

**‘Bringing government to the people’: Women, local governance and community participation in South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers the ongoing political transformations in South Africa in the context of debates about good governance and participatory democracy. It first appraises the current transformations of local government in South Africa, focusing specifically on relationships between gender equality and citizenship on the one hand, and local government policy, legislation, and community participation on the other, and then explores meanings of participation and how they inform approaches towards local socio-economic development. The findings of primary research conducted with civil society organisations and black women in communities in the Cape Town metropolitan area are explored through three interrelated themes. First, the model of structured participation that is central to South Africa's democratic transformation is assessed from the perspective of black women. Second, cultures of alienation, both within local governance structures and amongst black women and the extent to which recent restructuring is combating or contributing to these are explored. Third, how participation policies are dealing with conflict within and between target groups are analysed, whether stake-holder group politics obliterate important differences in interests and whether alternative structures might be more effective in terms of women's participation and empowerment. Finally, the findings are interpreted in relation to theoretical concepts of good governance and participatory democracy, and the potential and problems of realising South Africa's transformation process toward developmental local government are assessed.

**Key words:** South Africa, local government, black women, community participation, development, integrated planning, Cape Town

## **Introduction**

The decentralisation of governance is happening in large parts of the world in response to the privatisation of public services, erosion of economic bases, and cuts in social spending. Consequently, the responsibility of promoting local socio-economic development and facilitating community<sup>1</sup> participation tends to fall on lower levels or spheres of government. This trend can be interpreted in two ways: negatively as a withdrawal of the state, or as a potentially radical model of good governance, signalling a shift from local government (the power to govern) to local governance (the act of governing). The shift is dependent upon the mobilisation and empowerment of civil society and a citizen-oriented management approach in government institutions. It places emphasis on the importance of community participation, including those often marginalised by poverty and gender, the need for partnerships between communities and government structures and on accountability. Theoretically, therefore, decentralisation of governance has the potential to enhance participatory democracy.

In practice, the interpretation of ‘good governance’ determines whether the model is a radical means of deepening democracy, or a means of disempowering local communities. Increasingly, public-private partnerships are considered the most effective way to deliver services to communities and in many instances local government is increasingly recognised as lacking in the requisite capacity to deliver those services. Interpretations of good governance (favoured by institutions such as the World Bank) that emphasise the participation of all interested actors, and the role of the private sector in service delivery, can disempower rather than empower local communities since the private sector is far less accountable than local government to the communities with

which it is meant to be in partnership (Ismail, 1998, 3). However, should good governance be interpreted as requiring local government to liaise with communities before making decisions, and promote the rights and duties of communities to govern, then a more radical version of governance would result. Central to this is the promotion of local socio-economic development, the empowerment of communities, improved living conditions, greater access to resources and opportunities, poverty alleviation and equality. Such models target the poor, historically disadvantaged and women in particular in order to benefit the entire community.

Debates about 'good governance' and participatory democracy are particularly pertinent to recent and ongoing political transformations in South Africa. This paper focuses on how these transformations are both informed by and might inform understandings of good governance, specifically at the local level. The new democratic order, as defined in the 1996 South African Constitution, requires that local government undergo a process of transformation. This is informed by a vision of democratic, accountable, effective, participative and developmental local governance (Hilliard and Kemp, 1999). Women's equality is recognised as important in realising this vision because unless the transformation process consciously aims to rectify the social, economic and political marginalisation of women, local government will not become democratic, accountable, effective, participative or developmental (GAP/FCR, 1998, 3; Kehler, 2000, 7). Rather, concepts like developmental local government and 'good governance' will remain abstract theoretical concepts.

Eight years of democracy perhaps constitutes too short a period for assessment of radical social changes in South Africa. However, the re-election of an ANC government

in 1999 and the ongoing political transformation at the level of local governance invite reflection upon the potential impacts of democratic transformation on the lives of the most marginalised peoples, the majority of whom are women. Foregrounding the interests and experiences of the most marginalised and historically disadvantaged women in South Africa (those who are poor, black<sup>2</sup> and often living in peri-urban and rural areas) is a valuable gauge of progress of the efforts to construct participatory democracy. In addition, a focus on black women's needs is in reality a focus on communal needs, since the responsibility for meeting these is often placed on women (van Donk, 2000). This paper approaches some of these issues by focusing on local government transformations and their likely impact on community and, specifically, black women's participation. The first section provides an introduction to and appraisal of the broader context of local government transformations in South Africa, focusing on relationships between gender equality and citizenship on the one hand, and local government policy, legislation, and community participation on the other. It also outlines concepts and meanings of participation and how they inform approaches towards local socio-economic development in the South African context.

The findings of primary research conducted with civil society organisations and Xhosa women in communities in the Cape Town metropolitan area (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup> are explored through three interrelated themes. First, the model of structured participation that is central to South Africa's democratic transformation is assessed from the perspective of black women. Second, cultures of alienation amongst black women, disillusionment within local governance structures, and the extent to which recent restructuring is combating or contributing to these are explored. Third, the paper reflects

on how participation policies are dealing with conflict within and between target groups, whether stake-holder group politics obliterate important differences in interests and whether alternative structures might be more effective in terms of women's participation and empowerment. Finally, the findings are interpreted in relation to theoretical concepts of good governance and participatory democracy, and the potential and problems of realising South Africa's transformation toward developmental local government are assessed.

### **Local government transformation: the policy environment**

#### *The significance of gender*

The transition from apartheid to post-apartheid witnessed a remarkable shift in gender politics in South Africa, related to the concepts of civil society and citizenship, universality and equality, and the pluralisation of politics at all levels. Gender issues have been pivotal to state restructuring, including increased formal political participation of women (Ballington, 1999a; 1999b), the establishment of the Commission on Gender Equality, and other 'national machinery' (Albertyn, 1995; McEwan, 2000) to promote and maintain gender equality. The gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality, between aspirations and reality, is still enormous, but the explicit constitutional recognition of women's claims to equal citizenship is of considerable significance (du Plessis and Gouws, 1996). An explicitly gendered democratisation process has had significant influences on the nature of democracy and citizenship being constructed in South Africa, and is likely to continue to do so.

Despite the primacy given to gender in debates about the structures and processes

of democracy, there has been very little analysis of gender and local government (Cole and Parnell, 2000; Robinson, 1995). The ways in which women can access power and resources at the local level and their lived experiences of citizenship are still poorly understood, especially with regard to the majority of women still marginalised by the legacies of apartheid. Since the local government elections of 1995, what analysis there has been has focused on influencing local government policy and budgeting (Budlender, 1999; Skinner, 1999; Van Donk, 1998a; 1998b; 1999). There is clearly a need, therefore, for a sustained and critical analysis of the relationship between local governance and the constitutional guarantees to gender equality. This is given greater expediency by the fact that the transitional period of local government ended with the elections in 2000 and the constitutional, legal and policy mechanisms (discussed subsequently) are now mostly in place. The transformation process in South Africa presents an excellent opportunity to turn local government into a gender sensitive sphere of government. The focus of this paper is on external transformation: how local government delivers services and how it relates to communities, if the needs and interests of women are incorporated into local government agendas and if previously disadvantaged women are able to participate fully in community development.

### *Transforming local government*

Chapter 7 of the South African Constitution sets out the policy directive with regard to local government, clearly assigns it a development role and emphasises the participation of communities and community organisations (152(1)). These principles are also central to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), conceived to meet the socio-economic needs of previously disadvantaged communities. Most of the ambitions of RDP

have not been met (and arguably have been superseded by the neo-liberal macro-economic Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) framework). Access to and control over resources is still based on 'race', gender and class. Consequently, South Africa remains characterised by extreme poverty and social disintegration, mass unemployment and the exclusion of the majority of people from socio-economic development and growth (Kehler, 2000). However, many communities remain "replete with RDP and other forums and the language of local participatory processes remain that of the RDP" (Morojele, 2000, 26).

The White Paper on Local Government (1998) seeks to facilitate the process of local government transformation and its role in rectifying social and economic imbalances. Section B of the White Paper provides that co-ordination and integration are required for development planning, there is a need for community participation in local government matters, and it is the responsibility of local government to provide sustainable service delivery at an affordable level. Recent legislation concerning local governance aims to create a context in which persistent inequalities can be addressed,<sup>4</sup> bringing about radical change as municipalities become more accountable to the electorate and as communities, at least theoretically, become more involved in local governance. The new dispensation requires creativity and participation from all levels of society for its success.

#### *Integrated Development Planning*

Integrated Development Planning (IDP) is seen as the means to achieve developmental and participative local government, requiring that different departments link their plans, objectives, budgets, resource auditing, performance monitoring and community



consultation in a process of co-operative governance (Department of Constitutional Development, 1998, 10). IDPs should align all available resources towards development goals, integrate local activities, prioritise objectives, and be ‘participative’ in nature, environmentally sustainable and aimed at poverty alleviation. Emphasis is on effective and affordable service delivery, local development and community participation:

IDP is a process by which the planning efforts of not only various spheres and sectors of government and other institutions, but, also, of the various economic, social, environmental, legal, infrastructural and spatial aspects of a problem or plan are integrated – brought together – in a way that enhances development and provides for sustainable empowerment, growth and equity for the short, medium and long term. (IDASA, 1998, 6)

The importance assigned to community participation in all spheres of the IDP process reflects the concepts of ‘bringing government to the people’ and active public participation in socio-economic development. Thus, IDP is potentially one of the most important tools in the transformation of local government, conceived as the main instrument for ensuring that local government can fulfil its new developmental role in overcoming the socio-economic, institutional and spatial fragmentation of the past (Otzen *et al.*, 1999, 7).

Principles of public participation have “*to be institutionalised* in order to ensure that all residents of the country have an *equal* right to participate” (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2001, 9, original emphasis). The impossibility of direct participation of the majority of residents in planning processes is recognised; IDP legislation demands that clear rules and procedures are established specifying who is to

participate, on behalf of whom, on which issue, through which organisational mechanism and to what effect (“structured participation”). Emphasis is on accommodating diversity, in terms of participation styles and cultures, creating conditions for participation, encouraging the participation of “disadvantaged or marginalised groups” and “gender equity” (*ibid.*, 10).

### *Defining participation*

How participation is defined in the new legislation is clearly of significance. According to the World Bank, “participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them” (in Otzen, 1999, 6). Similarly, “Community/public/citizen participation is the act of allowing individual citizens within a community to take part in the formulation of policies and proposals on issues that affect the whole community” (Onibokun and Faniran, 1995, 9). More radical definitions of participation, however, not only emphasise community involvement in the processes of local development, but also demand that social development lead to the *empowerment* of community members. This involves social change to bring about improved living standards within the community and is especially significant to women. South Africa is characterised by a lack of strong civil society structures that can represent the interests of the majority of community members as well as an apparent lack of capacity amongst citizens to respond meaningfully to the complex matters of governance (Liebenberg, 1999, 6). Therefore, emphasis on participation is crucial, and the formerly disadvantaged must be central targets for participation as key to social development. As Kehler (2000, 5) argues, in this context, participation is defined as:

The organised efforts to increase the control over and access to resources and regulative institutions in society, on the part of individual citizens, groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control aimed at the socio-economic development of the whole community.

Participation is an end in itself. It is imperative, therefore, to explore the relative successes and failures of translating policy into meaningful and effective participation at the local level, and whether the structured participation outlined in IDP legislation will enable radical participation for all groups.

### **Women's Experiences of Structured Participation in Cape Town**

Since the creation of the Cape Town Unicity municipality in 2000, a number of community forums, known as ACTs (Area Co-ordinating Teams), are being established to facilitate local government communication with communities (FCR, 2000, 12).

Although there is some uncertainty within the Unicity regarding how the old community structures will fit into IDP structures, attempts are being made to create new partnerships to facilitate structured participation within even the poorest of communities. In order to assess the effectiveness of these, interviews were conducted with representatives of community-based partnerships that have been established to operationalise IDP in Gugulethu, one of Cape Town's oldest 'African'<sup>5</sup> townships, and Khayelitsha, a peri-urban township 30-40 km from Cape Town.<sup>6</sup> Representatives of NGOs working to build capacity within communities and local government, as well as representatives of women's groups were also interviewed. Finally, a survey of the perceptions of women community members on participation and local governance was undertaken. In-depth

interviews were conducted with 40 black women in various locations in Khayelitsha (Figure 2)<sup>7</sup> to ascertain attitudes on community needs and local socio-economic development, the extent and quality of their participation within IDP processes, and knowledge and understanding of IDP.<sup>8</sup> Generally, Khayelitsha is characterised by a lack of infrastructure and service delivery, high unemployment rates and poverty, high rates of in-migration from the impoverished Eastern Cape, and a high proportion of female-headed households.<sup>9</sup> Participation in local governance and socio-economic development is, therefore, of considerable importance to women in Khayelitsha.

Several projects have been initiated since the mid-1990s aimed at creating new community structures and operationalising IDP in Cape Town's townships. External donors fund some (the Isilimela Project in Khayelitsha, for example, is funded by the British Government Department for International Development) and all involve some sort of public-private sector partnership. They aim to build co-ordination and integration, establish synergies and partnerships, and counter misunderstanding and conflict within communities and between communities and local government. They attempt to establish systematic measurements of development need and progress so impacts can be measured, and so that strategically important groups such as women, youth and emerging entrepreneurs are not excluded (Solomon, 2000, 43). One example is the Community Development Co-operative (CDC) in Gugulethu, a community-based organisation (CBO), based on similar models in the US, designed to foster local community development by involving local people and private businesses to generate employment and improved housing/infrastructure. It was created in 1997 as part of IDP measures (interview with Ms Noni Ndema, General Manager, 24.1.01). Local women have

benefited directly from CDC's projects, especially from house-building projects. Some have also benefited indirectly from the local economic development generated by the building projects. In addition, through their involvement in consultation with CDC, women have also contributed to the types of development being prioritised. For example, a toilet-building project, initiated through IDP, was completed in July 2001:

Many formal houses in Gugulethu do have toilets, but they are outside and several metres away from the house. This creates problems for senior citizens, people with disabilities, and for women, since there have been several incidents of rape at night. Women in the local community identified this project, which relocates the toilet adjacent to the house with an entrance from inside the house itself, as a priority. The Minister for Health suggested that 1000 toilets should be built and has allocated R3 million to the project... CDC conducted door-to-door market research to identify those people most in need based on age, gender, ability and so on. (Ms Ndema, 24.1.01)

Projects such as this attempt to give leadership back to local people and have also attempted to involve women.

The links between CDC and the community, and between CDC and local government, are formed through existing RDP community structures:

RDP has a community liaison officer who liaises between the community and CDC, but local people do not have direct membership of CDC as they do in the US... This is likely to change in future because not everyone in Gugulethu can be involved in community structures... Only the Chair of the RDP sits on the board

of CDC; other members of the board are councillors and business people. (Ms Ndema, 24.1.01)

Despite attempts to consult women, therefore, there is the potential at present for already marginalised residents to be excluded from participation in CDC projects and in community development in Gugulethu. The extent to which residents are setting the agenda for development projects is still rather nebulous. Similar problems have also been identified in other township initiatives. The Isilimela project in Khayelitsha, for example, has revealed a lack of capacity within community leadership regarding rules and procedures of local governance, conflict within communities regarding participation and the continued exclusion of groups such as young people and women, and the failure of community representatives to communicate with local residents (Solomon, 2000). The project has not met its aims to capacitate communities to engage with the local government IDP and to create local development partnerships.

Evidence from interviews with women in Khayelitsha reveals a number of problems regarding structured participation. Just over half the women interviewed live in formal housing; the rest live in shacks. Levels of education in Khayelitsha are relatively high and a majority of respondents have at least basic literacy skills. They therefore have the capacity to fully participate in community matters if no other constraints exist. In addition, because of the high rates of unemployment,<sup>10</sup> poor housing and poor living conditions, these women have every incentive to be active in IDP projects in their areas:

We can't wait for the government to give us the things that they decide we need.

We have to get involved and tell them what we need and how things should progress. Then we will improve our communities... (LB, Harare, 8.2.01)

Another respondent argues:

If we sit around and wait nothing will be done and things will get worse. We have to fight for things and make improvements. We just need to know how. (AM, Site B, 9.2.01)

This desire to be involved in community development projects is echoed in nearly all of the interviews, as is the frustration of not knowing how to participate. Many women are members of street or area committees, which operate almost like village structures in Khayelitsha, but very few are involved with civic organisations or in community leadership. Indeed, few of the respondents express any knowledge of civic organisations within their areas. A few are members of housing savings schemes, and through these have acquired formal housing; they tend to be more satisfied with their own involvement in their communities, but still express dissatisfaction with local governance and a lack of consultation over socio-economic development.

With regard to community participation, the majority of respondents either believe that there are no IDP projects in their communities or say that they do not know of any, indicating their marginalisation in community development. However, when asked about participants in CBOs, most identify women, political organisations, senior citizens and youths as the major participants. In both Harare and Site B, a majority of respondents acknowledge women's involvement in CBOs:

Yes, women are very much involved here. Women are involved in most things taking place. We can't afford to just wait for things to happen. We are also the most in need. (AX, Harare, 8.2.01)

In areas where black women have a history of participation in CBOs they also seem more

involved in local development projects. Participation is seemingly more difficult in those more recently formed and informal settlements. A large majority of women in all areas state that they either did not know if local government tried to involve women in their activities or state clearly that there have been no attempts to do so. Only five of the respondents know of attempts to involve women in development projects. This suggests a general failure on the part of the local government to inform or educate communities about the possibilities of participation and the importance of this to the successful transformation toward developmental local government. This is further evidenced by the fact that a majority of women have received no information or education relating to participation from local IDP structures. Consequently, disappointment about the performance of local government and its failure to engage with communities is common.

As one woman states:

There are lots of people here who want to improve our areas but we never see anyone or hear anything from them. It's as if we don't exist. (PD, Site A, 6.2.01)

All but two of the interviewees believe that women have the ability to and should be involved in local development. When asked about how participation could be improved they mention the need for training workshops run at times when women are able to attend:

We need more training, but this is no good if the workshops are at times when women cannot attend because they are working or caring for children. (LB, Harare, 8.2.01)

Other respondents refer to the need for women's education and the need for local government to give them the opportunity to participate. Most interviewees articulate the



importance of community involvement in all stages of development projects, from needs assessment to project planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Lack of information is seen by most to be important in restricting their participation. The most common method of communication used, according to the respondents, is a loudspeaker, which makes announcements easy to miss. However, several also say that public meetings are held, which is encouraging because it facilitates immediate participation and community involvement, although it can disadvantage women whose time is already constrained. Radio is rarely mentioned, which is surprising given its usefulness as a means of communicating to those marginalised through illiteracy. Given the relatively high rates of education, letters might also be a useful means of information, but few respondents mention written communication.

The level of socio-economic development within communities clearly has a direct bearing upon women's degree of access to information and, therefore, opportunities for participation. One of the respondents, a 60-year old mother, grandmother and sole breadwinner for the family, explains the (not atypical) constraints on her participation:

Every day I get up at 5am to prepare breakfast for the children and walk to the train station. When I get home from work in the evenings I have to feed my daughter and her children and take care of the house. I just moved into my first house from a shack. I don't have to carry water now, but there is still a lot of work to be done, plastering and so on... My daughter is ill. I don't have time to attend meetings during the week, even in the evenings. (LT, Site B, 19.3.01)

There is a persistent lack of understanding within communities and local government of the multiple tasks that black women perform and how time consuming they are at home,

in the community and in the economic sector. They tend to have less flexibility than men, less leisure time and less time to participate in public events, particularly if they are heads of households, as many women are in Khayelitsha. Perhaps most alarmingly, only three of the respondents are aware of IDP. The majority have no idea what the term means or of its significance to local communities and their participation in local socio-economic development. If the concept of IDP is not being communicated its effectiveness in social development has to be questioned. As one respondent asks: “Why do we not know about IDP? If we do not know about it, how can we make people in government understand our needs?” (PD, Site A, 6.2.01)

### **Cultures of alienation and disillusionment**

The success of local government transformation depends upon the success of IDP measures in enabling the structured participation of very large numbers of people. The biggest threat is the development of cultures of alienation within communities and disillusionment within local governance structures. Under apartheid, local government was responsible for implementing policies of segregation, forced removals and the routine destruction of informal settlements. Memories of this persist in Cape Town and it is imperative that cultures of alienation are not allowed to develop through lack of trust and participation and disillusionment within communities. However, initial research suggests that there is already some cynicism within poor communities, where conditions are not perceived to have improved, and also within local government itself.

One significant cause of alienation among black women in Khayelitsha is the general lack of socio-economic development, as well as their exclusion from decision-

making processes. Very few of the respondents speak favourably of service delivery in their areas. Some in Site B mention delivery of water services and sanitation as well as some housing, but none were consulted about these improvements. As one respondent points out:

New houses are built by the savings schemes - Masithembane and HOSHOP. They are not coming from the government. We don't live close enough to the housing schemes and we don't know where the offices are. We can't save the money so we cannot join the schemes. So how is the government helping us?  
(CD, Site B, 9.2.01)

Some Site B and Harare respondents note that local government has delivered water, housing and community halls. However, a majority of respondents state that they are not happy with the level of development. Recent severe flooding and pressures from unabated in-migration are perceived as exacerbating problems. A number of women express resentment at radio reports that the newly elected Democratic Alliance local government has back-tracked on pledges to provide all households with an amount of free water and electricity:

First they tell us we will have free water and electricity and now they tell us because we are [in] Khayelitsha and not Gugulethu or Nyanga that we cannot have this. (SM, Site A, 6.2.01)

Most women do not believe that local government will deliver outstanding services before the end of the year. Several believe that this non-delivery is related to party-politics:

The services go to the places that support this [DA] government. We don't

support them so they are not interested in us. (PS, Site B, 9.2.01)

Disparity exists in Khayelitsha between community needs, as defined by the respondents, and local government. This is reflected in growing disappointment and dissatisfaction with the non-delivery of services and in the non-involvement of communities.<sup>11</sup> Participation in specified local governance activities (i.e. budget process, housing, water and electrification projects) - a requirement of IDP legislation - is alarmingly low. None of the respondents have ever been involved in budget processes:

The government thinks women don't understand budgets and so they don't bother... Listen, every woman here knows about budgets because they deal with them every day. (PN, Site A, 6.2.01)

The vast majority have not been involved in housing, water or electrification projects, and most have no knowledge of other members of their community being involved. This indicates a profound failure by the local government to meet community needs in Khayelitsha, to deliver services and to facilitate community participation. Most respondents express disappointment at the failure of local government to involve them more directly and to develop an understanding of what is needed in their areas.

Most interviewees have not attended any IDP or local government meetings nor have met their councillor since the local government elections. This highlights the non-participatory nature of current community-government relationships. However, this does not reflect disinterest because most women attended several community meetings and only nine of the respondents had not attended any recent meetings. Women are involved in matters that concern them and projects that are initiated and based in their communities. They are less involved in projects that are launched without consultation

and therefore fail to adequately address their needs. Nearly all express disillusionment with their non-involvement. One woman states:

We are never asked for our opinion on what should be done. If anything happens it comes from the council and we are not asked for the things that we think are important... No, we are not consulted about what we need. (XM, Site B, 9.2.01)

Evidence of disillusionment within local government is only likely to compound alienation within communities. One recent report reveals that while Cape Town local government is attempting to make community participation a meaningful process, there are many that are critical of how the process of engaging communities is being practised (FCR, 2000). Some officials believe that public participation is mostly implemented when local government is required to budget for the forthcoming financial year:

Last year with the IDP the whole year went by with no meeting, and all of a sudden when it came to the budgets there were meetings. (*ibid.*, 22)

Community participation, as envisaged in IDP legislation, has not yet been implemented:

Our participation is around particular projects. There is not yet a system – and there seems to be no intention of starting an IDP process – to get community organisation to start thinking on a broader basis. (*ibid.*, 22)

In one case, IDP sessions in 2000 were poorly attended because the community had been involved previously and had made submissions, but the lack of feedback meant trust was lost (*ibid.*, 25). Trust is easily broken when memories of local councils in the apartheid era are invoked by white councillors and broken promises. Rebuilding trust requires empowering people with information and knowledge of development planning. The importance of facilitating community participation, as part of IDP processes, is

recognised by officials, but is often only undertaken according to legal requirements and not due to a true commitment to ensure participation (*ibid.*, 40).

Furthermore, hidden barriers to participation exist in institutionalised participation processes. One example involves Masipumelele, an informal settlement of 10,000 people near Kommetjie. The councillor for Masipumelele states that she was not involved in the initial stages of IDP participation due to illness. Subsequently, she did not receive any documentation and was not informed even of the resulting budget and its links with IDP and participation processes. She has no knowledge that any person from Masipumelele was, or is currently, involved as a representative in IDP processes. The municipal plenary report back did not have any representatives from Masipumelele present (Urban Sector Network, 2001, 23-4). This, in effect means that the marginalised are further alienated due to circumstance and no special allowances are made for lack of capacity in some communities.

Another report suggests that attempts to involve communities, and especially black women, are still largely failing and councillors do not seem to take public participation seriously (Kehler, 2000, 18-19). Community representatives do not always filter information downwards, which further alienates poorer people. Although officials recognise that it is important that communities are empowered to participate meaningfully in terms of knowledge of technical aspects, budgetary processes and the like, very little has been done in this regard. Participation is not seen through the lens of social disintegration, conflict and self-interested leadership that are apparent in many townships. There are also high anxiety levels within the councils due to the ongoing restructuring and staff morale is generally very low. Consequently, it seems that there is

no real commitment to integration regarding 'race' and gender in local government processes.

The South African Local Government Association, a statutory body that is represented at central government level, will play a vital role in enabling local government to fulfil the mandate of the electorate. However, effective governance of poverty and inequality, which is also clearly gendered and racialised, is dependent upon institutional structures that are capable of responding to the needs of the poor and the marginalised. Although it is relatively easy to redesign formal institutions, underlying societal institutions are much slower to change. Bornstein (2000:202-203) argues that the redesign of public sector governance structures has outpaced the ability of the relevant organisations to change:

Many local and provincial government agencies suffer severe human and financial capacity constraints and, in the absence of a thorough shift in commitment to human rights, the rule of law, gender equality and open electoral processes, may continue with attitudes and practices characteristic of the apartheid era.

Democratic reforms do not necessarily help the marginalised unless the institutions of government are improved in terms of popular participation. Institutional structures at the local level still have a tendency to exclude already marginalised peoples, especially black women. Political exclusion of women is generally more pronounced at the level of local government and the relative absence of women's representation and organising at this level could be a serious hindrance to the advancement of gender equality (*Agenda*, 2000; Robinson, 1995) and women's participation in socio-economic development more

broadly. In Cape Town, for example, only 19% of all elected councillors are women; 15-20% of local government employees are women (GAP/FCR, 1998, 10). As a minority group, it is more difficult for women to raise their concerns and change institutional practices. Relatively few black women hold decision-making and management positions (still dominated by white men), and most are found in administrative and clerical positions. The potential of a lack of representation and participation in local issues to generate cultures of alienation is apparent in the fact that the turnout at the 2000 local government elections was only 48% (*Local Government Transformer*, 2001).

### **Group politics, conflict and alternative structures of participation**

Given the evidence of the lack of participation of black women in local governance, further questions need to be asked regarding the effectiveness of IDP. These questions relate to issues such as elite co-optation, how participation policies deal with conflict within and between target groups, whether stakeholder group politics obliterate important differences in interests and whether IDP structures are the most effective means through which black women can articulate their interests.

Evidence of elite co-optation exists in Cape Town, especially in areas like Kommetjie, where informal settlements like Masipumelele are located within the same administrative boundaries as affluent white suburbs. In these areas, affluent people are heavily involved in local fora and thus control the direction of resources. As Govender (1999, 4) argues, in many authorities country clubs, golf clubs and horse riding societies continue to access money that should be reprioritised to organisations working with the most needy. Problems over political alignment are also evident in Cape Town, not least



because of the schism between DA and ANC councillors, which affects decision-making and policy delivery, and the role that historical enmities play in interactions between parties and aligned officials. CBOs in African townships, such as women's groups and residents' associations, have found themselves at loggerheads with the local council because they are seen to be affiliated to the 'other' party (*ibid.*, 24). Despite formal participation channels being open to these organisations, no approval for projects can get through the 'other' party-dominated council:

The undue politicisation of local councils has in this case led to a situation where, although participation is encouraged through the IDP processes certain communities are systematically excluded by daily 'informal' practices of the council. (*ibid.*, 24)

In interviews with representatives of South African National Civic Organisation in Langa (29.1.01), it became clear that the relationship between civic organisations and local government is problematic and seems to hinder local socio-economic development processes. Local government often does not consult civic structures, which represent a large number of community members and, especially, women, and does not recognise the role of CBOs, which are often accused of being anti-development.

One recent report, based on a survey of officials in the Western Cape, suggests that gender issues are even more sidelined within local government (GAP/FCR, 1998, 4). Most fail to show an understanding of the structural nature of gender inequalities; some show resistance to address gender issues. They believe that if women should receive any 'special' treatment or consideration, this would constitute unfair discrimination. In terms of the external dimensions of local government, (governance, planning and service

delivery) the report found that a gender perspective is lacking. There is little understanding of the need to identify different social (interest) groups in the community, who may require different approaches to enhance their participation in community processes.

While IDP legislation recognises the importance of women's participation, present structures are insensitive to cultural differences among women. For example, one IDP handbook explains: "Every local grouping has elites who dominate decision-making and whose views do not necessarily reflect those of the majority" and "Women, in particular, are excluded from local decision-making. Special efforts must be made to hear their views as local decisions will affect them most" (John, 1997, 41). However, there is no recognition within IDP provisions of how cultural norms surrounding gender roles also exacerbate the problems of non-participation. This is a particular problem in Cape Town's Xhosa communities:

I don't say anything at the meetings. The men do all the talking. Even though I might have opinions about things I don't raise them at the meetings. (AM, Site B, 9.2.01)

We women are expected to keep quiet in meetings. We end up with football pitches instead of crèches. (XM, Harare, 8.2.01)

Cultural norms often restrict Xhosa women's participation in meetings to observation and they do not contribute beyond this. Despite the respect accorded older women in Xhosa communities they too are largely passive observers. As a consequence, few women-related issues are raised and included in programmes.

IDP is a relatively recent process and it is still too early to determine its success or failure with regard to facilitating community and women's participation in local socio-economic development. It is at present unclear how IDP structures can deal with the political co-optation of vulnerable target groups, like black women, by partisan interests in communities. In the light of initial evidence from Cape Town, questions remain as to whether IDP structures are the most effective means of enabling women's participation. Is it the case that external donors and private companies are now setting agendas and previously disadvantaged people remain marginalised in decision-making processes within their communities? Given that community leadership is still dominated by men in most townships, are there perhaps more effective means of facilitating women's participation in local democracy and socio-economic development than the structured participation required of IDP?

Cities like Cape Town are replete with women's organisations that pre-date both RDP and IDP and take a rather different approach to community development and participation. The relative successes of these organisations raise questions about the effectiveness of imposing models of participation from above. For example, the Skills Training Project in Langa, Cape Town's oldest township, is a CBO dealing with poverty and lack of opportunity through advocating self-help and community agency. It attempts to harness grassroots energies and sees service delivery by agents of the state as impossible and undesirable.<sup>12</sup> Women in leadership positions have backgrounds in labour organisations and, therefore, have experience and organisational skills. They help people form co-operatives and acquire skills to make them more employable. Methods include savings, feeding and gardening schemes (survival strategies during apartheid and still

important ways of organising for poor women); skills include brick-making and sewing. One aim is encouraging women to participate: “Women have historically been second place in our societies and they don’t always know their own potential” (Mrs ZM, 15.2.01). While women are initially trained in brick-making skills, they often stay together and organise other activities such as sewing groups, which have become especially important to the largely unskilled women moving to Cape Town from rural areas. Without skills and references, these women struggle to get jobs and the co-operatives provide an important alternative:

Women’s economic independence is key, which is why we have different schemes – sewing, gardening, brick-making. We do not see certain jobs fit only for men and others fit only for women. We have to make sure that women are given opportunities to escape their impoverishment. Women are now doing important jobs in our country and in our communities. We are building houses. We are working to uplift everyone. (Mrs ZM, 15.2.01)

Nathi Sinako, a 600-member women’s business organisation is one several CBOs performing similar functions in Khayelitsha. Initiated in 1995, membership comprises hawkers, informal shops, small supermarkets, dressmakers, hairdressers, brick-makers and florists. It has accredited sewing and business training programmes (Dyantyi and Frater, 1998). Similarly, Zenzele (‘do it yourself’) Enterprises began in 1988 as a sewing club and grew into a training centre by 1990, focusing on women’s empowerment (*ibid.*).

Cape Town is also replete with independent and community-run housing savings and building schemes. One of the most well-known and successful in the Western Cape is the Victoria Mxenge Scheme (Site B North), completed with the assistance of the South

African Homeless People's Federation. Khayelitsha residents originally scoffed at this scheme, founded and controlled by women (Mitlin, 2000, 16). How could women only able to save cents ever build houses? However, within 5 years of its founding in 1991, Victoria Mxenge was a flagship housing development with 140 new houses; many subsequent schemes were directly inspired by its successes. There are now 78 housing saving schemes operating in Western Cape, nine in Site B alone,<sup>13</sup> and numbers continue to grow. Women run most and all have predominantly female membership. They are a community-centred, community-driven process of developmental change independent of local government but utilising government subsidies and the capacity-building skills of NGOs.<sup>14</sup>

For IDP to be successful it might follow the example of inclusion set by these community-driven development schemes, which are less about 'bringing government to the people' and more about working with and developing existing capacities. CBOs provide an important intermediary between the state and communities and are essential in sustaining a strong democratic culture as advocates and articulators of community needs and aspirations (Bollens, 2000). If the energies that already exist within communities, and particularly within women's organisations, are properly harnessed, participative community development can be operationalised by local government.

## **Conclusions**

While the central state has stepped back from full involvement in development in South Africa, this has largely been through the orchestrated delegation of powers to local and provincial governments (Beall, 2000). Unlike experiences in the north, the level of state

involvement in service provision to low-income communities has not diminished with the growing legitimacy of the state, but has grown. “Participatory development in South Africa is in fact increasingly controlled by the state” (Lyons *et al.*, 2000, 63). The system of local government in South Africa is a world-first in many ways because it requires creativity and participation from all levels of society for its success and this is embedded in legislation. However, it remains to be seen whether impoverished areas will have improved access to resources, and whether the new structures will facilitate the participation of the poor, and especially black women, given their existing disempowerment within communities.

The case studies in Cape Town have demonstrated that even though local government has followed IDP guidelines, it is failing to foster meaningful participation, especially amongst black women. The latter have not been involved in development projects and also perceive local government as having failed its mandate to facilitate participation. There is a general dissatisfaction with the performance of local government. All spheres of government in South Africa are espousing public-private partnerships as the way forward to effective and participatory local government. In reality, however, these partnerships focus more on the “outsourcing of service delivery to the private sector due to an increasing lack of financial and institutional capacities on the side of local government, than on partnerships between communities and government structures” (Kehler, 2000, 7). Even where services are delivered, this does not necessarily indicate community participation. As one report points out, “If communities are not involved in the decision-making processes surrounding the question of what services need to be delivered services will most likely fail to meet the needs of those whose living

conditions should be improved...” (GAP/FCR, 1998, 24-5). The discrepancies between the perceptions of local government and black women effectively disempower the latter by making them recipients of, and not participants in, development. Dangers of alienation are inherent in this.

Studies have shown that it will be difficult to realise the aims of the IDPs in South Africa. One problem is the lack of capacity of local government, both in terms of funding and institutional capacity, required to take on new responsibilities (Friedman, 1997, 463-69). Increased decentralisation of functions has not been matched by a corresponding devolution of finance to local government, producing “unfunded mandates” (John, 1997, 2). Since local governments are required to generate 80% of their budget from their constituents, the problems for impoverished municipalities are obvious. As this study suggests, there is also a lack of community participation in all spheres of IDP and social development based upon a lack of knowledge of IDP and a lack of capacity within local communities. Furthermore, legislation is not clear enough and leaves too much room for interpretation of what meaningful participation is (Liebenberg, 1999, 6). Thus, while ever black women are excluded from decision-making and other IDP processes, and gender indicators are excluded from IDP requirements, community participation as the key principle in IDP remains “rather a statement of intent than reality at the community level” (GAP/FCR, 1998, 25-6).

It is not clear that IDP can deliver what it promises, primarily because the notion of citizen participation creates a fundamental anomaly. Citizens’ interests are cared for by elected representatives and the policies they determine are implemented by bureaucrats acting in organisational structures that are the antithesis of democracy. Thus democratic

expectations are imposed on governmental structures that were never designed to function democratically (Brynard, 1996, 39-40). Unless black women's voices are heard in IDP processes, their political and economic marginalisation will continue and local government will fail to fulfil its developmental role (GAP/FCR, 1998, 11). When counterpoised against this, the successes of black women's organisations, in terms of effecting access to and control of resources are instructive. Local government might focus less on creating new structures to 'bring government to the people' and build on structures already operating successfully within communities. It could also support and facilitate socio-economic development projects that are run by black women and aimed at the provision of sources of income.

The close interaction with communities presents opportunities for local government to promote gender equity that other spheres of government do not have. However, understanding which groups benefit most from a particular strategy and which are consulted and excluded from local decision-making processes is of importance. This paper has demonstrated that poor, black women can only participate in decision-making processes if they have appropriate information upon which to make informed decisions, but they are often ill-informed about issues that affect their lives directly. They also require time to attend meetings, and the confidence to speak up and receive respect as equal participants in discussions; these conditions are often absent. Local government has a role to play in devising creative strategies to ensure that these conditions are met. Indeed, it has a Constitutional responsibility to promote gender equity. In doing so it can become an important agent for social change. That women are still underrepresented within local government structures may only compound the challenges of constructing



equal citizenship through participatory democracy. The maintenance of a stable democracy in South Africa depends upon the translation of *de jure* rights into *de facto* equality and the direct empowerment of people from the grassroots level upwards, allowing popular and equitable participation of all sections of the population in decision-making and resource allocation. Clearly, women and poor people have to be thought of not as recipients of citizenship but rather as agents in its construction (Seidman, 1999).

Processes of democratic transformation are still unfolding in South Africa. Only time will tell whether experiences here will point towards workable alternative notions of citizenship, towards locally rooted and participatory democracy that can effect 'good governance'. To do so, the transformation must be successful in the creation of spaces for the participation of even the most marginalised, where emphasis is placed on the abilities of people to participate in and mould the policies that shape their everyday lives (Staeheli, 1994). As Seidman (1999) argues, if 'women's interests' are defined, in part, by the spaces through which participation is channelled, the local democracy that is being constructed in South Africa has the potential to offer a new vision of gendered participatory citizenship. The potential for good local governance, founded on citizen participation and accountability, exists; the creation of a more equitable society depends on the fulfilment of this potential.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘community’ to refer to a process of how people are involved, participate and develop. In this sense, its influence comes from “not just people but from how their various interests are exercised through power relations that are in turn shaped by a range of facets such as age, gender, political affiliation, history, language, status, etc.” (Sihlongonyane, 2001, 42).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘black’ as inclusive of all women of colour, whilst being mindful of the sensitivities associated with such terminology.

<sup>3</sup> The distinct demographics (the 1996 census revealed a majority so-called ‘Coloured’ population (50%), a relatively large ‘white’ population (22%) and a relatively small ‘African’ population (26%)) and politics (Democratic Alliance (DA) has a majority at provincial level and took the City of Cape Town in 1999) of the Cape metropolitan area require that caution be exercised in any attempts at generalisation. However, this study represents a detailed analysis of local governance in a specific locality, and raises several issues that are of relevance throughout South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> The constitutional commitment to local government is underpinned by four pieces of legislation. The Municipal Structures Act (2000) demarcates new municipalities (reduced from 800 to 284) and allows the creation of economies of scale and integrated planning within municipalities. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) deals with performance measurement of councillors and municipalities, together with the way in which they deal with the electorate. The Financial Management Bill deals with accountability and

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transparency of municipalities and the Property Rating Bill allows municipalities to be innovative in the collection of revenue.

<sup>5</sup> Under apartheid, Cape Town was spatially divided into ‘white’, ‘Coloured’ and ‘African’ residential areas. Although deeply problematic, these terms are still used. In this context, ‘African’ refers to those townships with predominantly isiXhosa-speaking populations.

<sup>6</sup> Now part of the Unicity, Khayelitsha is one of the largest African townships in South Africa, with an estimated population of between 500,000 and 1 million people.

<sup>7</sup> Sites A and C are characterised by two-room houses built by the city council in the 1980s. Site B is an informal settlement where flush toilets and tarred roads have been built as part of the RDP upgrading, but no council housing has been developed.

Community members have built a few formal houses with the assistance of building associations. Harare was established in the early 1990s to accommodate people from a nearby squatter settlement, and has a similar infrastructure to that of Site B.

<sup>8</sup> Initial access to organisations and respondents was facilitated by the Foundation for Contemporary Research and interviewees were identified through a ‘snowballing’ process. Interviews were conducted in isiXhosa with the help of a research assistant between February and April 2001 and translated. Khayelitsha was chosen because it is the poorest of Cape Town’s townships and arguably most in need of development.

<sup>9</sup> The area was one highlighted for central government funds in President Mbeki’s address to the nation in February 2001.

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<sup>10</sup> Only 25% of respondents were formally employed; 15% were engaged in informal employment. These figures are broadly representative of Khayelitsha (see Dyantyi and Frater, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> General dissatisfaction with service provision in Khayelitsha culminated in a temporary 'land invasion' in Mfuleni by those rendered homeless by flooding in June 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mrs ZM, Skills Leader, Langa, 15.2.01. Organisations such as these are to be found in most African townships throughout South Africa and are generally dominated by women.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ms C, Community Liaison Officer at Makukhanye housing scheme (2.4.01). HOSHOP alone has built 350 houses; 90% of the beneficiaries are women.

<sup>14</sup> Homeless People's Federation, Development Action Group and Marnol are just three of the NGOs involved in capacity-building related to housing developments.