Public Participation and deepening democracy: Experiences from Durban, South Africa[1]

Introduction

Ironically, one of the most important consequences of our country's oppressive apartheid system was the creation of a strong, vibrant and highly mobilized civil society. Borne out of the intense struggle against an oppressive regime, organised groupings of youth, women, sports, civic and ratepayers' associations, religious organizations and other civil society formations found themselves redefining their role in a new and democratic post-1996 local government order.

During this time, many of these organs of civil society in the greater eThekwini area were engaging with and fostering partnerships with the then local entities that were established during the Interim Phase of local government. Whilst residents in each of these different entities did participate in both strategic planning exercises as well as in local community development projects conducted during this time, the quality of the engagement across the City was highly uneven. Furthermore no clear policy guidelines were in place that governed the nature of stakeholder participation.

The establishment of a single, unified eThekwini Municipality in December 2000 therefore presented a unique window of opportunity to ensure a consistent and progressive approach to citizen participation across the metropolitan area. This opportunity was fully exploited during the conceptualisation of our long term planning process for our City. **It was apparent that the citizens of eThekwini have a critical role to play in shaping the nature and direction of the long term City Strategy and the transformation of local government more broadly**. During this period, an unprecedented wave of citizen mobilization and stakeholder participation swept through the City at a scale never before seen in the history of the Council.

By mid-2002, during the height of the City's long-term strategy process, one could almost feel the excitement as the City came alive with brightly-coloured posters in local libraries, shopping centers, and *spaza* shops inviting communities to get involved at local workshops. Council buses carrying the bold message of "a new way of doing business" caused people to stop, take look and question what was going on in the City. Videos were being screened at local government offices about how the City was strategising to do things differently. Local community newspapers, the Council's "Metrobeat" magazine and even the mainstream media carried announcements of local workshops and the successes of the Big Mama workshops, as the public stakeholder workshops came to be known.

More than just the buzz and energy that was created, ordinary people from all walks of life took the time to attend and actively participate in the hundreds of community

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[1] This piece is based on a chapter from the book **Making City Strategy Come Alive: Experiences from eThekwini Municipality**

workshops held throughout all the different wards of the City. This positive statement by the citizens of eThekwini and by the officials and City leadership responsible for the design of the "participation project" marked a turning point in the history of City government.

During the three years of citizen participation in our City's long term planning process, many successes were celebrated. At the same time, some painful mistakes and oversights were made in the complex process of ensuring that citizens played a meaningful role in developing our City Strategy. This piece documents the insights gained and the invaluable lessons in the art of public participation, where six key questions are focused on:

1. *Why* public participation?
2. *Who* exactly should participate?
3. *Who* should be responsible for co-ordinating the process of stakeholder partipation?
4. Exactly *what* issues should we be engaging around?
5. *How* should the nature of the participation be structured?
6. *When* and at what points should stakeholders be involved?

Rather than engage in a theoretical and intellectual discussion of these interesting and relevant issues, an attempt is made to articulate own views and contentions based on the experiences of our participation process.

Why public participation?

Contemporary texts in the fields of public administration, planning and governance provide interesting arguments for and against active citizen involvement in local governance. The view that citizens themselves can best articulate their own needs, help improve ownership of processes and improve legitimacy of government projects are cited as important reasons for active citizen participation. At the same time, the delays, increased costs and the energy required in determining who to involve, given the complexities of local community dynamics are often cited as factors that mitigate against active participation of stakeholders in collaborative governance.

In our South African context, enabling and progressive national government legislation that now includes communities as part of the definition of local government, have effectively closed the debate on the merits and de-merits of active citizen participation. **It is now a legislative imperative that citizens are actively involved in the governance process. This new conceptualization of local government has prompted local authorities throughout the country to change the previously dominant mindset that viewed community consultation and participation as a tiresome burden that slowed down delivery and had to be merely factored into or added onto the strategy-making process.**

Participation fundamental to achieving our Vision

For us in eThekwini however, stakeholder action has meant much more than a legal imperative that had to be responded to. With the adoption of a new Purpose Statement for eThekwini, *the active involvement of citizens is fundamental to achieving our outcome of improving people's quality of life.* For, without City stakeholders themselves taking action in a new enabling environment provided by the Council, the underlying goal of the entire governance project, would never be realized.

Living up to the expectations of our new Purpose Statement that redefines the very role of the organisation required that Council make every effort to ensure that the strategic intent of its Purpose Statement was translated into reality. This meant that City stakeholders were to be involved in the process of planning, budgeting, implementing and reviewing not just the overall City Strategy, but for key City-wide as well as local community projects and programmes. In order to manage such a daunting process, the Council committed itself institutionally by establishing a fully staffed Unit to dedicated to ensuring that this goal was achieved.

Improving the quality of Service Delivery

In looking back at our participation experience we have learnt that investing in genuine colloborative processes is invaluable because the quality of our service delivery is greatly improved when we consciously integrate ideas from those we serve. As we demonstrate our commitment to listening to City stakeholders and more importantly acting on their ideas, more and more innovative local suggestions start emerging.

Participation can also therefore be a powerful tool to help everyone understand the complexity of development problems and the need for devising integrated responses to difficult challenges.   A good practical example to help demonstrate this learning point is the local experiences from the iTrump Project in the Warwick Triangle area of the Inner City. When the problem of the fat from the bovine head cookers that was being poured into the City stormwater drains became a serious one, engaging the informal traders and ensuring that they understand why this was a problem was necessary.

As the traders began understanding how it blocks up the storm-water system when it hardens - thereby threatening their business site, officials also developed greater understanding for their need of a fat-disposal system that is not onerous for them as entrepreneurs. After a shared understanding was developed and the problem defined, a solution quickly emerged. Through the use of a specially designed strainer on buckets that collected the melted fat that could be easily disposed of when hardened, an integrated solution that dealt with the cause of a problem through a participative approach was reached.

Helping to See the Bigger Picture
More than just improving the quality of service delivery, active participation we found, allows City stakeholders to fully understand the necessity to prioritise when they are confronted with all the needs of the City. For example, during workshops in historically advantaged areas (like Durban North and Westville) participants could see their need of well maintained verges relative to the needs of creating parks and playlots in underinvested areas which never enjoyed such recreational amenities. Stakeholders appreciate the fact that local government has to take care of and provide for the needs of the entire City, if they are exposed to the "bigger picture" beyond their own neighbourhoods. Presenting this information and explaining the needs of other communities during the needs assessment workshops was very useful in this regard.

Engendering a culture of taking responsibility
Furthermore, by directly involving stakeholders in the planning and implementation process we found that they are prepared to take more responsibility in solving local problems. Thus for example, local communities in addressing the challenge of ensuring a safer living environment – an issue that was common across all ward workshops, were prepared to play a greater role in supporting police with crime prevention because they could see reduction in crime as their responsibility too.

Breaking down the barriers of "us and them"

A final observation and learning is that active citizen participation allows communities access to the once "faceless bureaucracy". As stakeholders engage with City officials, the artificial barriers are broken down. Mutual respect and a new spirit of working together becomes enshrined as local solutions to problems are sought.

In summary then, for us in eThekwini the governance experience is an incomplete one unless citizens are actively engaging with us. Without a strong and vibrant partnership, it is impossible for us to achieve our collective vision for the City.

Summary Lesson Box 1.
Lessons learnt on the issue of *"Why Participation"?*

☺ We must have dedicated resources to honour commitments to participation. The establishment of a full time dedicated Community Participation & Action Support Unit is critical for effective stakeholder participation

☺ We learnt that merely having a Unit is not enough. It is necessary that a clear Policy on Stakeholder Participation be adopted to both guide and bind the Council. At the same time it is essential to create participatory structures that are inclusive especially of the different sectors. The training of these structures is also an important intervention as part of an integrated package to build and support the actions of civil society formations

☺ It is a useful investment to run many workshops with senior management and relevant staff on the new role of local government and why it is necessary for active citizen engagement

☺ Related to the above point, is the need to generally develop an engender a culture amongst official to listen to the communities we serve. We have learnt that getting our officials to understand (for example why an issue like insufficient lighting is a problem in an area near a school that has night classes for women) the needs of communities is key

☺ It is also necessary to run training sessions with organs of civil society to capacitate them and ensure that they understand their new roles and responsibilities as partners with local government

☺ It is important to be clear about the intent of the workshop. Never allow the process to be superficial or token. Remember that the workshop intent must always be genuine, or the workshop participants will be justifiably angry!

☹ The issue of "representative versus participative democracy" is still a sensitive one and that more work on building the capacities of Councillors and community leaders are required in this regard

☹ The reality is that active citizen participation is more time-consuming , costly and hard work, but that these must be acknowledged and needs to be consciously built into the design strategy

How should public participation processes be structured?

Having the experience of three years of engaging with City stakeholders at various levels, it is indeed tempting to provide a blueprint for how engagement should be structured. In recognizing and acknowledging the fact that the social realities and needs of cities vary from place to place and from city to city, we strongly contend there can be no ready-made, "one size fits all" strategy that can be effectively employed. The stakeholder programme of engagement must be designed in response to the local needs and realities, and be reflective of the socio-political context within which the process is planned.

Hence, what follows, is not how we think that stakeholder engagement should occur, but merely an overview of how we engaged with stakeholders and what worked particularly well, and what did not as we drafted our City strategy. It is hoped that through this account, the key lessons learnt could be useful to other cities as they begin to design their own participation programmes.

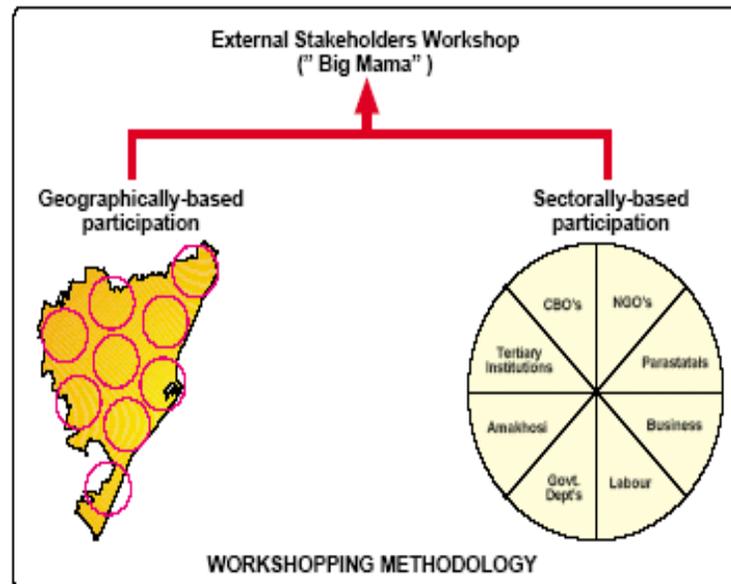### The eThekwini Approach

Milestone-driven Participation
The nature of stakeholder engagement was based very much on organising workshops at various levels during critical points in time during the strategic planning process. For example, key stakeholders were invited at the commencement of the process to help shape the direction of the transformation process. Thereafter engagement was conducted during the identification of community needs, determination of the budget and in finalising strategies as part of the draft strategy.

This approach worked well from a methodological point of view in that it allowed for key inputs to be made at important stages in the planning process. The quality of the interaction and engagements were high and directly influenced the direction of the plan.

In retrospect however, we found that limiting organised participation to key milestones, whilst useful for achieving the ends of the strategic plan, can often be disempowering to the stakeholders themselves. Especially if there are long lags between milestones. This point is further elaborated on when the question of when participation should occur is discussed later.

Geographic and Sectoral Participation
The other key feature of our approach was the utilisation of stakeholder workshopping at the geographic level: community / ward workshops (e.g. typical local stakeholders include Civic and Ratepayers Associations, Community Policing Forums, Local Sports Bodies, Ward Development Forums, etc) and the sectoral level: engaging the key organisations that operate within the different sectors (NGOs, parastatals, business, labour, tertiary institutions, etc) from across the City. See diagram below:

External Stakeholders Workshop
(" Big Mama")

Geographically-based participation

Sectorally-based participation

CBO's | NGO's
Tertiary Institutions | Parastatals
Amakhosi | Business
Govt. Dept's | Labour

WORKSHOPPING METHODOLOGY

Representatives drawn from both these levels were then workshopped at strategic points in a larger gathering of City-wide stakeholders in events labeled "Big Mama" workshops.

The utilisation of this three-fold approach did prove to be useful in ensuring quality inputs and allowing for discussion and debate from civil society and other key sectors.
Whilst the process did help achieve the outcome, in retrospect it is contended that more time and energy should have been spent engaging with the key sectors as part of a more thorough needs segmentation exercise. For example whilst a separate workshop was held with the business sector, this was not as extensive nor was the process sustained.

Multi-media Mass Communication

In addition to using organized workshops as a mechanism to ensure stakeholder engagement, members of the public were invited at any stage of the strategic planning process to submit their comments, criticisms and general inputs to the Strategy team. This call was made by the Office of the City Manager using the newsletter posted on the official Council website, our free public Council magazine (which is posted to all electricity subscribers) and through notices posted at public libraries inviting public comment on the various versions of our City Strategy. At times during the process, the mainstream media were provided with press releases or invited to press conferences to ensure that they were equipped to convey the latest developments with regard to City Strategy development.

Summary Lesson Box 2.
Participation how?

We have learnt that:

☺ Using the work-shopping approach at a sectoral and ward basis, together with the "Big Mama" type of engagement does prove to be a useful combination to engage with stakeholders
☹ We must spend more time in a sustained, *needs segmentation process*, which allows for a thorough and rigorous engagement with the different sectors of the City
☹ We must revisit the way citizens influence and shape the budget process to deepen local participation (see also chapter nine)
☹ We must revisit the way in which internal stakeholders (all staff from the organization) participate. We found that there is a need to be as thorough with our officials as with communities as the "transformation" of approach amongst officials in essential for the success of the participatory process. Relying exclusively on senior management to cascade information to all staff is not the most effective mechanism to be used.

When and *at what points* should stakeholders be involved?

As explained above, our approach focused on engaging key stakeholders at critical milestones in the strategic planning process. In looking back at our own experience, it has to be acknowledged that whilst every effort was made to ensure continued stakeholder participation, the process was not a sustained and even one. In retrospect, we accede that participation has been erratic and event dependent. This meant that during the lags between milestones, our stakeholders were not always in touch with the latest development or changes made in the strategy. As a result, when the next event was planned, some stakeholders felt out of the loop and even disempowered. This observation, although a sensitive one, must be considered to ensure that stakeholder partnerships are strong and effective.

Summary Lesson Box 3.
When Participation ?

We have learnt that:

☹ Milestone / event based participation, whilst effective as part of the strategy process can be disempowering if the milestones are not evenly spread throughout the strategy-making process. This can lead to citizens doubting the seriousness of the City's commitment to participation.

☺ A more sustainable approach is to ensure that fixed workshops are planned for throughout the year – e.g. quarterly or bi-monthly. In this way, all stakeholders are full appraised on the progress made on the City Plan. This consistency and predictability itself makes participation more effective.

Around *what* issues should we be engaging in?

Underpinning the debate about what role stakeholders should be playing in strategy and in what matters of governance generally they should be engaged, are fundamental mindsets about who is responsible for decision-making. Whilst it is acknowledged that the Council is ultimately responsible for final decision-making through legislatively prescribed processes, the last three years of stakeholder engagement has allowed us to refine and develop our views in this regard.

Beyond the "Blue Sky" approach
In the first year of strategy-making, particularly during the time of our first Big-Mama workshop, we held the view that Councillors, officials and all stakeholders should sit together and jointly determine the solutions relating to the key development challenges facing the City. Referred to as the "blue sky" approach" representing a clean canvass on which solutions are jointly developed, we found that whilst this process was participatory, it did not yield solutions that were technically well thought through, given that they were generated through discussion and debates on the workshop floor. In addition, the process was highly time-consuming as all roleplayers were often eager to add value to the debate.

It was interesting that the stakeholders themselves also found such a process less productive and raised the question as to why officials did not investigate technical options and at least provide a framework within which informed discussion could take place. As a result of this experience a new approach was developed, which is successfully being employed currently. This involves the strategy team developing a well thought out strategic proposal, identifying the key issues of concern and incomplete solutions that could address the concerns. The nature of stakeholder engagement is then to interrogate the proposals and attempt to develop more complete solutions to the key issues raised.

This approach is successfully applied to any substantive matter that stakeholders are engaged in – from planning to strategic budgeting to performance management or refining any strategic policy. We found this approach to be highly effective and acceptable to our stakeholders, officials and Councillors.

Summary Lesson Box 4
Participation around what?

We have learnt that:
☺ The nature of the issues that are being debated is not as important as how the participation is structured. Irrespective of the issue, effective participation resulted when the City developed a draft strategic framework which stakeholders engaged with. Starting off without any framework and developing strategy together is time-consuming and often counter-productive.

☺ It is a misconception that communities concern themselves only with what happens in their own areas. Great interest in most of our wards throughout the City was shown in bigger, more strategic issues affecting the city at large. Of course, the ideal approach is to twin these issues with those closer to home.

Who exactly should participate?

By far, one of the greatest participation challenges facing development practitioners involved in City-wide as well as community-scale projects are those related to the politics of representation. Clearly the question of who really represents the interests of communities and hence who should be drawn into the participation process is a complex one, often loaded with assumptions. Over the last decade, there has been a growing recognition that previously held notions of "the community" or "citizens" as discrete and homogenous groupings with shared interests and clear leadership are highly inaccurate.

It is now widely accepted that involving leadership from communities (defined both geographically and sectorally, e.g. religious, sporting, etc.) alone are not in itself adequate. In the early 1990's stakeholder consultation predominantly consisted of meetings between authorities and local community leadership. This trend of participation of local leadership exclusively, was replaced in the late 1990's as the concept of Development Forums gained prominence. This marked a move away from the traditional community leadership model to a sectoral interest group type of stakeholder engagement. It is this model that prevails today, and one that appears to have worked fairly successfully in ward workshops conducted in 100 wards across the City.

It is recognized that the issues of whether or not the representatives from each of the sectors adequately represent the interests of the group, as well as the effectiveness of the reporting-back to the sector are key in determining the quality of the participation. However, this approach does appear to be effective, particularly if it is accompanied with mass communication and publicity drives to ensure that the general public are informed and are aware that they have representatives who are accountable for articulating their views and tabling their interests.

Summary Lesson Box 5.
 Who should participate?

We have learnt that:

☺ It is never possible to ensure that all the "right people" participate. What is important is to ensure that all the sectors interests are well represented and that effective mechanisms are in place to ensure that the general public are fully aware of the process underway.

☺ It is important in am metropolitan area that includes traditional leadership, to ensure that mechanisms are in place to actively involve traditional leadership in the strategy process.

☹ Given the fluidity of leaderships, it is often difficult to ensure continuity of participation from the various sectors. This must be borne in mind, and factored in the design process. In addition, we found that in wealthier areas, public–minded individuals dominate the workshops, rather than local community organizations. This raises interesting issues around representivity that must be borne in mind.

Who should be responsible for the participation process?

There can be no disagreement that there is a need for a dedicated team to drive the participation process. Such a team should have the full support and mandate of the City's strategic leadership and empowered to design and organize an appropriate participation programme.

Whether or not this team is drawn from within the organization or from an external agency / consultancy would depend on capacity considerations of the organization involved. Given the fact that our organization had a fair amount of capacity and that staff from various departments had indicated their willingness to be trained as participation facilitators, it was decided that we should build on this strength and develop an internal cadre of participation champions and a team of internal facilitators.

It is important to note that this team was activated only as and when needed and individuals were otherwise busy with the work of the various line departments from which they were drawn. In order to augment this capacity, a team of community mobilisers was contracted from the community to assist in supporting the various structures from within the community and assisting Councillors in ensuring that all wards were fully informed of workshops and were capacitated to participate.

Whilst the internal facilitators and community mobilisers were instrumental in liaison with the community, it was clear that in all instances the person accountable in these interactions and indeed the person responsible for the chairing of all community workshops was the Councillor. Whilst teething problems were experienced in the early stages of the workshopping process as mobilisers, facilitators and Councillors were acclimatising themselves to their new roles, these were soon resolved and a sound partnership was soon established.