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Putting the ‘public’ into public service delivery for social welfare in South Africa

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Abstract

The privatisation of some essential services in South Africa has raised severe difficulties for those for whom the idea of fees for services is quite foreign and who, in any way, cannot afford to pay for services. The government has developed several initiatives to educate people about the need to pay for services provided by local government, the largest of which was the Masakhane fees-for-services campaign. This paper describes two recent initiatives which seek to engage local citizen participation, namely, Integrated Development Plans (IDP) and izimbizo (or traditional forums). These are examined along with the challenges faced by local government in promoting citizenship participation in service delivery within a decentralised system of governance. The article concludes with some recommendations on how citizen participation can be enhanced so as to make the ‘public’ visible in public service delivery and thus improve social welfare services.

Key words: public service delivery, Integrated Development Planning, izimbizo (traditional forums), citizenship participation
Since the transformation to democracy in South Africa in 1994, every aspect of social service provision has come under critical scrutiny and led to policy revision through a process of consultation and stakeholder participation. Public service provision is no exception with the presentation of the Draft *White Paper on Transformation of the Public Service* early on in the transformation process. An overriding goal of policy change has been participation. The new ANC-led government sought to capitalise on the mass democratic people’s movement which had unseated the Nationalist government of the previous 47 years. It started out with the best of intentions and the result was a raft of social service policies based on the human rights and social justice standards of the Western world, such as the *White Paper on Reconstruction and Development* (1994), *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* (1997), *White Paper on Social Welfare* (1997) and *White Paper on Local Government* (1998). These policies accurately reflected the changes needed for a more inclusive government wherein the needs of the whole population, and especially the poor, would be addressed. However, they have proved extremely difficult to implement because of major problems in the public service sector, including a lack of service delivery capacity and resources, inadequate human resources, widespread corruption, especially in provincial government, and lack of a fee-for-service culture (Author 2 & YYY, 2007; Ruiters, 2007).

Furthermore, the new social service policies required a level of service integration at the national, provincial and local government levels which was extremely difficult to achieve given the historical legacy under which public services were fragmented under the various homeland systems and self-governing territories of the country. Finally, though eminently desirable and a laudable goal, community participation proved an indomitable challenge as priorities shifted to market mechanisms of cost-cutting and downsizing. Most importantly, social security provision in broadened pensions and grant schemes, seemed to sit uncomfortably with the empowering ethos of participatory development programmes.
Moreover, the introduction of private sector market principles in the *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* (1997) shifted the focus from participation to administrative efficiency, effectiveness, and cost cutting and led to the privatisation of essential services, such as energy, water and sewerage infrastructure. This led to strong public-private partnerships, and an emphasis on managerial and technical skills to enhance efficiency and cost effectiveness at the expense of community participation (van Niekerk, 1998).

However, South Africa needs a public service delivery system that is responsive to the needs of the population, not least the poor, for, despite radical political changes, numerous social development initiatives over the past fifteen years and a well-intentioned constitution, the country remains a deeply divided one (Author, 2008; Author 2, 2006; Author 2 & YYY, 2008; Author 2 & YYY, 2007; Dixon, 2006; Engelbrect, 2008; Hölscher, 2008; Ruiters, 2007). Thus enormous challenges remain: Of South Africa’s 47 million people: (i) 61 per cent of the African population of nearly 38 million people is poor compared with only 1 per cent of the white population of close to 4.1 million people; (ii) unemployment remains high with an official unemployment rate of just over 30 per cent and unofficial rates of nearly 50 per cent; and (iii) urban disintegration characterises poor people’s lives, ravaged by AIDS and HIV, declining health, and crime and insecurity (Dixon, 2006). The state thus has a major role to play against the backdrop of severe service backlogs which continue to mask the great strides it has made in the last fifteen years. The *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service Delivery* (1997) was promulgated to change the way South Africa delivered its services but how effective has it been? It is to this that we now turn our attention as we examine the emerging spaces for democratic engagement and explore the challenges faced by local government structures in promoting citizenship participation in public service delivery.
The dilemmas of participation

The notion of participation has always been central to the philosophy of community development, which advanced the idea that, in a representative democracy, both formal and informal structures were needed for ordinary people at the local level to have a voice in decision-making processes. Participation has been central to all forms of community development from consensus-oriented liberal to conflict-oriented Marxist models. In Third Way and neoliberal policy, participation has been reconfigured as choice with responsibility and more accurately denotes user take-up of social services. It has led to the construction of new relationship between service users and state service-rendering structures (Gaventa, 2004). Different models of participation are needed in developing contexts, especially among the rural poor all too often overlooked by development planners, researchers and policy makers (Chambers, 1993; Cheers, 1999).

There are particular challenges to bringing marginalised rural populations into mainstream development planning and practice, not least the level of sophistication needed in understanding local issues in relation to policy-making and planning processes, basic rights, and existing legislation (Esau, 2007). This is why the Freirian consciousness-raising model has always had a huge purchase among rural populations and why community education has been a major focus of development work. While the rhetoric of participation has always permeated development planning discourse, it has not always been backed by concrete programmes aimed at widespread public participation (Brynard, in Bekker, 1996). As Miraftab (2004) noted, ‘invented spaces’ are needed through the construction of informal structures for grassroots community participation and action. For the most part, however, we have to work with what she terms ‘invited spaces’ wherein grassroots communities are
represented by non-governmental organisations through formal government-engendered community forums. As we shall see in the discussion which follows, the widespread demonstrations by community based structures against poor service delivery in South Africa illustrate ‘invented spaces’ while Integrated Development Plans and izImbizo typify ‘invited spaces’. They represent serious attempts by local government to engage local communities so as to prevent social unrest and antisocial behaviour. They also demonstrate the need for different forms of community engagement needed when working across developed and developing – urban and rural – contexts, as the examples below show.

In South Africa, local government has been the primary means through which public services, such as water, electricity and sewerage and public waste removal, are rendered. These are the services with which this paper is concerned rather than broader welfare and development programmes. The Constitution of South Africa (S155) (1) establishes three categories of Municipalities, Category A, B and C. In line with this, the Demarcation Board of South Africa demarcated 283 municipalities for the whole of the country. Of these, six are metropolitan municipalities (category A), 47 are district municipalities (category C) and 231 (category B) are local municipalities. While metropolitan municipalities have exclusive municipal executive and legislative authority over their area of jurisdiction, Category C municipalities share their authority with category B municipalities (Municipal Systems Act 32, 2000). This is to say, a cluster of category B municipalities, typically found in small towns and rural areas, make up a category C municipality. The constitution recognises a municipality’s right to govern, on its own initiative, the local government affairs of its community (S151 (1)) and the importance of involving communities in matters of governance.

A great deal of effort has gone into trying to achieve public participation, not least the Community Development Workers Programme (XXX & Author, 2009) and the Masakhane –
fees for services – campaign, an important initiative which seeks to educate the public about the need to pay for services provided. But this has been an ongoing problem since a large percentage of the population is not used to receiving essential services or paying for them and, in any way, cannot afford them. This is compounded by the fact that some public services are managed by private providers and reflect a very different ethos from the government-must-provide expectations that were engendered by the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Public service provision by private providers and community development programmes operate from different mindsets as we shall see from the discussion which follows. The complexities which have arisen spring from local government’s attempt to use community development principles of participation to educate local communities to conform to private sector goals of fees for services.

**Private sector ideals in the public service domain**

Notwithstanding the difficulties involved, participation was an overriding goal at the time of the political transition to democracy but was soon infused with the administrative ideals of efficiency, effectiveness and cost cutting as the government sought to address the huge demand for services in the face of severely inadequate resources. The *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* (1997) sought to give power to the public through participatory principles, such as consultation, courtesy, transparency, and redress. At the same time, it engendered an entirely new culture of service provision for the majority of the population by reconfiguring the public as the ‘client’ and seeking fees for services from consumers and ‘value for money’ from providers. Private sector ideals which positioned clients as consumers ran contra to public expectations of government provision. Concerns
with efficiency did not sit well with ideals of participation and the promotion of social
inclusion and human wellbeing (Stewart & Walsh, 1992).

While internationally the privatisation of public services has come under fire
(Sullivan, 1987), the situation in South Africa was exacerbated by the two-worlds created
under apartheid. In one world were the better off enjoying all the services and benefits the
modern world had to offer and in the other the majority of the population without services,
especially in the rural areas. Bridging these gaps required more than constitutional change, it
also required new service delivery capacity education to make the shift to a culture of service
provision and the fees-for-services which accompanied it. Thus stories abound of people
unable to make the shift. For example, Chirwa (2003) observes that while water provision and
refuse removal to the black township of Fort Beaufort in the Western Cape Province increased
by almost 60 per cent between 1994 and 1996, in the same period several thousand
households either had their water disconnected, or were evicted for failure to pay water bills.
Thus alongside constitutional rights to housing, health care, food, water, and social services
go the realities of service provision and the costs involved.

The challenge of delivering essential basic services fell to municipalities forced,
because of their meagre resources, into partnership with private sector providers. Thus there
developed a range of public-private partnerships at the municipal – local government – level.
For example, in the area of water provision, a French multinational company, Saur, initiated a
number of water schemes through the Build, Operate and Transfer programme in the rural
areas of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces (Smith & Morris, 2008). In 1999, a
30-year concession was entered into with Sauer by the Dolphin Coast Municipality in
KwaZulu-Natal. Two years later, when the municipality tried to withdraw from the
disadvantageous contract, Sauer demanded, and won, a renegotiation of its contract which
resulted in increased tariffs (Bond, 2000, 2002). While infrastructure and service delivery in
the municipality improved, wealthier rather than poorer areas gained maximum benefits. Privatisation impacts negatively on those who cannot afford services, especially the poor (McDonald, 2002) and has met with public resistance, especially in the area of energy and water provision. It leads to increased prices and increased insecurity for the lower class workers already threatened with job cuts (Hall, Lobina & de la Motte, 2005). For Hall et al. (2005), the crucial sectors of water and energy provision in developing countries, like South Africa, should involve local consultation, which takes the public’s interests into account. The poor should not be left at the mercy of commercial operators and market forces without putting mechanisms in place to cushion them against destitution.

However, given bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays, there are several instances where private provision has brought tangible benefits to communities: The privatisation of the Benoni Fire and Emergency Service in Gauteng led to a reduction in the cost of rates due to savings made by the municipality on labour and capital costs. Brynard (1995) noted that the success of public-private sector partnerships in less-developed communities depends crucially not only on issues of affordability but also on transparent communication and stakeholder participation. Community participation, however, is a hit and miss affair as municipalities have sought to find effective ways of nurturing processes of participation. In South Africa, two models have developed to enhance participation at the municipal or local government level: Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and izImbizo. Both involve structures and processes for community participation and it is to these that the discussion now turns.

**Integrated development plans (IDPS)**

Prescribed by the White Paper on Local Government (1998) the compilation of an Integrated Development Plan (IDP) involves a process through which local government municipalities,
of which there are 283 in South Africa, are required to compile strategic development plans in which they assess and prioritise needs, set goals, devise strategies for development and implementation projects, budget effectively, and monitor progress against predetermined targets. Effectively IDPs are intended as anti-poverty and growth and development strategies that, ideally, emanate from a common or shared community vision of meeting locally identified needs.

Ideally, the IDP, if produced by a legislatively engendered joint-planning process, provides a forum where citizens can come together and exchange ideas. In an environment where diversity and inclusiveness are difficult to accommodate, joint planning processes for the development of IDPs provide a safe ‘invited space’ (Miraftab, 2004) where people from different walks of life can share ideas and begin to build bridges. It prevents planning from being left to the whim of local government officials. However, municipalities are differently endowed and, as we shall see in the examples below, those that are wealthier and better resourced are in a more advantageous position to implement and monitor successful joint planning processes. A high degree of political awareness is required for participation in joint planning and communities with low literacy levels are doubly disadvantaged.

For Visser (2000), IDPs nevertheless, constitute one of the most important instruments of community participation and coordination between national, provincial and local government. They provide a focal point whereby service delivery by all spheres of government comes together in integrated coordination and alignment programmes at local government level. They are strengthened by a legislative framework which prescribes not only the content but also the process of integrated planning by local government institutions. Section 35(1) of the Municipal Systems Act No. 32 of 2000 refers to the IDP as a municipalities’ ‘principal strategic planning instrument’. Section 26 of the Act lists items that
must be included in the IDP, such as the municipality’s developmental vision, its priorities and development objectives, its key performance indicators, and key performance targets.

The Municipal Systems Act (2000) also places a high premium on community participation. Chapter 4 is dedicated to community involvement not only in the IDP but also in all aspects of local government. In this way, the IDP provides an opportunity for learning and sharing ideas. It also has the potential to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds to work towards a shared vision for their communities. The first municipal elections in South Africa were held in 2000, the second in 2005 while the third will be held in 2011. Currently, local government institutions have their second set of councillors in place, and close to ten years of experience in the new local government model. The experiences have been varied as pointed out by Author (2010) in a comparison of two IDP processes of two towns – one urban based and the other rural.

The eThekwini (an urban-based municipality) has an Integrated Development Plan clearly outlines the city’s development objectives and provides a policy framework to guide decision making related to the financial management of and development planning for the city. The eThekwini municipality has an eight-point outcomes-based plan in which the major priorities are; economic growth and job creation, a safe and secure environment; healthy and empowered citizens and financially viable and sustainable local government (eThekwini 2007).

According to Author (2010), the plan unfolded within the context of a shared, common vision. It was adopted by civil society, other spheres of government, the business sector, tertiary institutions, unions, and traditional leaders after an intricate process of public consultation and community mobilisation, including media publications and web postings. The use of community development workers, although expensive, proved to be useful in publicising and educating the public about the IDP process, as well as seeking their input into
the content (see XXX & Author, 2009). In this way, true community participation at the grassroots level was realised.

On the other hand however, Matjhabeng Municipality – a rural based municipality outside the Free State goldfields, cannot boast a similar success story. The depletion of gold reserves and the general drop in gold prices in the late 80s have had a serious impact on the economy of Matjhabeng. In particular, the construction, manufacturing and electricity sectors have steadily declined since 1996 (Botes et al., 2007) and income levels are on the lower side. A survey conducted in 2001 showed that about 60 per cent of the population had no steady source of income. The community of Phomolong, within the Matjhabeng municipality, was the centre of intermittent service-related protests during 2005 and 2006 (Botes et al., 2007; Sunday Times, 2006). These protests were directed at the Matjhabeng municipality and brought to the surface the widespread dissatisfaction of the citizens with their local government, not least some of the goals of its IDP: debt recovery, the introduction of prepaid meter systems, and right-sizing of the municipal organisation (Botes et al., 2007). During the service-delivery protests, however, it came to light that many people were ignorant of the IDP process rendering community participation ‘insufficient and ineffective’ (Botes et al., 2007: 25). The protestors called for an educational campaign to be launched about IDPs so that communities are made aware of their roles and responsibilities in the planning process.

To date, unrest has gone beyond the Matjhabeng Municipality. In May 2005 a leading South African Sunday newspaper documented no less than fifteen serious incidents that had taken place in several parts of the country, within a one-year period, involving protests against poor service delivery. Author (2005) noted that most of the recorded protests against local government continue to occur in smaller, rural and poorly resourced towns. Since 2005, the country has witnessed activists in far flung pockets of the country mobilising themselves to

This unrest, while suggesting a growing involvement of communities in matters of service delivery, indicates that space ought to be created for a dialogue on understanding state-society relations, cultural factors and market dynamics in specific local government contexts. The difference between eThekwini and Matjhabeng municipalities lies in historical and contemporary socio-economic circumstances and their impact on local governments’ ability to engage in participatory processes that facilitate smooth service delivery. The comparison shows that where there is capacity to build and nurture shared vision between a range of role players – as was the case with eThekwini Municipality, it is possible for participatory planning to yield positive social welfare results. The Matjhabeng municipality on the other hand was unable to do this owing to a range of resource constraints and institutional challenges.

**Izimbizo**

While the IDP is a process through which communities have input into the planning process and matters relating to their municipalities, an *imbizo (izimbizo for plural)* is a forum for enhancing dialogue between communities and leaders from various levels of government. An *Imbizo* refers to a gathering convened by a traditional leader. Culturally, it is normally convened when there is an issue to be debated or when a traditional leader wants to discuss a pressing issue with his subjects, or to address problems in the community (Nethsitomboni, 2007). Traditional leaders use *izimbizo* gatherings to listen to suggestions from their subjects and possibly to respond during such discussions. The benefits of an *imbizo* are two pronged: First, community members are given a chance to participate in the decision-making process
and, secondly, the leader is given advice on how to relate to his subjects. In this way, strong elements of culture surface through a firm sense of belonging to a community to enable the resolution of community challenges. Drawing on this cultural heritage, the South African government launched the *imbizo* programme in 2001 to effect participatory democracy so that communities can exercise their right to be heard and assist in the national effort to build a better life for all (http://www.info.gov.za/issues/imbizo/index.html)

Discussions at an *imbizo* typically highlight problems that need attention, blockages in policy formulation and policy areas that may require reviewing. Furthermore, the *imbizo* gives leaders an opportunity to get in touch with people at a grassroots level, to get a feel of their circumstances, frustrations and ideals. Mbogi (2004) believes that an *Imbizo* is a holistic African developmental approach that is rooted in cultural traditions, values and belief system. At the state – society interface, an *imbizo* is an important means through which service delivery and general development in marginalised areas might be improved.

During the *imbizo* focus weeks, the deputy president, cabinet ministers, premiers, provincial minister, mayors and local government officials hold interactive meetings in selected communities. Discussions usually span a couple of days and are not only in-depth but also highly interactive. They are usually centred on pivotal themes relating to service delivery and general community development. Between 2001 and 2004, there were two *imbizo* focus weeks, held annually in various provinces. They tackled a range of themes, including children’s rights, economic development, community participation and general service delivery matters.

Presidential *izimbizo* are held when the president, or officials from the president’s office, participates in meetings through extended visits to the provinces and municipalities. Community members get an opportunity to engage with the presidency in the presence of provincial and local government delegates. In this way, people are able to hold the three
spheres of South Africa’s government accountable and, in the process, influence governance and service delivery. In 2006 alone, there were at least eight presidential izimbizo held in mainly rural municipalities across the country (GCIS, 2008).

Literature on the impact of izimbizo is scant. Buccas et al. (2007) noted that while izimbizo attract large numbers of the community, they do not necessarily translate into meaningful participation. They note that good organisation and a strong political will is required to change an imbizo from a social event into a participatory one. This criticism is not without substance, since an imbizo is usually accompanied by widespread media coverage, copious publicity material in the form of posters and leaflets, as well as promotional T-shirts and caps (Government Communication and Information System, 2004). In this way, an imbizo could be construed as a social event rather than a political forum for policy consultation.

There have been several positive outcomes of izimbizo, not least the realisation on the part of local leaders that there is concern and support from higher spheres of government. A notable outcome was the Community Development Workers Programme (see XXX & Author, 2009). A series of izimbizo revealed that it was often difficult for people to contact their local government offices, mainly because of poor access resulting from illiteracy, age, infirmity or prohibitive transport costs. On the basis of this lesson, the President of South Africa, in his State of the Nations address in 2003, announced the introduction into the public service of a new body of community development workers. Community development workers have since been trained and deployed in communities to ensure direct and continuous interaction and response to the needs of the community. Without doubt, the Community Development Workers Programme was faced with implementation challenges (Author, 2009; XXX & Author, 2009). However, the first community development workers’ conference held in June 2007 noted that since the start of the programme in 2003, over 3,000 community
development workers had been recruited and were active in some 2,000 wards – smaller municipal divisions – in South Africa’s nine provinces. Community development workers have been hailed as playing a pivotal role in service delivery to the poor (mainly rural) and those who are housebound due to age or infirmity or are isolated for whatever reason (HSRC, 2005). The Community Development Workers Programme, therefore, is just one example of how participation through *izimbizo* can be beneficial in identifying crucial factors and strategies in the provision and delivery of public goods and services at local government level.

While both the IDPs and *izimbizo* have proven to be useful spaces for public participation, the strength of the Izimbizo is that it enjoys high level political support as it is a programme driven by the Presidency. The weakness of the *izimbizo* however, is that it cannot, by its nature, cover a wide cross section of the country, nor is it a continuous process where issues raised can be monitored and reviewed in an iterative manner.

On the other hand, the strength of the IDP is that it can seek input from a wider cross section of people at a micro-community level. Further, not only is the IDP a legislated process, it is also an iterative one with ongoing evaluation and regular monitoring of progress by the community. To this effect therefore, the IDP is potentially an instrument of participatory governance and efficient administration both of which are critical factors in service delivery for social welfare.

**Nurturing public participation**

Provision of local public goods and services can be more effective when, through participation, users and other stakeholders are given a say in decision making. The role of communities in the delivery of public services was illustrated by Dia (1996) using case studies of farming in Burkina Faso; responses to the AIDS crisis in Uganda; health services in
Mali; and primary health care in the Gambia. Dia (1996) concluded that there was ample evidence to show that communities can play an effective role in delivering public services.

This discussion has shown that in South Africa there are participatory processes at work. It has also shown that constitutional, legal and policy frameworks have been put in place so as to forge invited spaces for ordinary people to take part in matters of public service delivery. The IDP process and the izimbizo traditional forums constitute such invited spaces and have the potential of enabling ordinary people to have input into the decision-making processes of their communities. Indeed this discussion has pointed out positive spin-offs of the two processes. The discussion has shown however, that these two modes of community engagement are not without challenges. Brynard (2007) believes that problems arise because bureaucratic government structures are not designed for citizen participation. Davids, Theron, and Maphunye (2005) pointed out the vagueness in policy and legislation with respect to the conditions for participation and ways to build local capacity. They further pointed out that there is little understanding of the rationale for, the theory of, and strategies for public participation in a development context.

Clearly, in South Africa as elsewhere, the challenges of meaningful community participation in the delivery of public services are rooted in the historical, socio-economic and political circumstances of the country as well as the structural constraints of increasingly privatised social services (Bentley, 2007; Stepney & Popple, 2008). One has to realise the enormity of the challenge to reorient the public after over 40 years of functioning within a top-down and rigid culture of non participation, to the opportunity to make decisions that will meaningfully affect their lives. Noting the benefits of citizen participation and the opportunities available through such processes as IDPs and izimbizo, it is important that communities, especially the poor and marginalised, be encouraged to take part in public service delivery discussions. The poor and marginalised, however, often lack the confidence,
eloquence and experience to participate in matters of local government. Local government officials will, therefore, have to educate and conscientise this group of citizens on the processes for and benefits of participation. Moreover, it is important that once such communities have participated, the outcome and experiences of their participation encourages their further involvement in matters of local government. People need visible evidence that their input is respected and that their involvement is worthwhile and beneficial.

Conclusion

This article examined the conflicts and tensions involved in sustainable public service delivery and the participatory mechanisms available for stakeholder and citizen involvement. It has highlighted the complexities involved in community participation, especially when it is primarily set in place to instil a culture of payment among service users. It has reviewed the policy and legislative framework of local government charged with rendering essential public services. Given the history of apartheid where a large majority of the population went without services and the promises of reconstruction and development post-apartheid that created the expectation that the government would provide them, it is easy to see how fees-for-services translates into broken promises for the poor. This makes the education of the public a matter of great importance for municipalities which are essentially business-like entities with private sector ideals. When participation is engaged for instrumental ends, like persuading people to pay for services, it is all too easy for the public to become disgruntled and disillusioned. The challenge for municipalities is to communicate with local communities and demonstrate the value of participation. Here community development workers have played a vital role as have IDP processes and izimbizo with patchy results. Nevertheless, despite the problems herein outlined, public services are reaching many more communities in South Africa. To make them
sustainable there needs to be greater integration with broader welfare and development processes aimed at helping communities become self-sustaining. Further, people need to realise that their point of view in decision-making processes will, in fact, yield beneficial results through visible accountability by the controllers of services. Where this is not the case, service rip offs by lax or errant public servants should be brought to book and face the full might of the law.

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