
Citizenship, Community Participation and Social Change: The Case of Area Coordinating Teams in Cape Town, South Africa

John J. Williams

1 Community participation and social change

Social change does not roll in under the wheels of inevitability. On the contrary, we have to organise for it, mobilise for it, struggle for it and indeed, plan for it. This is especially so in a country such as South Africa, where centuries of colonial-cum-apartheid thought and practices have led planning bureaucracies to create and perpetuate socio-economic patterns of uneven development and neglect. Amidst the geographies of largely “white” affluence, fear and collective “othering”, those others, i.e. predominantly “black”, unemployed, homeless, destitute, angry and alienated, are increasingly demanding their basic rights, rights that are enshrined in the post-apartheid Constitution (RSA 1995). One of the many structures that have been created in order to make available constitutionally guaranteed opportunities for participation in governance has been Areas Coordinating Teams (ACTs), established in the late 1990s as a vehicle through which government agencies could engage local communities in development planning. The ACTs were established in order to encourage consensus among politicians, bureaucrats and communities with regard to specific planning issues such as housing, health care and overall infrastructure at grassroots level.

This article addresses the question of whether the ACTs, as spaces for participation in development planning available to the local communities of Cape Town, do indeed contribute towards grassroots-oriented, bottom-up programmes in post-apartheid

South Africa. It draws on two complementary studies. The first consists of informal interviews with councillors and officials. In these interviews, the politicians and the bureaucrats expressed their views and understanding of ACTs. The second study was based on a structured questionnaire directed at community-based organisations (CBOs) attending the ACTs initiated/coordinated meetings. My focus here is on the relationships between the official, “invited” spaces of the ACTs and other spaces within the community and on the relationships that officials and elected representatives have with these spaces, in order to assess their potential for democratising the development planning process.

2 ACTs in context

Local government in South Africa had until the early 1990s, no constitutional safeguard, as it was perceived as a structural extension of the State and a function of provincial government. South African history reflects very little opportunity for community participation; the fact that most of the population had no political rights until 1994 demonstrates the total absence of participation in any broader sense. Instead, the method of government was highly centralised, deeply authoritarian and secretive, which ensured that fundamental public services were not accessible to black people (SALGA 2001; Williams 2000). With the demise of the apartheid regime, various policy frameworks were developed by the ANC-led government to foster community participation at the local level. For example, the Municipal Structures Act, Ch. 4, states: ‘The

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participation of citizens in the structures will ... revolutionize the way that local governance happens at the metropolitan level. Individual municipalities will be empowered to decide what is best for their situation with the guidance of national legislation that permits a variety of forms of local participation' (RSA 1998). Local Government Councils in South Africa consist of two kinds of elected councillors, those elected directly as representatives of a given community and those nominated by a particular party based on the proportion of votes the party receives in local elections and represent the manifesto, principles and programmes of their party.

Constitutional requirements of transparent, accountable, democratic practices in all areas of governance and the right of communities to participate in defining and prioritising the form, content and dimensions of Integrated Development Planning (IDP) at local level, provide a context against which new practices of participation and citizenship come to be framed. Elements identified for community participation in IDP include: the development of local level partnerships and spaces for citizen involvement, alongside a range of innovative mechanisms such as open days, photo exhibitions, surveys and comment/suggestion boxes, toll-free telephone lines and one-stop-shops to register complaints. This core group of activities is seen as amenable to being implemented corporately as a comprehensive package for community participation, or separately in response to the needs of the community.

As part of this new vision for citizen participation, and in response to pressures from the community for a place in which to meet with officials to resolve local problems, Area Coordinating Teams (ACTs) were created in 1999 in six areas of the Cape Town Municipality. ACTs comprise three sets of actors. Firstly, officials from respective service branches operating in specific areas such as local line managers in housing, cleansing, roads, sewerage, health, libraries, sport and recreation, parks and bathing and so forth, and the City's Development Facilitation Unit, whose role includes arranging meetings, recording minutes, monitoring and facilitating the procedures at meetings. The second set of actors consists of proportionate numbers of local councillors (with party political affiliations) and ward councillors (irrespective of party affiliation). As political leaders, they are supposed to function as a communication channel between the Council and the local community, to listen and participate

in community proposals, complaints and plans, and hold the local line managers accountable for service delivery and planning. The third segment of the ACTs is constituted by all community organisations based or working in a particular area. Their roles include the channelling of community complaints to local officials as well as reporting back to their organisations on issues and information from a particular ACT. They are also supposed to monitor progress with regard to local projects and hold officials and councillors accountable for what they do or fail to do in a specific community.

In theory, the roles of the bureaucrats, elected representatives and community organisations would seem to be quite straightforward. In practice, though, there appear to be various tensions, conflicts and contradictions with regard to interpreting and understanding their respective roles at grassroots level. Historically, for example, bureaucrats and elected officials were not legally required to consult with communities with regard to service delivery such as housing and health care. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the Constitution (sub-section 152) requires that local authorities consult communities prior to any decisions being taken that might affect them. For residual apartheid functionaries in the post-1994 local authorities the very idea of having to consult with ordinary people at grassroots level is commonly regarded as 'simply a waste of time'. Here, the perennial question seems to be: after all, what do ordinary people know about such things as "planning", "governance" and "management"? The mindset of such functionaries, not attuned to the democratic ethos of the new order, serves to undermine mechanisms such as ACTs that are meant to deepen inclusionary democratic practices at grassroots level. The ensuing sections highlight the structural tensions that exist within the ACTs, focusing in particular on the roles and relationships of officials and representatives.

3 ACTs and community-based organisations (CBOs)

Surveying six CBOs in Cape Town and 27 individual members of such organisations, the research sought to assess the extent of influence and accountability to their broader constituency of these organisations and the success of the ACTs in satisfying their service needs, in order to find out more about the relationship the City of Cape Town (CCT) has with specific communities.

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The ability to mobilise a specific community in the interests of fundamental social change presupposes the existence of an organisation that is informed by reliable information from the state apparatus, such as local planning bureaucracies (cf. Williams 1989). Hence a specific organisation's presence at information-sharing sessions conducted by such planning bureaucracies is crucial to assess both the reliability and usefulness of such information to a specific local community. It is therefore quite interesting to note that approximately 96 per cent of the organisations surveyed attended ACT meetings. Of those individuals who attended ACT meetings, 55.6 per cent attended the meetings on behalf of more than one organisation. Over 88 per cent of the respondents claimed to be members of a residentially based organisation. Of these organisations, 74 per cent of the respondents claimed that they were associated with other local organisations with similar interests. These residentially based organisations limit their services to the neighbourhoods they live in. All respondents indicated that they only function within the area of the city in which they reside. Additionally, 77 per cent of the respondents stated that they represent CBOs, 18.5 per cent claimed that they represent non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with 3.7 per cent stating that they did not represent either a CBO or an NGO. What is striking about these CBOs is the plurality of relationships with other community organisations. This multi-relationship profile is perhaps a residual feature of the anti-apartheid organisations when such organic networking was considered a necessary condition for survival (cf. Williams 1989).

The effectiveness of community participation in development programmes of a specific local authority derives in part from the collective skills of the leadership of a particular grassroots organisation (Callaghan 1997). In this regard, it has been disclosed by the respondents that almost one third, 29.6 per cent, of them claimed to be the secretary of their organisation, 14.9 per cent claimed to be the chairperson of the organisation and 11.1 per cent claimed to be an executive member of their organisation. Of the organisations involved in ACTs, 85.2 per cent of the respondents claimed that their organisation was properly constituted. The nature of the demographic profile of a particular organisation has a profound bearing on the quality of mobilisation that occurs within and on behalf of

a particular community *vis-à-vis* development programmes at grassroots level (cf. Castells 1997). Survey results indicate that over 66 per cent of the respondents claimed that they have a signed up membership. Over 48 per cent of the organisations claimed to have a membership of over 100 people. The age distribution within the organisations participating in ACTs demonstrated relatively high levels of involvement amongst younger people and low levels amongst those over 55. It is interesting to note that younger people are more active in ACTs. Their participation seems to be closely related to their role in the struggle against the Apartheid Regime and their expectations about a better life in the democratic order. The challenge for the ACTs would be to sustain their role in the quest for inclusionary citizenship at grassroots level.

How long an organisation is in existence says a lot about how it is able to affect change in a particular community. Familiarity with community issues, establishing personal and organisational relationships, gaining the confidence of community members and building overall trust in specific community programmes and leadership are all time-consuming exercises (Williams 1989). Just under one-fifth of the organisations surveyed were more than 11 years old (17 per cent), just over one-fifth (22 per cent) were between six and ten years old and almost two-thirds (61 per cent) were less than five years old. What is significant about these figures is that more than 80 per cent of community organisations came into being after the birth of the post-apartheid South Africa. For this, there could perhaps be two reasons: First, the new democratic order allows for the existence of such grassroots organisations; second, ordinary people may indeed have a greater sense of confidence in their ability to influence, positively, the affairs of local government than under the old regime. Even so, what these figures surely show is that communities are prepared to organise themselves and participate in issues that affect them directly.

Not only is the existence of an organisation as a community forum important for citizen-driven planning. The rate of interaction between a particular community and its local representatives in local government also provides a fair indication of the extent to which there is an opportunity for CBOs to influence the form, content and overall dimensions of development planning programmes at grassroots level (Chipkin 1996). The survey

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revealed that over 66 per cent of the respondents stated that they had contact with local officials in the Council administration before the creation of ACTs. Survey findings revealed that people were much more likely to have had contact with their ward councillors (70 per cent) than their proportional councillors (18 per cent), prior to the creation of ACTs. Public events, such as community meetings, served as the primary sites for contact, with a substantially higher number of respondents citing meeting ward councillors (over 51 per cent) than proportional councillors (18 per cent); of which a further 22.2 per cent met their ward councillor at a one-to-one meeting. Relatively few people reported having phone conversations with either type of councillor, at 7.4 per cent for ward councillors and 3.7 per cent for proportional councillors. According to the survey results, since the creation of ACTs, interaction between the Council and community organisations has intensified, with over 56 per cent of respondents reporting a more favourable relationship with ward councillors, although there was greater ambivalence when it came to the proportional councillors, of whom only just over 25 per cent of respondents felt their relationship had changed for the better.

The perceived level of community awareness of fora to promote grassroots-driven development programmes provides a useful indication of their degree of identification with particular public policies (Harvey 1996). Over 74 per cent of the respondents felt that since the establishment of ACTs, they have become more aware of the role of the Council and over 66 per cent felt that they have become more aware of the responsibility of the Council. Some 41 per cent of the respondents believe that residents are generally aware of ACTs. Just over half (51 per cent) of those surveyed felt that communication from the Council to the community had improved and just under half (48 per cent) felt that communication from the community to the Council had improved as a result of the ACTs. Most importantly, perhaps, 55.5 per cent of the respondents felt that the Council was held accountable through ACTs.

4 The role of councillors and officials *vis-à-vis* ACTs

The study of the relationship of councillors and officials with regard to ACTs was conducted through informal interviews, comprising open-ended

questions about their views on and understanding of ACTs. Interviewees were drawn from those who already attend the ACTs meetings, which means that they support them and which accounts for the overwhelming positive response to the need for ACTs as an ideal model/mechanism to foster cooperation between the CCT and communities. In the absence of an appropriate forum to allow for regular contact between CCT and the community at large, the creation of ACTs filled a nagging void in the policy infrastructure of Cape Town local government. ACTs were thus a response to the constitutional requirement of community participation in determining the form, content and overall dimensions of integrated development programmes at grassroots level. In this regard, the Development Facilitation Unit of CCT claims that ACTs took a clear cue from the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) principles of accountability, transparency and public participation, democratic principles of governance enshrined in the post-apartheid Constitution.

Indeed, the overall understanding of ACTs among the officials and councillors that chose to attend the meetings is that they are an ideal place for interaction and synergy for several reasons: first, ACTs are a place for constructive dialogue and conscientisation, as information is given to all members of the community about issues that affect their lives. Second, if the relevant information is given to all stakeholders at an early stage, it can easily be turned into valuable knowledge and prevent costly mistakes in relation to specific development issues and planning projects. Third, regular contact between CCT and its constituent communities makes it possible for problems to be resolved before they assume crisis proportions, as local communities are important sites of specific knowledge formations, providing important insights to the local government *vis-à-vis* the context integrated development programmes at grassroots level. In this regard, for example, the environment health officer, MyaMya, claims that many problems could have been resolved if the communities were consulted. He cites the case of providing appropriate sanitation facilities:

There has always been a water shortage in the informal settlement of Joe Slovo, in Langa. When the municipality decided to build latrines in order to prevent a future health risk, they

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introduced chemical toilets, which would be emptied once a week. This would be the best economical option. But what they were not prepared for was that the people of Langa would use them also as refuse, which would fill the latrines up on a daily basis. The project failed and ended up to be more expensive than all the other options.

Yet whilst, in theory, ACTs are an ideal encapsulation of the varied social relations of power undergirding the IDP, discussions about the engagement of officials within them revealed some of the reasons why in reality they fall far short of their true potential. The main problem appears to be related to the fact that in the corridors of power in the Council, they are not being taken seriously. There appears to be very little – if any – political commitment to their continued existence as part of the infrastructure of governance at local level. This lack of political support has substantially emasculated ACTs as many councillors and officials do not turn up for scheduled meetings. In fact, attendance remains optional in the absence of a Code of Conduct compelling them to be present. Some councillors feel no ownership of the process. Others clearly do not want to consult “difficult” groups, certainly in areas where there are community power struggles, imperious traditional leaders and rival gangs. Explains Councillor Isao in this regard:

The councillors that do not show up at the meeting are often afraid of confronting the people, or that they will interfere in their affairs, instead of using ACTs as a constructive place for discussion.

Just as there are problems in the political and bureaucratic sphere, there are problems within community groups. ACTs lack an institutional framework setting out criteria of what constitutes a community organisation, and no regulations are in place to ensure that members report back on a regular basis. Concerns about the organic link between community representatives and their respective membership arise from the claim by several councillors and officials that in many cases there are only a few active people in a community, who are connected to most organisations within the area. This results in a form of elitism, which, in

turn, has a negative impact on local area development projects. Also, many attendees present themselves as, ‘we the people of this community’. This raises the question: ‘who are “we”?’ Many of the organisations do not have membership lists, constitution or annual meetings, compounding the question of the legitimacy of their authentic role as “community representatives”. Vusi Magagula, a Senior Development Official, claimed that many of the organisations only attend when there are issues that concern them, which reflects poorly on the seriousness with which some organisations approach ACTs. Furthermore, many community organisations are not equipped to handle information, while others are still not even aware of the existence of ACTs. The lack of coordination of issues sometimes also gets out of hand, often resulting in pointless discussions. In this regard, Brian Cook, line manager for Parks and Bathing, of CCT, commented:

The meetings sometimes become a political battlefield which is totally against the idea of ACTs, which is to deal with the rendering of municipal services. Other times irrelevant issues like one crack on somebody’s wall, or the theft of light bulbs, etc. Fortunately many relevant, collective problems are also raised like cockroach invasions, illegal shebeens, taxis and gangsterism, etc.

In some instances, ACTs have become solely meetings for complaints, preventing other, equally and perhaps more relevant issues to be dealt with. It would appear that some have even chosen to use ACT meetings to slander officials that apparently do not do their job. This has led to unfortunate complications and attacks on the officials after the meetings. A common impression is also that the meetings tend to be disorderly and chaotic, and are rushed due to the lack of time, as they are usually held in the evenings.

5 Conclusions: a brief assessment of ACTs

In principle, ACTs should be an ideal meeting place to discuss development plans prior to their implementation. By bringing together many different departments in one place, they offer officials a chance to interact with each other as well as giving members of the community and themselves a larger perspective on development planning issues facing

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the city at large. Furthermore, ACTs are a forum for civic education as both councillors and officials will be informing the communities about their procedures, obligations and the structures within which they work. For communities, ACTs serve quite a different function: they provide a familiar place where all demands, issues and complaints can be raised. ACTs are thus used by communities as backup if problems are not resolved, for example in relation to a municipal service where/when complaints are not attended to by the planning bureaucracy. ACTs are also a place where community organisations search for volunteers or new members and where groups mobilise to address prevailing problems such as crime and gangsterism. ACTs also serve to highlight those resources that do not exist within a specific community and identify how such resource constraints/shortcomings could be addressed. In short, therefore, the ACTs do narrow the chasm between a particular community and the Council, especially at the local level.

ACTs could be the vehicle for the effective implementation of community-driven projects, becoming the centripetal force of grassroots-oriented development planning. The fact that other areas have requested to implement ACTs shows that communities are becoming aware of their existence and their potential as catalysts for development planning at the grassroots. But although the image of ACTs is an ideal embodiment of the concepts of community participation and accountability, there remain several significant shortcomings. A number of these shortcomings derive from inadequate conceptualisation as regards institutional design. There are no minimum criteria for the community organisations to be able to participate in ACT meetings, nor are there clear rules on matters such as the number of members, the constitution, the time span between Annual General Meetings (AGMs), bank accounts and so forth. Equally, there is a lack of clear procedures on questions such as whether or not individuals should be encouraged to attend and participate, or attend, but not vote. These general procedural weaknesses undermine the effective functioning as well as the legitimacy of the ACTs.

There are also larger procedural issues at stake. The power of the community to influence the Council is inherently limited by the fact that the ACT process is purely consultative in nature. This is reflected in the documents that established ACTs

as a participatory structure. In a CCT *Development Facilitation Unit Status Report on Area Coordinating Team*, under a section titled 'Authority and Accountability' it is mentioned that 'ACTs is solely a coordinating body and has no decision-making powers' (CCT 2000a: 3). Again, later under the section titled 'Parameters of ACTs' it is reiterated that 'the ACTs are not a decision-making forum. It needs to coordinate services and provide information to the communities' (CCT 2000a: 3). In another CCT report by the IDP Team it is mentioned that 'ACTs merely act as a conduit for flow of information' (CCT 2000b: 4). In the sense that 'ACTs will also be a mechanism for ... the alignment of community expectations to the City's capacity to deliver' (CCT 2000b: 3). This official hesitancy by the CCT to embrace ACTs derives perhaps in part from the stipulation in chapter four in the Municipal Systems Act, which states that participatory governance is not to be interpreted as permitting interference with a municipal council's right to govern and to exercise the executive and legislative authority of the municipality. In other words, ACTs can neither interfere in the affairs of the Council nor force it to carry out its decisions. Interpreted in its narrowest possible form, community participation then only occurs for its symbolic value of inclusivity and legitimacy and even for the purposes of attracting funds and/or securing institutional survival (Bekker 1996).

The consequences of this for the status of deliberations at the ACTs are significant. Issues raised at the ACTs are completely non-binding, as the Council is not obliged to follow through on them. Individual officials and Councillors who are supposed to be participating in ACTs are not obliged to attend the scheduled meetings. There are no mechanisms to hold the Council accountable to decisions achieved at the ACT meetings and implement community-driven policy change. This means that even though all parts are to coordinate and influence decisions together in order to create true ownership of the process, ultimately true power to implement decisions and make policy often resides with one party only. This bureaucratic model does not really comply with the "Batho Pele" principle, 'putting the people first', which is at the heart of the whole post-apartheid South African discourse on community participation and which presupposes a new relationship between the state and civil society, in horizontal rather than vertical

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partnership. Since the ACTs lack such a strong and clear grassroots-driven planning principle it is almost impossible to build an egalitarian platform for community participation in Cape Town. A more fundamental problem resides in the lack of political support for the ACTs and a clear foundation, which leads to non-assurance about the continuance, performance and the long-term vision of the ACTs. Indeed, ACTs have largely remained a political idea and, structurally have not yet become part of the City's mode of management. Indeed, the then senior manager for the Department of Health, Dr Ivan Toms observed, 'it is astonishing that the ACTs have survived until now, [they survived despite the] lack of political support, gang fighting and tornadoes'.

Theoretically, any public policy which encourages transparency, constructively engages and involves citizens in the functions of a local government and which seeks to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives is good public policy. In this regard, ACTs constitute good

public policy – on paper. By creating institutional space and opportunities, where individuals, community organisations, the Council administration and elected representatives can sit and discuss issues affecting their lives, whether it be improvement of infrastructure, housing, health, or any other service which is provided by local government, should be encouraged and sustained. In practice, though, ACTs are a structural failure. For ACTs to become effective instruments of fundamental social change, the Council must support ACTs, both by passing appropriate by-laws to institutionalise them officially and by drawing up a code of conduct that compels officials and councillors to attend and take seriously scheduled meetings and related development planning initiatives. In their present format, it can be concluded that ACTs have been implemented mostly for their symbolic value rather than to empower communities and to transform unequal relations of socio-economic power in the City of Cape Town.

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