

CONCLUSION

Municipalities are intended to be at the interface between government and citizens. However, as various contributions in this publication have highlighted, current institutional mechanisms to promote inclusivity and representivity are frequently weak and often (and perhaps inadvertently) undermine democratic participation rather than promote it. Weak capacity (both human and financial), weak leadership, mismanagement and corruption continue to be challenges. In addition, ongoing capacity and resource constraints of ward committees, and partisan politics that polarise these forums and frustrate attempts to take substantive decisions, have also meant that this forum intended to provide a voice for communities has functioned unevenly.

More fundamental is the critique that public participation has by and large become a technician and procedural exercise, driven by the state on terms set by the state. The challenge, if not inability, of the state to give substantive meaning to participatory local democracy is echoed in its efforts to pursue equality. As noted by the PCRD, there is a difference between equality as lived reality versus equity as a procedural component of democratic institutions. The goal of achieving socio-economic equality has been reduced to a set of indicators that do not reflect any substantive realisation of this ambition, and which are difficult (in some cases impossible) to verify. Thus, both conceptually and logistically, bureaucratic attempts to make equity a cornerstone of democratic institutions fall short, ensuring citizen frustration with persistent socio-economic inequalities.

Poor coordination between the different spheres of government means that even where community participation is functioning well, the voice of communities can be ignored or have limited impact when decisions are made elsewhere, beyond the municipal sphere, with little to no communication to, or recourse for, affected communities. This issue is discussed by Planact, who suggest that government needs to start developing more organic, less rigid forms of interaction between the different spheres, rather than limiting themselves to scheduled interactions as defined by policy and legislation.

Over and above these weaknesses, there is the added factor of the bureaucratisation of democratic participation. The institutionalisation of public participation has resulted in a narrowing of what is considered a legitimate expression of community voice and dissent, with “invited spaces” becoming the primary (if not only) way in which the government is willing to engage with citizens. Within these pre-defined spaces, meaningful engagement is often non-existent, as citizens are framed as being “passive and lacking in agency... In many ways the concept of participation has been conflated with information, consultation and negotiation” (DDP: 90).

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The most broadly applied form of an “invited space” is the Ward Committee system – there are now more than 4 200 wards of which almost all have set up committees. Despite the popularity of this system, Afesis-Corplan and Idasa note that they frequently ignore marginalised members of communities despite legislative measures to ensure representivity, while weaknesses in capacity, political conflict and a lack of community involvement have plagued this forum. This does not mean that ward committees have no value – as the BESG case study reflects, with the right combination of circumstances, including good relationships with CDWs and CBOs, it is possible for them to become a meaningful part of citizen engagement.

Ward committees are not the only invited forum – the dual system of local government, particularly in rural areas, includes traditional authorities who are often heavily involved in decision-making at the local level. As noted by TCOE, however, these are often not representative of the concerns of the community and the “current legislative framework locates them more as subjects of traditional authorities rather than citizens of a democratic country” (TCOE: 80), which has increased the frustration of rural communities.

The reluctance of citizens to continue to be bound to processes and structures that function unevenly and that seem to have a minimal impact on substantive change in the socio-economic circumstances of communities is understandable, and part of the reason for the increased incidents of community protests as an expression of voice and dissatisfaction. There is little incentive for citizens (particularly those who are socially and/or economically marginalised) to try to work an unworkable system in the face of government’s “attempts to forge ahead with the implementation of projects in total disregard of people’s legitimate grievances”, resorting instead to the “devising of alternative mechanisms to make their voices heard” (Afesis-Corplan: 59).

In recent years, communities have resorted more frequently to such alternative mechanisms (or “invented spaces”), which at times are highly radicalised. As the Introduction to the report notes, community protests have tended to be concentrated in urban areas which have a relatively good record of service delivery when compared to other municipalities, but where levels of relative deprivation are significant. While the expression of voice and dissatisfaction may happen in the streets, as narrated in EISA’s reflection on protests in Balfour, they may also find form in other forms of expression, such as the withholding of rates in more affluent communities, as discussed by CLC.

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Similarly, the emergence of (often more radicalised) modes of engagement from communities raises particular challenges to the NGO sector that acts as the intermediary sector between state and communities/citizens. As noted by Isandla Institute, this compels NGOs to reposition themselves to ensure that they remain a meaningful and influential role player in the local governance sector.

The contributions to this report, while not exhaustive, all reflect the reality that the current system of public participation in South Africa is not working in anyone's long-term interests. They point to the need for "invited spaces" to become more inclusive and less dominated by political interests, partisan politics and weak leadership. This means reaching out to marginalised communities in a meaningful, rather than nominal, way. Furthermore, a broader range of participation opportunities need to be made available by the state within "invited spaces", including citizen participation in budgetary and planning processes more widely, for example. This report, however, also highlights the need to fundamentally rethink what is meant by public participation by both government and society, and to move away from narrowly-defined interpretations of what justifiably constitutes democratic participation.