



CITIZENSHIP AS BECOMING

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In many respects, South Africa has an active and vocal citizenry, but an unintended outcome of government actions has been to reduce the incentive for citizens to be direct participants in their own development. To prevent this practice from being entrenched, the state must actively support and incentivise citizen engagement and citizens should:

- ✦ Actively seek opportunities for advancement, learning, experience and opportunity.*
- ✦ Work together with others in the community to advance development, resolve problems and raise the concerns of the voiceless and marginalised.*
- ✦ Hold government, business and all leaders in society accountable for their actions.*

Active citizenry and social activism is necessary for democracy and development to flourish. The state cannot merely act on behalf of the people – it has to act with the people, working together with other institutions to provide opportunities for the advancement of all communities. (The Presidency 2012: 37)



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THE NATIONAL Development Plan (NDP) views active citizenship as one of three 'cogs' that need to work effectively to keep the wheels of development going in a

desirable direction. The other cogs are strong leadership and a capable state (or effective government). The emphasis on active citizenship, or civic activism, has

been widely welcomed, particularly by organisations working at the coalface of community development, human rights and participatory local democracy. The assumption that prior to November 2011, citizens have not been ‘direct participants in their development’ would be incorrect. Since well before the launch of the NDP, citizens have been participating in matters that affect their socio-economic wellbeing and expressing their views on the nature and pace of development, and on the quality of governance. The most visible expression of this participation appears to be community-based protests, which are becoming more commonplace, particularly since 2009 (Municipal IQ 2013). What is especially worrying is that violence and the destruction of public property increasingly define these protests.² However, as Von Holdt et al. (2011) remind us, non-violent protest actions often precede violent protest. Such actions are ‘the smoke that calls’ because, when they prove to be ineffective in getting recognition for the concerns and demands raised, collective violence becomes a way of attracting attention and ensuring responsiveness from those in leadership positions.

However, to suggest that protest – as a form of ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Holston 1998) – is the only strategy citizens engage in to exercise citizenship would be highly unfair to local communities. Countless civic structures and organisations, involved in community development, social welfare, human rights, civic education and social mobilisation, are operating below the radar of people in powerful positions and a sensationalist media. As contributions from Planact, SERI and CORC in this publication illustrate, smart (and sometimes perhaps not so smart) forms of civic activism predate November 2011, more often than not in the face of a seemingly unresponsive, uncaring, callous or even intolerant and aggressive state. The SERI paper shows how a local community organises itself into a representative structure that engages in a variety of

strategies and tactics to exert agency, lays claims on the state (at times even holds back an aggressive state), develops the community and even contests elections. The Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC) is emblematic of thousands of community structures working to improve the lives of the poor, to mobilise local communities, to demand better services and leadership from their municipalities. No one can deny that the TCC has been active in a manner envisaged by the NDP, but the storyline here differs from the narrative suggested by the NDP. Whereas the NDP notes that government actions have inadvertently reduced the incentive for citizens to be involved in their own development (The Presidency 2012: 37), the TCC case study shows how government *inaction* and perceived intolerance become an incentive for citizens to get more involved and exercise political agency.

BOX 1. HOW THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (NDP) DEFINES ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The NDP reflects the following conceptions of active citizenship:

1. Active citizenship is related to rights, equalising opportunities and enhancing human capabilities.
2. There is a strong correlation between active citizenship, government (routine) accountability and responsiveness. Reference is made to the two-way communication between government and citizens as well as the need to ‘hold government to account’ and ‘speaking out when things go wrong’ (as a civic duty).
3. With direct reference to local government, citizen participation needs to be mainstreamed and citizen priorities need to shape municipal planning. The NDP notes that: IDP processes need to be municipality-led; participation in IDP processes needs to be deliberative and engage communities in prioritising and making trade-offs; and, local government needs to engage people in their own spaces, rather than expect them to come to governmental forums.

WHAT IS ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP?

It is perhaps in recognition of these local struggles for recognition, agency, accountability and responsive leadership, and for more equitable development outcomes that the NDP forefronts active citizenship as a key driver of development and social transformation. However, although the NDP gives some pointers as to what active citizenship means, it stops short of defining the notion (see Box 1). The notion clearly has a “feel good” factor, which adds to its appeal across sections of society. This is similar to other worthwhile and intrinsically “good” concepts in development literature, such as sustainability, empowerment or resilience, which reveal a morass of widely divergent, possibly contradictory (or even irreconcilable) perspectives when one scratches the surface.

Likewise, active citizenship is a contested notion, imbued with different meanings and connotations. As the papers by DDP, the Black Sash and the Mvula Trust note, political theory distinguishes between an individualistic conception of citizenship (liberal, or libertarian notion), a communitarian conception focusing on group identity and the common good, and a civic republican conception, which emphasises civic morality and participation (Jochum et al. 2005). This collection of papers reflects an interpretation that transcends the individualistic conception of citizenship, one that is embedded, and finds expression, within communities that engage in political struggles. This is politics with a small ‘p’, from the Greek notion of *politikos* meaning ‘of, or relating to, citizens’ (in other words, civic) rather than ‘for citizens’. It is concerned as much with rights and responsibilities as with decision-making processes and development practice.

Thus, active citizenship, as quoted in the DDP and the Mvula Trust papers, is both an active process and a status associated with holding rights. This understanding is echoed in other conceptions of active citizenship, which are not mutually exclusive but

overlap at times. The different terminologies – “claim-making”, “enlarging political agency”, “becoming” and “deliberation” – help to elucidate different concerns and points of emphasis.

Active citizenship is a multi-dimensional image that includes vertical relationships (citizens engaging with the state) and horizontal relationships (citizens engaging with and among themselves). The notions of claim-making and enlarging political agency reflect a particular interest with the vertical relationship between politically and/or geographically defined communities and the state (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Active citizenship as a vertical (two-way) relationship



The notion of *citizenship as claim-making* finds particular resonance in South Africa, where such a large part of the population face daily livelihood struggles and live in deprived and desolate environments. This conception is particularly evident in social movements that ‘have emphasised the constitution of active social subjects – the ability to become political agents – as the crucial dimension of citizenship. [...] Thus consciousness, agency and the capacity to struggle are seen by them as evidence of citizenship, even if other rights are absent’ (Dagnino 2005: 155).

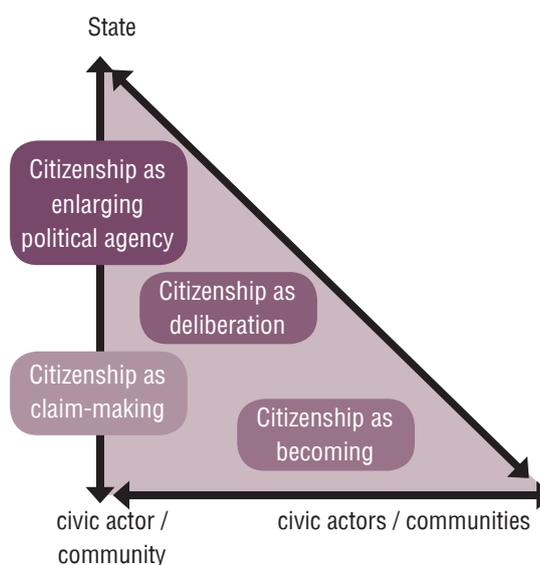
The notion of *citizenship as enlarging political agency* equally refers to the ability to claim rights, with the additional strong emphasis on holding the state accountable. This conception is particularly prevalent in the NDP, which posits a strong correlation between active citizenship, government (routine) accountability and responsiveness. It also underpins the Community Monitoring and Advocacy Programme (CMAP) of the Black Sash and the Citizens' Voice Model of the Mvula Trust, which are elaborated on in their respective contributions.

The inclusion of the notions of *citizenship as becoming* and *citizenship as deliberation* adds a horizontal dimension to the concept of active citizenship. Citizenship as becoming puts particular emphasis on citizenship as process – 'it is extended as it is acquired in spaces of participation' (Cornwall et al 2008: 34). The age-old idea of learning by doing becomes 'learning citizenship through practice'. A distinct, yet complementary notion is citizenship as deliberation, which emphasises the relationships between different political and/or geographic communities and the idea that negotiation is at the heart of the process. In this conception, citizenship is about 'the lived experience of negotiating positions' (Cornwall et al. 2008: 34). The importance of deliberation is also acknowledged in the NDP (The Presidency 2012: 438), which highlights that 'participation in IDP processes needs to be deliberative and engage communities in prioritising and making trade-offs'. Similarly, contributions by Afesis-corporan, CORC, DDP and Isandla Institute highlight deliberation as a key feature of democratic practice.

With the addition of the horizontal dimension – civic actors engage with and among themselves – a multi-dimensional image of active citizenship emerges, as illustrated in Figure 2.

This publication brings the horizontal dimension to the fore quite explicitly, without romanticising poor communities as virtuous, altruistic and homogeneous.

Figure 2. Active citizenship as a horizontal and vertical relationship



The paper by the Mvula Trust openly comments on the fractured nature of local communities and the associated challenges in presenting a coherent, collective front when engaging the state. Similarly, but in different ways, the experiences described by Planact and SERI remind us that power is not only embedded in the (vertical) relationship between state and communities, but is also ubiquitous in community dynamics. In particular, the Planact paper highlights the messiness of community politics and how well-intending NGOs somehow end up in the middle. The paper acts as a useful reminder that community politics often emulates and is deeply enmeshed with existing political structures and contestations – as so powerfully reflected in Harber's (2011) account of Diepsloot. Similarly, the SERI paper illustrates the challenges and dynamics of community politics and what this means for a community structure seeking to represent the interest of the community. The papers by Isandla Institute and DDP suggest that dialogue and learning within and among communities is at least as important as with the state, and both are

needed for facilitating and sustaining communities of practice.

Short of theorising the notion of active citizenship, this section has sought to provide some definitional pointers. Definitional clarity of concepts is important in ensuring that we mean the same thing when we use similar words. The definition or interpretation adopted also has implications for how the current situation is read and what is proposed as a solution of sorts. More often than not, it also has implications for what is considered “good” or “becoming” citizenship.

“BECOMING” CITIZENSHIP

When unpacking the notion of active citizenship, it is easy to slip from active citizen to good or becoming citizen. The implicit normative underpinning of “good” participation has allowed the state (and other actors) to dismiss protests as an invalid expression of agency. After all, a good citizen can be expected to adhere to preset norms and standards of engagement. Yet, when civic actors experience such norms and standards as restrictive and exclusionary and use other strategies and tactics to make their voices heard, they can be branded “bad” or “improper”.

What constitutes a citizen whose conduct is becoming will depend on the chosen conception of citizenship. The neo-liberal view is one of individual integration into the market, while the middle-class one is merit-based individual agency. Both conceptions are problematic in the South African context of high levels of poverty, structural unemployment and rising inequality. A third conception stems from a paternalistic notion that sees those who are poor and marginalised as victims of circumstances, incapable of self-expression and in need of capacity development. Many other conceptions of citizenship undoubtedly exist, but what is important here is the failure to recognise anything that falls outside the chosen conception as modes or acts of citizenship.

Thus, prejudicial values and attitudes hamper the ability of others, including the state, to view marginalised groups as fully fledged citizens. As the CORC paper suggests, people living in informal settlements are perhaps regarded as the antithesis of active (read: good) citizens, as their place and very presence in the city is, more often than not, contested, if not denied. The experiences of other informal settlements communities narrated by SERI and Planact underscore this point. The paper by the Mvula Trust focuses on another majority population that, notwithstanding progressive policy and institutional arrangements, finds itself on the margins of socio-political society: women. Not only are the gender-blind or inherently male-biased norms and standards of engagement stacked against them, at best women are seen as victims of circumstance, in need of capacity development.

This idea – that people need to be capacitated before they can truly be regarded as active citizens – is very dominant in South Africa. Of course, people become disempowered and further marginalised without the right information, skills, competencies, attitudes and instincts. Indeed, the papers by Afesis-Corplan and DDP highlight the important role of civic education in supporting and sustaining agency and civic activism. However, emphasising capacity building can obscure the underlying normative (read: prejudicial) positioning, implying one of three views, that:

1. Local communities or marginalised groups are incapable of understanding and expressing their needs and aspirations.
2. Civil actors must reach a certain stage of development before they can express themselves (correctly) and should be using the appropriate channels before they can be considered active citizens. This would allow for a dichotomy to emerge between active and passive citizens, with a higher status attached to those that have reach this particular stage of development.

3. The terrain of engagement has been set, and the acceptable modes of expressing agency are predefined. In other words, the people will have to change, adapt and be capacitated, as the modes and structures of engagement are fixed. This is not very different from the prevailing fixation on citizens using set structures (most particularly the ward committee system) and processes to express their voices and make claims.

Hickey and Mohan (2005) provide a useful summary of how development theory and practice over the past few decades has reflected different interpretations and emphases of participation, as a right and obligation of citizenship. They conclude that participation is not merely a technical project method, but a political empowerment methodology aimed at enhancing capabilities. This view of participation ties in with the notion of citizenship as becoming, of learning through practice, of transforming and democratising the political process in ways that progressively alter the realities of inclusion and exclusion.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

What is called for is an explicitly political approach to development, one that is simultaneously profoundly contextual. After all, citizenship is lived, enacted and reconstituted in particular contexts. Yet contextualising meanings and practices of citizenship goes beyond the rights inscribed in the Constitution. Rather, it is about the micro-politics of everyday life, where groups are simultaneously distinct and overlapping.

The South African context is characterised by high levels of poverty, informality and structural inequality:

- ✳ About two million households living in informal dwellings in informal settlements and backyards (News24 2012).

- ✳ The South African Child Gauge 2012 estimates that six out of 10 children live in poverty, and many of them cry themselves to sleep because they are hungry (Hall et al. 2012).
- ✳ About one in nine South Africans is infected with HIV.
- ✳ According to the expanded unemployment rate, just over one in three South Africans (36%) is jobless.
- ✳ 61% of job seekers do not have matric.
- ✳ Over 50% of youth aged 15–24 years is unemployed. Approximately one third of this age group is not in employment, education or training, which is likely to put more pressure on the labour market (Statistics South Africa 2013).
- ✳ Inequality is entrenched and South Africa is amongst the most unequal countries in the world.

In addition, the psychological impact of South Africa's violent history of oppression on its people manifests in various socio-economic ills, including extreme levels of violent crimes, especially toward women and children, and high levels of suicide and substance abuse. The deep fissures permeating society, and the difficulty to accept disagreement and dissent, stem from this reality of woundedness and deep-seated distrust of self and others. The psychological state of South Africa as a whole, and its marginalised communities in particular, is precarious at best.

The context sketched above provides the canvass against which agency and identity is formed, claims are made and citizenship as status is assessed. The sense of patriotism underpinning the NDP demands that all South Africans recognise these realities, which can in fact serve to drive and channel their civic activism. Yet to make the ambitions of the NDP a reality requires a political vision of development and participation. In his paper, Edgar Pieterse laments the absence of a clear political vision for animating and sustaining deep citizenship, in a context characterised by poverty,

unemployment, inequality and spatial dysfunctionalities, and levels similar critiques at both the ruling party and organised civil society. Taking a similar view, Hickey and Mohan (2005: 15) challenge NGOs to develop stronger ‘political forms of participatory thought and action’, which will require ‘moving beyond the locality with empowerment involving multi-scaled strategies and networks’. Edgar Pieterse refers to this as ‘network politics’, which need to be imbued with ‘(non-violent) militancy, coupled to a politics of proposition and co-production’.

Citizenship is a notion that links agency, politics, culture and place (Hickey and Mohan 2005), and contributions to this publication focus on all or some of these dimensions. The papers by Afesis-corplan, the Mvula Trust and DDP recognise culture and identity as an important aspect, whereas the papers by CORC, Isandla Institute, Planact and SERI reinforce the significance of place. Edgar Pieterse adds work as a fifth dimension, by explicitly bringing to the fore the South African context of high levels of poverty and structural unemployment. This addition resonates with the papers by CORC, the Mvula Trust and the Black Sash, which focus on the role of communities as (co-)producers of development and (in the case of the Black Sash) as project implementers.

What is clear is that citizenship as becoming is both profoundly political and deeply contextual. In the words of Cornwall et al. (2008: 35), ‘Citizenship is less an identity than something that is **performed, affirmed and reconstituted** in different ways in different spaces. It is intimately linked with the ways people come to constitute themselves as social actors and their vistas over the social terrains of which they are part’ [emphasis added].

WHAT ABOUT THE STATE

All papers in this publication recognise that the state has played, and continues to play, an important role in enabling certain modes and experiences of citizenship to emerge. The Afesis-corplan paper is cognisant of

the state’s weak capability to engage communities in a meaningful, inclusive manner, which leads to consequential outcomes. Particular mention is made of the pervasive compliance culture in local government that is hindering, among others, meaningful participation. The papers by Planact and SERI illustrate civic activism *despite* the state and in many instances *against* a state experienced as aloof, indifferent and aggressive. Underpinning these and other papers is the recognition that a paradigm shift is needed, towards fundamentally different values, attitudes and political culture, which is a theme particularly highlighted in the SERI paper.

The papers by the Black Sash and the Mvula Trust both highlight accountability as a defining feature of a developmental, responsive and capable state, whereas the DDP paper emphasises government’s role in promoting community building and active citizenship (a notion further concretised in Isandla Institute’s description of a citizenship academy).

The CORC and Isandla Institute contributions consider both sides of the equation – the state and civic actors. The CORC experience illustrates a different modality of engagement between the two sides, one that is about building trust, co-production and co-ownership of both process and development outcomes (and in the process serves as a useful reminder of how long such processes take). The paper by Isandla Institute points out that both the state and civic actors need new capabilities in order to reframe development as a collaborative, yet political project. For communities of practice to emerge and flourish will require evidence-based and contextually suited knowledge (‘cunning intelligence’) and political judgement, moral vision and emotional sensitivity (‘practical wisdom’).

As mentioned, Edgar Pieterse posits that government lacks a clear political vision of how to animate and sustain deep citizenship. His paper outlines an alternative conception of citizenship empowerment that

centres on the notion of community work and is made possible through a host of community–government partnership and interface bodies.

THE PROVERBIAL ELEPHANT

Before concluding, it is important to pause and identify a particularly deafening silence in this collection of papers. While the Afesis-corplan paper gives some recognition to the important role of political champions, overall there is little reflection on the role of political parties and the nature and quality of (party) politics.

The pessimistic reading is that many of us have become disheartened with the politics of the day. This comes through in the Planact and Afesis-corplan papers, which reflect concern with the perceived/real trend of community activists and leaders who, once they find themselves in elected office, become part of the gatekeeping and elite problem. Arguably, the value of community activists entering the municipality is that this could be seen as the next vanguard of the struggle for responsive governance and improved development outcomes. Sadly, the Afesis-corplan paper and the Planact paper in particular show the risk of ‘personifying’ active citizenship and the perceived embodiment of this notion by leaders, who can then become gatekeepers or see themselves as the “true” custodians of community aspirations and development initiatives. This resonates with the ‘vanguard logic’ that characterises the dominant political culture, most notable in the ANC (Pieterse and van Donk 2013). This ‘vanguard logic’ forecloses dynamic opportunities for civic engagement and ‘fails to appreciate that deep participatory democracy must embrace independent and open-ended institutional systems of agonistic deliberation, contestation, social agreements and review’ (Pieterse and van Donk 2013: 120).

The NDP has also been less pronounced on how to deal with political society, preferring to take a more

common sense and managerial approach on how to deal with the vagaries of political society, more especially political parties. Yet, the dominant political culture is not in favour of civic activism and active citizenship as put forward in the NDP and in this publication. The question is whether we can afford to leave “fixing” or transforming the political culture to the experts, i.e. political parties. Without a radical shift in political (and institutional) culture, none of these critical issues – embracing agency and civic activism, negotiated politics and indeed effective local government – will become a reality.

The positive reading is that by virtue of focusing on politics with a small ‘p’, this publication is reclaiming political space that has erroneously been left to political parties to occupy. After all, civic activism is political, regardless of how it is expressed. Ultimately, the papers seek to make a contribution to a transformative politics of development, informed by a robust and unashamedly political vision of participation.

CONCLUSION

The notion of active citizenship has widespread appeal. Yet, it is ambiguous and open-ended. Clarifying the definition and interpretation of active citizenship is important, in part because it is easy to slip into normative dichotomies of “good”/“bad” citizens, or “becoming”/“unbecoming” conduct. Active citizenship is multi-dimensional, involving vertical engagements between civic actors and the state and horizontal relationships among civic actors. It is also profoundly political and deeply contextual. The challenge to the South African government, political parties and civil society alike is to develop a radical political vision and transformative methodologies to animate and sustain modes of active citizenship that are relevant to the developmental challenges of the country.

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NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank Tristan Görgens for being a repository of useful readings, and Kristina Davidson for immensely valuable suggestions to improve the readability of this paper.
- ² Municipal IQ records the highest number of service delivery protests in 2012 since 2004, with over three quarters being violent in nature (Municipal IQ 2013).