

Article

An empowered and robust civil society as an ideal strategic partner of a municipal manager in the promotion of community participation in local government

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Blade Nzimande¹, asserts that, the question of public participation is central in any democratic order, and it is something we dare not take for granted but must ensure that we constantly work on it all the time. To many, public participation is seen as a vehicle to promote and instill a culture of good governance at the local government level. Good governance is not exclusively the territory of the public sector or municipal manager's task. It relies proof-undly on an informed and involved citizenry. The civil society is an equal partner towards the endeavour to attain accountable and responsive governance at the local level.

Civil Society Organisations and participation

A key driving force of participation is an active civil society. The involvement of the civil society in the affairs of government is perceived as essential for democratic consolidation. Steven Friedman² reiterates that participation by civil society remains an important check on government, which helps ensure that it accounts to citizens (2004).

Post 1994 legislative frameworks provided a space for the proliferation of civil society organizations including CBO's and created a platform for public participation in local governance through legitimate bodies that exist in the communities such as political parties, cultural groups, civic forums, business, youth organization, women's

organizations, and NGOs. Section 152 of the Constitution states amongst other things that the function of local government is to encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in local government. Similarly, the Municipal Structures Act (No 117 of 1998) requires municipalities to engage in consultation with civil society in meeting needs of local communities. The White paper on Local Government stipulates that municipal councillors should promote the involvement of community groups in the design and delivery of municipal programmes (RSA 1998 sec B par1.33). These government policies were promulgated to recognize as bona-fide role players the broad range of civil society in assisting government in promoting public participation and championing the interests of the citizens. From 1994, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) played an important role in assisting government in raising awareness of the implications of the new dispensation, while the period from 2000 to date has seen CSOs not only assisting with service delivery, but also playing an increasingly vocal advocacy and monitoring role³.

The new government recognizes the impact that civil society can have on improving government performance. Civil society is assuming increasingly greater prominence as the role of the state is being redefined and public accountability becomes more important. Civil society can serve either as a partner in reform or in challenging the reform process, although it is difficult to play both roles well. The range of partnership roles includes information-sharing, consultation, participating in project implementation, and being involved in project appraisal. By challenging the existing roles and standards of governance, and by standing outside of the system and demanding greater

¹ Blade Nzimande is the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party. The quote has been taken from the key note address delivered at a conference on Public Participation at the International Convention Centre in Durban.

² Steven Friedman (2004) 'A voice for all: Democracy and Public Participation. Critical Dialogue, Public Participation Review

³ N. Bezuidenhout and B. Mautjane- Civil society Participation in Local Governance

accountability, civil society can also play a critical role in shaping the reforms being implemented.

How conducive is the current environment for civil society organizations to become strategic partners of a municipal manager?

The local political environment is however, not always conducive for CSOs to articulate their mandates. It is sometimes a hassle for CSOs to participate in local governance due to political nature of consultations. Participatory mechanisms at local level are normally structured along Ward lines and a few CSOs are ward or constituency-based, this invariably bars their participation. Similarly, most municipalities use Ward Committees as their IDP participatory structures, inevitable the role of CSOs is rendered insignificant. Some problems however, related to their own lack of capacity and inability to deliver on their mandate. Legitimacy is another controversial issue faced by CSOs. Some civil society organizations are deemed illegitimate because they are not democratically elected and eventually are accorded a mediocre status. Kambuya Kabemba asserts that 'in many instances civil society has been left out of major political and economic decisions on matters concerning the people'

How to foster a conducive atmosphere for public participation?

Public participation should be seen as an on going process rather than an event. It is a process that neither happens naturally nor over night, it requires strategic and pragmatic interventions and efforts. The factors as furnished below could help strengthen and facilitate public participation:

- Continuous consultation with the citizenry and involvement of CSOs. Consultation should be implemented in a step by step way where responsibilities of all participatory structures are clearly outlined. Citizen participation should not be reduced to participation only by elite. Organized civil society, in the form of predominantly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business, interest groups and ordinary citizens (especially the poor) are critical agents of the participatory process.
- Promotion of innovative ways of popular participation as opposed to the dominance of Ward Committees over the participatory space.
- Recognition of the contribution of different sectors and interest groups as opposed to the politicization of the participatory space
- Ensure improved information dissemination.
- Link Ward committees with community structures

- Capacity building of municipalities. It is important that municipalities are capacitated about the importance of participation
- Budget allocation for community consultation

The government needs to empower people so that they can feel confident and that they have the capacity to confront their problems and finds the way towards solutions (Kambuya Kabemba: 2004).

Challenges of public participation

For the efficacy of community consultation, participatory mechanisms should involve disadvantaged groups such as women, youth, the urban/rural poor, and the disabled in decision making processes. Such mechanisms should acknowledge that participation is not a once off process but rather an on going process that should engage multiplicity of stakeholders, including the poor in the preparation of the budget of local governments. The participatory process of decision making will not strengthen public-private partnerships but also translate into major beneficial consequences: efficiency, equity, good governance and sustainability in the planning and management of community affairs.

- The transformation of the local government system has taken place within a framework that endeavours to spearhead public participation as a cornerstone of local democracy and development. As a new phenomenon, public participation is still faced with numerous challenges. Participatory structures must be de-linked from party politics. The roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders involved in the quest for development and participation must be defined. There is a need:
 - For clear communication channels between municipalities and community based structures.
 - To transform the relationship of mistrust that currently exists between all participatory agents.
 - To facilitate a flow of information
 - Encourage municipality outreach programmes
 - For capacitation of municipalities and stakeholders working on issues of community consultation
 - To make IDP representatives forums proactive and accessible to people
 - To educate communities and address apathy
 - To build networks with stakeholders and practitioners

Civil society organizations need to equip themselves with tools in advocacy, lobbying, mobilization, and participation.

Municipal manager's paradigm shift

In order to forge strategic partnerships with robust civil

society, a paradigm shift from the side of the municipal manager's is critical important. Civil society organizations should not be perceived as agents of destabilisation but rather as equal partners in development. Civil society organizations are not resistant movements, but agents of active citizen participation. Managers should thus not be threatened by the active involvement of the civil society in the affairs of municipalities.

Participation in a democratic society came only when the citizens are afforded with opportunity to utilize their democratic rights to engage with government without fear or intimidation. Municipal authorities should recognized the importance of strengthening broad, transparent, and inclusive social dialogue with all concerned sectors of society, in order to promote and consolidate democracy, accelerate service delivery, and development and to build societies with inclusion and social justice. In this way, managers should committee to promote and encourage increased participation by citizens, communities, and civil society in the affairs of municipalities.

A municipal manager should encourage the active participation of civil society in the development of public policy for the generation of employment and the fight against poverty, crime and the like. Indeed, the Municipal Systems Act envisages a municipal manager who ensures that the administration is open to, and facilitates the input of local communities and residents in municipal affairs. The Act further states that the municipal manager must ensure that the municipal administration is responsive to the needs of the local community to participate in the affairs of the municipality⁴. It is critical for managers therefore to disseminate and make information available to the civil society. If information is withheld the future of the strategic partnership between the manager and the civil society is bleak. After all, information is power and the lack of it may restrain the alliance from flourishing to its full potential.

Municipalities should commit to institutionalize meetings with representatives of civil society including the academic and private sectors. This is to suggest that municipalities ought to recognize the powerful role civil society has in the consolidation of democracy, and recognized that its participation in government programs is one of the most important tools for success of governments' development policies. Public participation in decision-making and policy development processes is a key to ensuring equitable, sustainable development. Including public concerns in policies and programs ensures that they are all-inclusive and meet the needs of everyone in society.

⁴*Jaap de Visser* 'Walking The Tightrope: Roles and responsibilities of the municipal manager' Local Government Project Community Law Centre, UWC