

*Perspective*

# Crafting active citizen participation through ward committees

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## INTRODUCTION

The new government has provided for a legal framework that necessitates the establishment and institutionalization of ward committees as vehicles to entrench participatory governance at the grass root level. According to Roger Southall (2004)<sup>1</sup>, 'participatory democracy entails a high level of public participation in the political process through a wide variety of institutional channels'. Indeed, participatory democracy can only come into being when ordinary men and women, young and old are afforded an opportunity to actively and meaningfully contribute to their own development and well being.

The purpose of this paper is two fold: firstly, it seeks to highlight the importance of ward committees as engines to impel public participation. Secondly, to draw reader's attention to some of the key impediments faced by the institution of ward committees in term of achieving the foregoing. It is thus imperative that we do not despise other alternative forms of participation. The argument is that ward committees can only become effective and efficient vehicles for engaging communities in municipal decision-making when complemented by other pragmatic mechanisms of participation.

### The Constitution of South Africa

The Constitution creates space for public participation in local governance through specific mechanisms such as Ward Committees and Integrated Development Planning and demand that local government promotes public participation<sup>2</sup> (2004).

<sup>1</sup> Roger Southall is the Executive Director, Democracy and Governance, Human Science Research Council. In *Critical-Public Participation in Review*. Volume 1 no. 1 2004

<sup>2</sup> N. Bezuidenhout and B. Mautjane- Civil society Participation in Local Governance. Article available on IDASA website

Chapter 6 of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) denotes that Ward Committees and their members can participate in local government in the following ways:

- Assessing and approving the budget
- Planning and developing the Integrated Development Plan -Ward committees should work closely with councillors and other community organizations to identify priority needs and make sure these needs are included in the budget proposals and plans.

Section 152 of the South African Constitution requires of a local authority to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in matters of local government<sup>3</sup> The Municipal Structures Act of 1998 is also unequivocal and requires Local Governments to establish ward committees. In terms of the Act the object of ward committees is to enhance participatory democracy at the local level.

### The role of Ward Committees

The demise of the notorious apartheid government saw the dawn of a new system of local government that provided for ward committees to be established by all municipalities across the country. The new government recognized the need for a structure that is closest to the people at the grass root level and representative of the people and aspiration of the community. The role of ward committees is to make sure that the electorate directly participate and partake in decisions made by council. They should be part and parcel of the processes and structures that affects their lives as ordinary citizens. The ward committees should be set up in a way that it

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)

can reach most sectors and areas in the ward. The ward committees' main tasks are to communicate and consult with the community in respect of development and service plans. It has, however, no formal powers to force the council to do anything. Ward committees should keep their electorates informed of decisions, progress reports' (Paralegal Advice<sup>4</sup>). There are various ways of keeping citizens informed including radio, newspapers and regular public meetings.

### **The duties and responsibilities of ward committees**

This information has been extracted from the DDP training manual on ward committees. The resource manual has been compiled by the Democracy Development Program, Institute for Multi-Party Democracy, Centre for Public Participation and Community Law and Rural Development Centre.

Ward committees serves as messengers between the community and the council. Similarly ward committee provide communities with an space to lodge or express their views and complaints

Ward committees also have the responsibility to identify and utilize the skills and resources that exist within communities or group. It is important for them to have a good understanding of what is available in their communities (in terms of finance, expertise, skills, new materials, community facilities, volunteers/ labour and resources)

Ward committees need to play a role of providing support for the people/groups involved in community structures and activities. This involves affirming people, recognizing and acknowledging the value of their contributions, giving encouragement, being available for people when they need to talk or ask questions.

A ward committee should also be a strategic mobilizing agent for both the municipality and the community in the planning and implementation of programmes. They can also play an important role in mobilizing partnerships for the development of local projects.

Ward committees have the role of interacting with external role players on behalf of or for the benefit of their local communities or constituency.

Networking the ward committee should establish relationships with a variety of people or organizations and be in a position to use them to effect and facilitate change in their local communities.

The ward committee could also influence decision through lobbying and persuasion

Disseminate relevant information pertaining to municipal processes, decisions taken and projects

### **How effective are Ward Committees?**

Ward committees however, are largely perceived as ineffective in advancing citizen participation at the local government level. Their inefficiency is caused by among other things, lack of capacity and incentives to persuade them to work whole heartedly towards the betterment of their constituencies. Janine Hicks<sup>5</sup> argues that whilst ward committees are a key component of community-based involvement, many municipalities still do not have formal or functional ward committees in place. She further reiterates that in municipalities where ward committees are operational, these are marked by uncertainty and in some instances, chaos. This largely stems from the fact that there appears to be no clear cut understanding of the role that ward committees are supposed to perform. Community members have certain expectations of what they expect of their ward committee representatives, yet councillors have different expectations. Furthermore, as Janine argues there is no clarity on the roles of ward councillors as opposed to proportional representation (PR) councillors, there are tensions between ward committees members and ward councillors, and limited resources available to enable ward committees to function better and improve efficiency. This is perhaps the most widespread challenge facing ward committees in their quest to involve communities in matters of local government. The lack of understanding of roles leads to a greater ill perceptions and misconceptions about the performance of ward committees and other local government stakeholders in general. This gap should thus be an entry point for some form of awareness and capacity building intervention.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Alternative forms of participation**

It should be acknowledged therefore that ward committees on their own do not appear to be the only absolute answer or remedy to promote and facilitate community involvement in decision making at the local government level. Besides, the functions of ward committees have been restricted mainly to make recommendations to the ward councillor or through the councillor of the metro.

It is imperative that we encourage and do not preclude other forms of public participation, such as "Imbizos", sector forums created by Civil Society Organisations and

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<sup>4</sup> Quote taken from Paralegal Advice. Article entitled 'Democracy and Public Participation'. [www.paralegaladvice.org.za](http://www.paralegaladvice.org.za)

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<sup>5</sup> Janine Hicks (2006) 'Assessing the effectiveness of community participation based involvement, in Critical Dialogue, Public Participation Review. Volume 2 No. 1 2006

Community Development Workers (CDW) - structures created to assist and facilitate community development. IDP forums are critically important. Different forms of participation must be acknowledged and valued. The processes of community participation must be all inclusive and should accommodate a wide range of role

players. Similarly, strategies to improve active citizen participation should take cognizance of the broader transformation programme of government, such as poverty alleviation, including issues of underdevelopment, economic growth and job creation.