EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fifth edition of the State of Local Governance publication, "Active Citizenship Matters", is dedicated to a subject considered a building block in the national government's vision for the country. This publication explores how the notion of active citizenship can serve as an analytical concept to review the nature and quality of participatory local democracy in South Africa. It also considers it as a paradigm to inspire new models and practices that are relevant in South Africa's development context. Nineteen years into democracy, the evident waning trust in local government in particular has reignited the debate around the role of civil society in the governance of the country. The National Development Plan acknowledges this positing active citizenship as a critical cog in the wheel of development, together with strong leadership and a capable state.

In the introduction to this publication, Mirjam van Donk stresses the importance of clarifying the definition and interpretation of the notion of active citizenship. The notion of active citizenship has widespread appeal, yet it is ambiguous and open-ended. She also alerts us of the easy slippage into normative notions of "good" or "becoming" citizenship. Emphasising the multidimensionality of active citizenship, she introduces notions of claim-making and enlarging political agency as indicative of a concern with the vertical relationship between civic actors and the state. The notions citizenship as becoming and as deliberation add a horizontal dimension, with citizens engaging with and among themselves. She further stresses the importance of a clear political vision of development and transformation, with citizenship being deeply contextual. She concludes with a call to radically transform dominant political culture to enable the vision of active citizenship to become a reality.

The paper by Edgar Pieterse encourages an innovative approach to engaging the community in the development process with great emphasis on recognising the role of civic actors in a more formal capacity. Based on South Africa's development priorities, he argues for the recognition of the social sector as a formal entity in community development. Furthermore he explores how to utilise the barriers which contextualise community environments as opportunities to engage citizens in a practical model of development. He makes a particularly strong case for contextualising citizenship, which in South Africa's context means taking into account the perennial challenge of unemployment and poverty. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of a solid institutional architecture that will create and strengthen community-government partnerships and interface structures.

Isandla Institute builds on the arguments in the preceding paper and emphasises the critical role of citizenship academies as mooted by the National Planning Commission. The paper conceptualises citizenship academies as "learning spaces" to be initiated by municipalities in partnership with local civil society or learning institutions. While the citizenship academy incorporates a strong focus on community empowerment, particularly in relation to practical planning, dialogue and project management at neighbourhood level to inform local government development processes, the ultimate goal would be to facilitate a structured and sustained dialogue between communities and local government in the form of communities of practice.

The next three papers reflect on the experiences of, and opportunities for, active citizenship in the context of informal settlements. Each of these papers presents examples of proactive citizenship which demonstrate the readiness of some communities to tackle the most critical issues pertaining to their rights.

The Planact paper is a sobering reminder of the way community politics work. It illustrates how issues of power and representation can be highly contested in communities and how a well-intentioned NGO can find itself caught up in these political dynamics. It further shows that deep distrust of the state, often borne out of real and painful experiences, obscures any meaningful engagement about the essence of community development.

In its paper, the Socio- Economic Rights Institute of South Africa broadens this perspective to power dynamics which influence the relationship between grassroots community and local government structures. The paper outlines the struggle of the Thembelihle Crisis Committee to be acknowledged by the relevant local government structures in various decision-making processes directly impacting the people of this community. This case study offers critical insights into the elements that mould a united community; more importantly, it reminds the reader that community trust can only be gained through sincere and transparent engagement at the grassroots level.

The Community Organization Resource Centre's paper concretises what co-production of development means. It reflects on the significance of formal partnerships between local government and organisations of the urban poor, and illustrates the dynamics of establishing and sustaining such partnerships in Cape Town and Stellenbosch. It makes a strong case for community-led partnerships that are based on innovative micro–initiatives by the community in addressing the challenges of informal settlements.

A silver line running through most papers is that government cannot approach community engagement in the development process as a checklist exercise. The process has to be a sincere, thorough and consistent, and dialogue at the right level, inclusive of all relevant parties, is a key success factor.

The Democracy Development Programme (DDP) focuses on dialogue as a critical methodology to exercise and sustain active citizenship. It suggests that while dialogue is critical in the process of the development process, the quality of any dialogue process is determined by the approach that is taken. The paper reflects on the use of this methodology in different communities and its transformative potential. The paper further makes an argument for civic education that encourages a willingness to participate on the part of the citizen in the development process which will enable a shift in the mindset of the latter, i.e. from subject of the discussion to active participant. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that all stakeholders in the dialogue process share in the ownership and accountability of the development process.

The civic education theme is picked up by Afesis-Corplan, which explores the main barriers in fostering and sustaining active citizenship. The paper also explores the role of the NGO sector in facilitating dialogue between local government and the community. This issue is closely linked to the classism, which hinders constructive dialogue between community and government. The community will not engage freely in a process with stakeholders if the perception is that government will consider them inarticulate due to the level of their education. The paper concludes by recommending civic education, nurturing community leadership and supporting political champions to shift the status quo to a more inclusive process of community engagement.

The final two papers present practical models for community-based monitoring and instilling vertical accountability in government. The Black Sash Trust presents its Community Monitoring and Advocacy Programme, which offers a tried and tested model for building the capacity of ordinary citizens to take ownership of their development processes by playing a role in monitoring public services. The paper offers critical learnings in the methodology of the project and a key outcome of the process is the level of ownership expressed by community participants in the form of requests for additional information and training to monitor key government services not included in the scope of the project.

The Mvula Trust outlines the Citizens' Voice Model as a platform for rural women to develop and communicate their development agenda with local government. The paper highlights the effectiveness of creating targeted platforms related to critical services within a given community context. Water and sanitation services are critical in the rural context and this model explores the success of an initiative that connects primary users and managers of these services with local government structures to ensure constructive dialogue and, ultimately, better development outcomes.

Active citizenship is a critical cog in the wheel of development as specified in the National Development Plan. However, the ideology of engaging the citizen in the development process to encourage ownership of their rights and responsibilities is defined by the context of a given environment. In the absence of a strong political vision and political will to sincerely facilitate a process of community engagement, willingness on the part of civic actors alone cannot foster a spirit of cooperation in local governance. At the same time apathetic and insincere leadership at community level will lead to the disintegration of communities and further isolate the people, especially those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Clearly, active citizenship matters; but the development trajectory of the country is unlikely to change unless the political, contextual and multidimensional nature of active citizenship is recognised.