles, the outcomes?
- **When:** Determining the timing of consultations and when one has consulted enough – i.e. when to end the consultations. Should it take place during the preliminary information gathering stage when one is trying to determine exactly the nature of the problem? Should one wait until there is some internal coalescing around the principles and expected outcomes that will guide the process? Should it be at each step in the process? Should some individuals/groups be consulted at some stages in the process, and others consulted in other phases of the policy development process?
- **Why:** Why does a particular individual, department or group need to be consulted? What type of exchange is one hoping to have with each person/group? Is the purpose of the consultation to gather information, to obtain feedback/reaction? Is it that, through the consultation, there is also the aim of disseminating information (marketing of the policy)? Finding answers to the why of consultation would enable one to determine what could be achieved through consultation. Answers to the why of consultation would also assist in determining the where and how of consultation.
- **Where:** At which location(s) should consultation take place? Is it more appropriate to consult some individuals/groups at certain locations and other individuals/groups at different venues?
- **How:** Asking oneself how the consultation should be conducted, implies finding the best method(s) or procedure to follow when embarking on a consultation programme. Should one arrange workshops, round table discussions, and public meetings? Should the Internet be used to disseminate information on the policy review in order to also solicit possible feedback? Should a discussion paper be released? Should sub-groupings of clients/stakeholders be brought together for consultations? Embarking on a consultation programme implies also budgetary implications. This should carefully be considered when deciding on a programme of consultation.

Utilising the above approach, or consultation checklist, could assist one to develop a conscious consultation plan or programme that would effectively address the particular circumstances that could influence the consultation process. The consultation plan can also be a tool (instrument) to facilitate discussion and endorsement by whoever is directing or co-ordinating the policy initiative, as well as any other officials whose endorsement is required.

Generally, and as a rule, consultation within the public institution (internal consultation) should precede external consultations. Failure to consult internally at the outset can often cause resistance and other difficulties in the policy development process. In particular, do not overlook inter-departmental consultations on problems/issues that cut across more than one department. An important aspect of consultation is to keep people informed – even other public institutions that might become involved in a particular programme – about the objectives of a proposed policy, as well as how it may possibly affect them in the future.

Consultation should be followed up and individuals/public institutions be assured that they will be informed about the outcome of their inputs. Letting stakeholders know how their inputs were used, including an explanation of why their suggestions were implemented, or not implemented, is important to foster positive ongoing relations in the future.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion may serve to stimulate thinking that should put certain principles in place which would form a sound foundation upon which a more refined form of governance could be forged. In terms of Government policy it is required to engage in community participation processes to ensure that sound governance occurs. However, true community participation depends on a variety of aspects such as proper stakeholder involvement in public administration conduct, negotiation, capacity enhancement to achieve efficiency and effectiveness and consultation. In this regard, policies often fail to achieve their envisaged results. In an ideal system of governance, community participation is crucial. It appears that officials should be sensitive towards the complexity and involved nature of the execution of their duties and the crucial role that sound community input plays in this regard. As the process of implementing policies unfolds in all spheres of government, dysfunctionalities should be identified and applicable solutions will have to be sought along this way. This warrants extensive longitudinal research to be conducted throughout the governance arena in order to inform future policy processes.

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