

# Participation, local governance and attitudes of youth: a Grahamstown case study

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*The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes children's right to participation in processes that affect them. In this article we caution that in order to give real content to participation, it is necessary to understand what participation is and to acknowledge the problematic nature of the concept. We then demonstrate, by considering a number of international and African studies, the kinds of issues that have undermined the implementation of participatory initiatives for both adults and children. Subsequently we explore the way in which participation has become a central tenet of cooperative developmental government through what has, especially at the local level, become known as governance. We argue that for these opportunities to become a reality and for citizens to benefit from the governance model, a strong and organised civil society that moves beyond the limitations of confrontational protest politics and engages with the state without becoming co-opted, is the way forward. Increased inefficiency on the part of local governance structures has led to increasing disillusionment by citizens, especially younger people. The final section of the paper deals with this disaffection through a focus group interview with a small number of Grade 12 learners from Grahamstown/Rhini. The interviews reveal a level of cynicism and lack of interest in participation in governance structures, such as ward meetings, among the learners interviewed.*

*Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies (Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary General).*

## Introduction

The connection between human rights, participation and development was made in the 1980s in the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, where in Article 1 it is argued that 'the right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized' (UN, 1986: vi).

The right of children to participate in decisions that affect them was also supported in November 1989 with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 sets out the right of the child who:

*is capable of forming his or her own views ... to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

The Convention states that children must have the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings. The South African Constitution also declares that in all decisions affecting a child, where the child is of an age to express his/her views, the child should be allowed and encouraged to participate.

These are admirable ideals, and, one could argue, an essential element of democratic practice and a human rights regime. In order to give real content to participation, however it is necessary to understand the problematic nature of the concept; the way in which it has been manipulated to mean different things

in different contexts, how the concept of power is central as to who participates, and how difficult it is to achieve sustainable participation, especially with regard to slow processes of development and service delivery within a civic context. These limitations apply widely to adult citizens, and more so, as the tentative conclusions from the case study discussed in this article show, with regard to children and teenagers.

In this article we consider the concept of participation and focus on problems regarding participatory endeavours in other countries, especially in Africa. This leads to an exploration of the concept of local governance, which has participation as its central tenet, in South Africa, and the problems encountered in implementing it. The final section comprises a case study of a small group of school learners in Grahamstown/Rhini, in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, and explores their attitudes towards governance structures, showing their ambivalence toward civic participation.

## The concept of participation

Although the term *participation* is widely used in democratic theory, its meaning often remains vague (Weale, 1999: 84). It has, as Rahnema (1992) points out, become a jargon word separate from any specific context, and has been manipulated by vastly different groups of people to mean entirely different things. It has for example, served as a core concept in colonial community development (self-help), emerged as an essential part of the humanist enterprise (the creation of *meaning* through action), and served as an almost mystically transforming process for radicals such as Paulo Freire (Roodt, 2001).

For the purposes of this article, however, the broad definition offered by Weale (1999: 84) is useful: he defines participation as “taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies”. In a more philosophical sense, participation may be seen as a quest to strive for a meaningful life-world, through being politically and civically active. As Coetzee (1989:23) states:

*People have the right to live in a life-world that is meaningful to them and they are able to contribute actively to the constitution of such a life-world ... Social reality is constituted, maintained, as well as continuously adapted by individuals. As soon as a lack of ability or scope to come to terms with different/opposing positions becomes evident ... there is a real danger of a dehumanisation of social reality, i.e. a rigidification of human existence (or alienation).*

Both these aspects of the participatory endeavour are important in the context of post-apartheid South Africa because of the need to overcome the divisions and alienation of the past, and to build a new nation and promote democratic traditions and behaviour. As Swartz (2006:552) contends:

*As the discourses of rebuilding have replaced those of liberation, there has been a growing focus on shared values and renewed morality as a primary means for rebuilding the fractured society that is post-apartheid South Africa. Central to this process have been several areas of debate: the issue of socio-economic justice for the vast majority of her historically disadvantaged citizens; how to develop a concept of the nature of citizenship in a country newly emerged from the tyranny and totalitarianism of apartheid...*

Attempts to introduce participatory initiatives internationally and in other parts of Africa, however, have shown that it is not easy in regard to adults, and even more difficult regarding children and teenagers.

## Problems regarding participation

Many studies have revealed the problematic nature of citizen participation. Allan Cochrane (1986), who refers to the attempts at local level participation as “community politics”, was cautious about the success of community initiatives as far back as the 1980s. In a survey of community politics in the United States of America and Britain, he argued that real gains had been limited and highlighted a number of problems. Briefly, these include the perceived impossibility of dealing with structural problems of economic and social inequality at a local level. Concessions won were usually of a trivial nature at significant cost in time and effort, and local leaders tended to become absorbed into official structures and to feel threatened by pressure from below (Cochrane 1986:55-56).

In many countries, traditional leaders reasserted or maintained their influence. The problematic nature of these participatory initiatives in Africa is well documented. In the case of Botswana, the Southern African Report (1992:23) noted:

*The rapid changes of the past two decades have outstripped the capacity for popular involvement of institutions like parent teacher associations, civic organisations, community forums, and public hearings for planning boards.*

Jansen and Hoof (1990:202), discussing the style of consultation of Village Development Committees by planning authorities (the presentation of technically complicated and complete plans for ratification), assert that "... a dependency trap has evolved in Botswana that (has) led to the destruction of self-help activities ...". Botha and Tandy (1992:29), writing about the functioning of similar Village Development Committees and Ward Development Committees in Zimbabwe, state that the degree of involvement is much less than envisaged. A number of surveys have shown them to be unrepresentative with regard to the inclusion of women and youth, and in a number of areas they have entirely ceased to operate.

A number of reasons have been suggested for the failure of these participatory experiments. Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, (1988), reviewing the work of Chazan on democracy in Ghana from the 1960s onwards, argues that the participation of the public in institutions of civil society has been consistently undermined by residues of undemocratic colonial traditions, the presence of a high degree of economic inequality in the absence of an indigenous capitalist class, ongoing economic dependency, a weak state, inept leaders, corruption and an extractive and utilitarian political culture at the state level.

More recent studies have confirmed the problematic nature of participatory initiatives in local governance, arguing that they do not always lead to more democratic and inclusive practices, because very often the decentralisation of power to the local level serves to reinforce the dependency of ordinary citizens, as well as local elites on political leaders for resources and business contracts. (Blackburn, 2000; Johnson & Wilson, 2000; Schönwälder, 1997).

For children and teenagers ongoing participation in political processes and institutions is even more difficult to sustain, as the Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (2010) points out:

*It is a danger to democracy that young people are not considered, directly or indirectly, as anything other than a liability to democracy. Young people are, in many ways, under siege: marginalised by male adults and the elderly from decision making processes, faced with the prospect of mass death by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, denied employment and blamed for the increasing level of crime and violence. They are not in a position to make informed choices in the exercise of citizenship. They are at the mercy of political proprietors who take it upon themselves to interpret and decide what citizenship entails for young people.*

In spite of numerous and well documented examples of the problematic nature of participatory politics in the Western world and especially in Africa, there is still optimism and support for initiatives of this kind. After South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 there was much enthusiasm for participatory democracy and development.

Looking back at attempts to implement citizen participation in various community-based organisations, it is clear that these have met with varying success. The civic movement along with the development forums of the early 1990s have come and gone, with many of the activists who drove these institutions moving on to formal government, the private or informal sector, or joining the ranks of the under- or unemployed. As a result of the demise of civic and development forums, the main arena for citizen participation in South Africa for both adults and children, are local governance structures.

## Local governance

South Africa's Constitution drives a rights-based agenda that places citizen participation at the centre of transformation and development. The South African Constitution also requires that in all decisions affecting a child, where the child is of an age to express his/her views, the child should be allowed and

encouraged to participate. The centrality of participation is promoted especially at local government level through the concept of developmental local *governance*.

In terms of Section 152 (1)(e) of the 1996 Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), one of the objectives of local governance is to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government. This constitutional prescription is endorsed in the White Paper on Local Government (Republic of South Africa 1998, 37), which defines *developmental local government* as one that is committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve their lives.

Governance can therefore be seen as a paradigm that requires local government to move beyond “the regulation of activities within its domain and enter into an equal dialogue with participants which will create new democratic ‘rules of the game’ . There is a clear implication that communities will be called upon to interact with local government beyond the conventional boundaries of representative democracy” (Steytler, Hollands, Savage, Heideman, Roodt, Mastenbroek, 1998:119). It is generally accepted that decentralized governance provides a structural arrangement for fighting poverty at close range and that it empowers local communities to participate in identifying problems, strategies and plans and to mobilize resources and energy to fight poverty.

Parnell, Pieterse, Swilling & Wooldridge (2002: 10) argue that civil society mobilization and pressure must be used to propel and sustain internal institutional transformation in South Africa to convince municipal staff and managers that they need to work differently if they want to deliver holistic, appropriate and quality service.

It is apparent therefore, that the Constitution, White Paper and the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) strongly support the idea of community participation when it comes to local issues. Ward committees were introduced in South Africa in 2001, with the primary aim of enhancing participatory democracy and functioning as an interface between government and civil society. Cashdan (2002: 159), emphasizes the need for the ward committee system to promote a democratic government effectively, as well as to hold elected representatives accountable for promoting community participation. The ward committee system plays the critical role of being a representative structure in the community and as a means of promoting service delivery and community participation (Cashdan, 2002).

The problems that are outlined here regarding participatory development apply largely to the governance process as well. A study conducted by one of the authors (Stuurman 2009) on the ward committee system as a means of promoting community participation and service delivery, reveals trends in keeping with experiences internationally and in other African countries, as outlined above, amongst both adults and youth in the Grahamstown/Rhini area. The general disillusionment of the adults with the dysfunctional nature of the ward system as a vehicle for participatory development is echoed by the views expressed by Grade 12 learners in a local township school. The learners, interviewed as a small part of the wider study on perceptions of the ward committee system, can be said to represent a pilot study requiring follow up on a larger scale in order to be representative.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, their views offer a disturbing insight into the attitudes of present day township youth. All ethical procedures (informed consent) were followed by Stuurman in pursuance of this study.

## Grahamstown/Rhini case study

The South African Constitution provides not only for legal representation for children but also in all decisions affecting the child: where the child is of the age and competence to express her or his views, the child should be allowed and encouraged to participate. As such the Integrated Development Programme (IDP) Forum of the Makana Municipality is comprised of all the members of the IDP Steering Committee, including representatives from local sectors, such as Youth Formations. Programmes focused on youth

<sup>1</sup> Grahamstown, 22 May 2008 at 14h00 at Benjamin Mahlasela School. Teacher: Mrs. Nojoko: Participants: Charles Dingana; Thembinkosi Madlavu; Ntombifuthi Lewu; Vuyokazi Ntaka; Vuyokazi Gotyana; Ntombekhayana Bhebh. Additional students present: Xolisa Magada; Bathini Masinda; Banele Maflika.

development are intended to have a positive influence on the growth and development of the area, and to take cognisance of the needs of youth in the area.

### **“Civic participation is for old people”**

The focus group participants argued that young people are not interested in issues of service delivery or development, but in other issues, such as sport or social matters. They said that service delivery, an exhausting and frustrating long-term process was mainly the concern of “old people”, something with which young people do not want to associate themselves. Throughout the discussion, they emphasised that they did not participate in government programmes concerned with service delivery in their ward. For example, they argued that due to the time constraints they found it difficult to balance their academic life and “politics”. Furthermore, they preferred to spend time on issues that could benefit them directly, rather than waste time on something they see as “pointless”.

They pointed out that if they perceived politics to be beneficial and more interesting, they would be more motivated to involve themselves. They added that many people had in the past sacrificed their time to fight for freedom and democracy, but that they remained uneducated as a result. In their experience, freedom fighters have not benefited from the end products of democracy. One student mentioned, for example:

*My uncle was a local freedom fighter, and he was also a local hero. He was fighting for the rights of the poor people. But now that we have acquired freedom and democracy, he does not benefit from anything, and nobody cares about him, even the people that he used to fight with, who are now in the municipality, do not even care about him too. So I would rather focus on my education, and secure the place in the next generation.*

Another student added:

*Young people are not listened to, the politics is mainly an old people's business, and young people are focusing on other aspects of life which will bring joy in their lives. Unlike politics that are frustrating and psychologically disturbing, youth prefer less harmful activities. It would be much better if we were to benefit from the system, surely such frustration would be worth fighting for.*

The overall conclusion based on the feedback of the young people in the focus group is that participation in processes to ensure service delivery is a strenuous experience that yields very little in terms of personal reward.

The students argued that service delivery, development and politics are old people's business and that in most projects in their ward, it is always old people who benefit from and participate in these projects. There was, however, a large amount of cynicism regarding what the current generation of adults had achieved. According to a young student:

*Old people have messed up, so it is up to them to fix the matter, and there is no need for young people to intervene. We cannot be involved, because things are already bad in the country, and if we intervene, the same old people will not listen to our views and opinions.*

Another student mentioned in this regard:

*All our spheres of government are full of old people who are making laws and implementing them according to their own needs. Even though they know better what is going on in the country, but they must also acknowledge that young people have opinions and views on other things. But these people are not willing to listen to what young people have to say.*

The obvious reluctance of the youthful interviewees to become involved in civic issues and the perception that it is older people “who know better what is going on in the country”, speaks of a reality where civic and developmental issues are often of a technical nature, requiring input from “experts” such as city engineers, planners, building inspectors and the like, and more importantly, require patience and commitment on the part of the layperson to truly understand. This aligns with experiences in other countries, as discussed above. Jansen and Hoof (1990:202), discussing the style of consultation of the Village Development

Committees by planning authorities (the presentation of technically complicated and complete plans for ratification), assert that "... a dependency trap has evolved in Botswana that (has) led to the destruction of self-help activities ...".

The attitude that participation in political and governance processes is primarily an activity for "old people", is particularly ironic in the South African situation, given the massive involvement of youth (and in many cases children) during the struggle against apartheid. One explanation is the difference in the nature of the militant political struggle with the emphasis on mass action such as rallies, demonstrations, street battles with police, defiance campaigns, boycotts and underground military activities, compared with the much slower, and often frustrating business of civic and developmental processes. It can be argued that the former is more suited to the temperament of youth, while the latter requires the patience and maturity of adulthood.

Another explanation is that during the struggle many adults who had jobs and wanted to preserve their family, while fulfilling familial responsibilities, were not willing to take the risks that were part and parcel of militant opposition to the repressive militarised apartheid regime, whereas the youth, especially given the parlous state of education in those days, were. Yet, and this was apparent in many of the rural communities in the Eastern Cape, post 1990, when the focus turned to civic and developmental issues, adults, especially old men, reasserted their traditional authority, and in the process sidelined women and youth. This is in line with the experience of Zimbabwe also discussed above (Botha & Tandy, 1992:29). As stated by the focus group interviewees, the need for a good education to prosper is now much more established, and with some notable exceptions, the youth are no longer prepared to sacrifice education for participation in political and civic activities.

### **"Politicians are untrustworthy"**

In keeping with the attitudes of many adults interviewed for the main study on participation in municipal wards, it was clear that young people have lost faith and trust in politicians. They mentioned that local, provincial and national government level politicians have been inadequate. The students in the focus group all perceived politicians as "liars who do not care about other people, only for themselves". It was also claimed that politicians generally make promises to the poor but never deliver services, which is why their reputations are so poor, and they are no longer trusted.

In addition, the young people perceived politicians to be unreliable and nepotism and corruption to be rife. They argued that politicians, once elected forget about the people, and make sure that their own family members and friends benefit before their terms end. For example, a student said that:

*Almost all the politicians are rich people, and they drive big cars living in huge houses. These people were not better off at first, but immediately when they got into their offices, they became rich. It should also be borne in mind that before they were elected, all these politicians have made promises to the people, about jobs, housings, infrastructure etc. but immediately when they win elections, they automatically forget about those promises, and focus only on their progress and promotions. And if one of their objectives fails, they become corrupt, and the conflicts and crisis develop. How nice it would be, if politicians were fighting for the needs of the people, instead of fighting over useless issues, like power.*

Another participant mentioned that:

*Generally politicians are untrustworthy. I mean in my entire life I have never come across any politician who sticks to their guns, but they always go with the flow. For example, you can get into power as people-oriented person. However, in no time at all your personality will be tested, and subsequently people adapt to the system, and join the dirty ride. Politics, I mean generally, is a dirty game, so whoever is a politician surely is a part of such a game.*

A lack of trust in politicians has made many young people cynical about involvement in politics and service delivery as an altruistic enterprise aimed at benefiting the community as a whole and promoting democracy and accountability. Their lack of interest was apparent during the focus group discussion, when

the researcher found that none of the students in the group knew who their youth representatives were in the ward committees. Furthermore, they did not know who the ward councillor was. This did not seem to bother them, as it was clear that they did not feel the need to hold these representatives accountable, or that it would make any difference if they did:

*We don't know who the youth representative is, and we don't care what he is doing because he is not representing us, surely he is also part of the politics.*

For these students corruption amongst municipal officials, employees and elected representatives is not something that they read about in the newspaper or hear about from other people. Most of them experience it in their daily lives or in the lives of family members. One student related an instance of this phenomenon:

*I personally experienced that form of corruption and the unavailability of the food parcels. For example, my Aunt registered before the food parcels arrived in the ward. She was not employed, and at home we were very poor. These food parcels were mainly for the unemployed and the pensioners, but there were several people with jobs who also benefited from the project. Surprising enough, piles of food parcels were found in the house of another municipal employee, and her relatives and friends all received double food parcels.*

The attitude of these school learners confirms the findings of Diamond (1988), when he argues that the participation of the public in institutions of civil society has been consistently undermined by residues of undemocratic colonial traditions, or in this case, apartheid traditions. Corruption and an extractive and utilitarian political culture is characteristic, not only in the example of food parcel corruption described above, but more chillingly in the attitude of the learners themselves.

## **If you can't beat them, join them ...**

One of the side effects of this direct and ongoing experience of corruption is that these youths have accepted it as an inevitable way of life. This institutionalisation of corruption and nepotism has reached such a scale that they feel powerless to stop it through active participation and involvement in the structures that are meant to deal with these problems and hold officials, employees and elected representatives accountable. From a sociological point of view this institutionalisation of nepotism and corruption has led to it being regarded as a commonplace phenomenon that no longer evokes feelings of moral outrage: rather for a large proportion of youth it is now seen as a legitimate strategy for acquiring developmental resources and benefits for the families of those in power. As one student put it:

*Look for example at my home; we are living in a very small house as a big family. The government has been promising to build house for the people, but nothing has happened in that regard. So people are only looking after their loved ones, so when we get into power, surely the first people to think about will be our family, I mean I am being realistic now. If we were all happy, I would consider doing good things for others, but how do you expect me to cater for others, whereas my situation is not better, don't you think people will think there is something wrong with you.*

It was clear during the focus group discussion that most of these young people had given up on service delivery, and appeared to be to a greater or lesser extent cynical as to occurrences in their communities. This issue raises a critical and important point about the next generation, in that these young people are the leaders of the future. From the discussion, it became clear that the form of democracy that exists in the Makana Municipality is not encouraging meaningful participation in local governance structures by young people, nor is it producing good and reliable leaders for the future. It is more likely to reproduce corrupt and bad leaders.

The broader study on participation in ward structures in Grahamstown conducted by Stuurman (2009), of which the youth focus group was a part, revealed that many ward structures had been “captured” by the ruling party, and in some cases, even by factions of the ruling party. This is in essence an extreme form of corporatism, the incorporation of civil society into government. Corporatism has led to institutions of civil society in South Africa becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the government. This has often

led to cronyism, clientalism, nepotism and corruption. Many community-based organisations have slipped into a co-opted rather than co-operative role, in the process often undermining the effectiveness of elected political representatives (Steytler et al, 1998:125).

## Conclusion

In this article we started off by stating that the concept of participation has many different meanings depending on the particular context and paradigm of which it forms part, ranging for example, from colonial community development with its stress on “self-help”, through humanist notions of the creation of meaning in order to be fully human, to the political and emancipatory emphasis of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. A review of attempts to operationalise the concept of participation practically, focusing largely on Africa, showed that many difficulties have been experienced, and that failure, rather than success has been the norm.

The next section of the article examines the way in which participation has become a central tenet of cooperative developmental government through what has, especially at the local level, become known as *governance*. The concept of governance describes the necessity for local government to extend its range of operation beyond mere service provision to deal with broader development issues in partnership with civil society, especially citizen participation, through the ward system. Ward committees were introduced in South Africa in 2001, with the primary aim of enhancing participatory democracy and functioning as an interface between the government and civil society.

We argue that experience and research over the past few years has shown that the lack of resources of the local government and the weakness of civil society, have led to increased inefficiency on the part of local governance structures and increasing disillusionment among citizens, especially younger people.

The final section of the paper deals with this disaffection through a focus group interview with a small number of grade 12 learners from Grahamstown/Rhini. The interviews revealed a level of cynicism and lack of interest in participation in governance structures such as the ward meetings by the learners. These structures were seen as dominated by self-interested older adults who were not concerned with issues important to, or affecting youth, and that service delivery and development more broadly were regarded as “adult business”. Politicians were characterised as self-interested, nepotistic and corrupt, in that they appropriated resources, not for the benefit of the broader community, but for their own families. Most perturbing, the learners did not believe that their own participation in the system could change anything, rather, they emphasized the need to focus on their own education in order to attain positions where they could channel resources to their own families - in effect perpetuating the very system about which they were critical and cynical.

The strong corporatist style of civil society/government relations where political parties or even factions of political parties dominate under-resourced governance structures has thus led to a situation where citizens, and in particular young people, are cynical about the impact and benefits of participation.

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