



# An exploration of public participation in policy making amongst Cape Town civic organisations

BY DAHLIA PATSIKA

15 NOVEMBER 2021

**The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project between OCA / DAG and UCT.**

See <http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za> or  
Contact us at [know-op@uct.ac.za](mailto:know-op@uct.ac.za) / 021 – 650 4415

# Introduction

- ▶ The South African White Paper on Local Government (1998) encourages open society engagements, political inclusiveness, state-citizen engagement, and deliberative dialogues in matters of local governance that involves service delivery
- ▶ Public participation therefore ensures that the distance between community members and local authorities or elected officials is narrowed by ensuring that there is inclusion in decision-making processes
- ▶ However, the COVID 19 pandemic came on a compromised democratic system and shrinking economy in South Africa and it severely affected the public participation processes.
- ▶ This paper explored perceptions regarding the understanding of public participation, the different forms of public participation, roles of civic organisations in policy making, the influence of public participation in decision-making at local level, ways in which public participation can be improved at local level and also public participation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ▶ In-depth interviews were conducted through a semi-structured interview guide as well as a thorough literature review of case studies in and around South Africa and the world over to evaluate various ways of public involvement in decision –making.

# Contextual background of the study

- ▶ Public participation is not a new phenomenon. Studies have been done in South Africa and globally around the concept.
- ▶ Nzimande (2012) argued that in South Africa public participation was limited and not supported by legislation before the inception of democracy in 1994.
- ▶ The introduction of the democratic Constitution of the Republic of South Africa enlarged the scope of public participation through the provisions of Sections 152 (1) and 195 (1) which encourage involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government and policy-making through public participation
- ▶ It can thus be argued that that public participation in policy making is an important tool of public administration. It is also an essential ingredient of community development and democracy.
- ▶ Lack of adequate consultations and participation of citizens in policy making processes could lead to increased mistrust between the people and their governments due to lack of accountability and transparency by local authorities and elected officials.

# Contextual background (2)

- ▶ In 2017 the Civic Action for Public Participation (CAPP), which is a coalition of civic organisations in Cape Town, was formed out of collective dissatisfaction with participatory processes
- ▶ According to the DAG report (2018), the participatory processes that were present were regarded as problematic, unproductive, and tokenist engagements leading to loss of trust in public participation
- ▶ This loss of trust as described by the coalition of civic organisations can be attributed to the idea that participation is more of a tick-box exercise, lacks important information, is technocratic and exclusive.
- ▶ In 2018, DAG conducted and hosted workshops and a city-wide review of developments that were being contested by civic organisations (DAG report, 2018). The review, presented by DAG, has shown that civic organisations were unable to influence development processes and decision making at local government level due to limited participation mechanisms (DAG Report, 2018).
- ▶ Consequently, lack of or inadequacy in public participation results in bad governance especially in local governance structures where participation mechanisms are mere 'tick-box' exercises done to meet legislative requirement



# Motivation of the study

- ▶ This study was motivated by persistent challenges in public participation processes that civic organisations face in Cape Town communities
- ▶ The researcher completed a four-month internship at DAG, in conjunction with the University of Cape Town (UCT) Knowledge Co-op, as part of requirements to complete her Masters' studies in Social Development.
- ▶ The researcher observed that the main challenges civic organisations faced regarding public participation included lack of adequate information on policy and development issues, and lack of resources for effective performance of their roles in communities.
- ▶ Interaction with civic organisations and community stakeholders revealed that civic organisations' members were excluded from key decision-making processes like development and housing policies. This affected their contribution to social and economic development

# Major Findings (1)

- ▶ The overall aim of the study was to foster a better understanding regarding the role that civic organisations could play in policy formulation through public participation.
- ▶ The study was conducted using two sample sets, one which consisted of civic organisation members, and the other which consisted of key informants who were stakeholders in the public participation processes.

## **Participants' understanding of public participation**

- ▶ Ability to speak freely and involvement in policy and development issues that affect their daily lives.
- ▶ This is in line with Section(s) 59 and 72 of the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996) which states that the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) should facilitate public involvement in legislative and other processes.
- ▶ The key informants, on the other hand suggested that public participation is a democratic process enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa and a fundamental human right for all.
- ▶ Although both civic members and key informants presented varying understandings of public participation, they all defined public participation as the involvement of citizens in decision making processes that affect their daily lives.
- ▶ Therefore, it could be argued that many citizens seem to have little information and knowledge about what it really means to be involved in the decision-making processes, and that it is in fact a constitutional right.

# FINDINGS (2): Participants' understanding regarding different forms of participation

- ▶ **Civic members** understood public participation as involving marches, attending public meetings and voting, 'tick-box' exercises, legal practices such as signing of petitions and litigation.
- ▶ The civic members' understanding of the forms of public participation is derived from their personal experiences of getting involved, and what they have witnessed as participation in their communities..
- ▶ The **key informants**, however, seemed to have a much more critical understanding of public participation which they associated with 'tick-box' exercises. The key informants' understanding seems to imply that some forms of public participation do not fully engage citizens in meaningful and mutual manner to promote respectful and active dialogue amongst policy makers and citizens in the decision-making processes.
- ▶ The **Constitution**, in Section(s) 59 and 118, requires that the National Assembly, National Council of Provinces and the Provincial Legislatures always facilitate the active involvement of the public in decision-making processes as a form of democracy (RSA, 1996).

# Major Findings (3)

## **Participants' understanding regarding the roles of civic organisations in policy formulation**

- ▶ The main roles of civic organisations in policy formulation are informing and educating the community on any policy and development initiatives and public participation processes.
- ▶ Being able to challenge municipalities and the local government to be accountable for their actions, and transparent on service delivery or any development initiatives in the communities.

## **The influence of public participation in decision-making at local level**

- ▶ There is little or no influence of public participation in decision making at the local level.
- ▶ The civic members linked this to a lack of adequate information on policy and development issues in their communities.
- ▶ Lack of solid relationships between the local government and civic groups and exclusion in the decision-making processes.
- ▶ Lack of influence in decision making due to micro-political dynamics within the civic organisations and the local government.

## **Ways in which public participation can be improved at the local level**

- Creation of meaningful collaborations amongst civic groups, local government and key stakeholders
- Need for accessibility, transparency and accountability on public participation practices



# Impact of COVID 19 on CSOs Roles

- ▶ Most public engagements which are facilitated by CSOs such as public meetings, protests, or demonstrations were affected by the lockdown restrictions
- ▶ Reliable and accurate information was difficult to source at the start of the pandemic –worsened by “carpetbaggers” or “ideas opportunists”
- ▶ Virtual meetings further excluded poor people who cannot afford to buy data bundles
- ▶ The reduction of GDPs automatically reduced the percentages that are available for CSOs work
- ▶ 85.47% of civic organisation noted that they could have done more if they did not have funding constraints
- ▶ 71.94% of civic organisations were self-funding as they lost funding or experienced budget cuts

# Recommendations

- ▶ Initiation of **online public participation** engagements with the help of the local and national government and stakeholders
- ▶ Policy administrators, ward committees and other NGOs which work to promote public involvement should **work together** with local gvt officials to inform and educate citizens about the importance of public participation
- ▶ *Parliament, Legislatures and Committees should be taken to the people by the National and Provincial Parliaments, to fast-track consultation processes to align with the provisions of the Parliament of South Africa in relation to public participation. This process, as enshrined in the Constitution, facilitates constant interaction between the communities, stakeholders, and the elected representatives, thus allowing citizens to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes as opposed to tick-box exercises.*
- ▶ **Governments to support CSOs** networking and engagement between civic organisations, local governments, and society by providing financial assistance or reduced data costs
- ▶ *An Integrated Development Plan (IDP) which focuses on people-centered development should be implemented at the local government level by the Mayor and his/her office, the National Assembly and Provincial Parliament members in local governance, policy and development Ministries in order to make citizens responsible for their own development, thus empowering*

# Conclusions

- ▶ There is profound role of civic organisations in policy-making through public participation.
- ▶ Civic organisations enhance democracy through accountability tracking as well as ensuring transparency in decision-making processes.
- ▶ The pandemic has exacerbated some of the existing social problems thus the public participation processes as well.

Thank you  
Siyabonga  
Maita basa

This report is licensed under a  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/za/deed.en>

