

## Alternative approaches to community participation beyond formal structures: evidence from Langa within the municipality of Cape Town

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### Abstract

*While ward committees and Integrated Development Planning (IDP) representative forums constitute formal participatory mechanisms in South Africa's local government, little is known about the potential of local approaches in enhancing participation in municipal planning. This paper examines alternative approaches to participation based on research conducted in Langa – a township situated on the Cape Flats of Cape Town. The paper highlights approaches to residents' participation in planning tested during the 'interregnum' – the period when ward committees are in abeyance due to elections. The study found that, while IDP participatory processes facilitated awareness of participation, ward councillors were crucial in operationalising participation that reflects the diversity of the community.*

### Introduction and background

South Africa's post-apartheid local government legislation emphasises public participation as a prerequisite for consolidating the democratic dispensation. The rationale for public participation is enshrined in and protected by the South African Constitution of 1996, as well as specific policy and legislative instruments: notably the White Paper on Local Government 1998, which mandates municipalities to work with communities to maximise socio-economic development and growth; and the Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998), which decrees local government to establish structures and modalities through which citizens and communities can participate in the planning and policy-making processes which determine the development of the municipal area.

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The notion of participation has enduring currency as an institutional directive and a tool for achieving the objectives of developmental local government (Winkler 2011; Harrison et al. 2008) in South Africa. Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) have been an important tool in providing an overall framework for development and addressing South Africa's historic divides. All local governments have to prepare an IDP drawn up with all stakeholders in the area, which aims to coordinate all government services. IDPs may take six to nine months to prepare and are updated annually. Ward committees also provide another framework for participation.

At a glance, existing participatory mechanisms in local government are effectively 'invited spaces'<sup>1</sup> as citizens and communities are mostly invited to participate in structures such as ward committees, IDP representative forums and other consultative mechanisms (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000) in the local municipality. Though the concept of 'invited spaces' is not entirely the focus of this paper, it is significant given its prevalence in the local government participatory sphere. Cornwall defines 'invited spaces' as "*those into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations*" (Cornwall, 2002, p. 24). These are contrasted with 'claimed spaces' which people create for themselves. In the context of local governance, invited spaces are mostly top-down and state-led in nature – where citizens are invited to participate and give input to plans/or decision-making processes (Cornwall 2008; Escobar 2011; GGLN 2012).

In discussing the potential of alternative participatory approaches for local planning, this paper addresses a key question: What alternative approaches are available for ward councillors to facilitate community participation in planning in the absence of ward committees at the local level? Using a case study approach (Langa ward in the Cape Town area), the paper distinguishes two local approaches, namely *sectional group (or 'pocket') meetings* and *'mass' or public meetings*, used by councillors to facilitate community participation in local planning. The paper then explores how these approaches are implemented and examines their implications for enhancing participatory democracy in local government. At the time of this research, the ward committee in Langa was dissolved following the 2011 municipal elections. While residents of Langa looked forward to a new ward committee, the ward councillor assumed responsibility for mobilising and engaging residents through alternative approaches

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'invited spaces' is borrowed from the ideas of Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, who have both written extensively on participatory governance and citizenship. Their contributions are invaluable to this study, which seeks to explore the notion of participatory invited spaces in the South African context. In this article, 'invited spaces' will be used synonymously with 'participatory mechanisms', referring to formal structures such as ward committees and IDP representative forums, as established by local government in South Africa to foster deliberative and participative democracy. Invited spaces create opportunities for public input on processes of municipal governance. Unlike spaces where citizen participation is linked to representation of a stakeholder group, 'invited spaces' are often 'consultative' and tend to have a limited influence on decision-making (GGLN 2012).

around pertinent municipal processes. Hence, the research specifically targeted councillors and ward committee members who had served in the previous term.

This paper has five main sections: a background situating the research in the current South African context; an overview of the research methodology; a description of formal participatory structures established by local government to promote participatory democracy; analysis of the findings on alternative participatory approaches to residents' participation in planning in Langa; and finally a conclusion discussing the implications of these approaches for enhancing inclusive planning.

### **Public participation as a cornerstone of South Africa's democracy**

Participation has varied meanings depending on the contextual use of the term. One conception is as "*...the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making and policy-forming activities of organisations or institutions responsible for policy development*" (Rowe and Frewer 2004, p. 512). Another, Creighton's definition (2005), is "*the process of integrating public concerns, needs and values into governmental and corporate decision-making*". However, in its simplest meaning, participation evokes a sense of engagement of ordinary citizens in determining governmental actions that affect well-being.

Participation is an essential part of local governance and community-led development processes, providing community members with an opportunity to be part of decision-making and to exercise ownership over development processes (e.g. identification of needs, selection of priorities, project design, approval processes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation) taking place in their constituencies. Though participation has been embraced widely as a developmental tool, it has encountered growing criticism in the past decades from scholars (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001), who argue that participation has failed to achieve social change, owing to it being ineffective in addressing issues of power and politics that often characterise the participatory sphere.

In South Africa, government commitment to fostering citizen participation, particularly at the local government level, finds expression in legal and national policy frameworks.<sup>2</sup> However, the extent to which these instruments are translated into action by the local state has been limited, and evidence suggests that public participation falls short of its ideals and expectations. Formal participatory mechanisms or structures, such as ward committees and IDP representative forums, rarely create the enabling environment that ensures meaningful participation of people in key municipal processes (GGLN 2013; Van Donk 2012; Winkler 2011; Sinwell 2010). This situation led Williams (2006, p. 19)

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<sup>2</sup> The South African Constitution 1996, the Government White Paper on Local Government 1998, the Municipal Structures Act 1998, the Municipal Systems Act 2000 and the Batho Pele White Paper on Transforming Service Delivery 1997, among others, are the main legislative instruments that provide the legal basis for public participation in South Africa's local government.

over a decade ago to conclude that community participation is reduced to *“spectator politics, where ordinary people have... mostly become endorsees of pre-designed planning programmes”*. Indeed, the inadequate engagement of local communities in, for instance, the IDP (regarded as the overarching tool for service delivery and transformation at the local level) has consequences for promoting social development and democracy at that level.

Moreover, studies have shown that the performance of ward committees is hampered by barriers including party politics, poor accountability, corruption, patronage and nepotism, rubber-stamping of planning by communities, and inadequate local government support for democratic participation (Tapscott 2010; Esau 2007; Moodley 2007). Due to these challenges, the objectives of participatory democracy envisioned in the White Paper on Local Government 1998 are likely to become remote, particularly in local municipalities. For instance, the literature indicates that ward committee structures have tended to become extensions of political parties and have neither real power nor capacity to achieve their mandate of deepening participation in local governance (Piper and Deacon 2008; Oldfield 2008).

To date, participatory democracy in South Africa has not necessarily led to the social and economic empowerment of citizens, despite the citizenship rights that liberal democracy bestows. Most people are unable to apply their citizenship rights. Thompson and Matheza (2005) cited in Thompson and Nleya (2010, p. 225) have argued that, *“the poor are variously perceived as apathetic and reluctant to take advantage of the fresh opportunities available to them, especially now that apartheid has gone”*. The quest for meaningful community participation, especially in municipal IDP processes, has so far proved intractable in many local municipalities. Although progress has been made to improve service delivery, especially in metropolitan municipalities, apathy towards the local state, owing to bad governance and poor service delivery, particularly in under-resourced local municipalities, has led to low levels of community participation in local government activities.

Furthermore, financial and administrative constraints, inadequate use of public participation procedures, and limited understanding by local government officials of participation processes and the legal framework continue to undermine efforts to foster the meaningful engagement of communities in IDP processes in many local municipalities. South Africa’s system of local government remains a complex developmental environment that is still reeling from the legacy of apartheid social engineering, compounded by crises such as inequality, poverty, rising unemployment and social ills. These challenges make authentic and democratic public participation in local governance more strenuous.

With South Africa now well into its third decade of liberal democracy, it is likely that the hard-earned democratic achievements may erode if the above challenges are left unaddressed. Participatory democracy has not sufficiently resulted in improved service delivery and accurate identification of

community needs and priorities, nor increased trust between communities and officials or politicians. Important decisions pertaining to service delivery and resource allocation remain the preserve of technocrats – moderated by government.

As seen in recent years, many communities have disengaged from the government's participatory 'invited spaces', and instead have elected to take their grievances to the streets in the form of violent protests<sup>3</sup> (Bond 2012; Van Donk 2012; Tapscott 2010). These sporadic violent protests over service delivery not only expose the shortcomings in municipal services, but also reflect the fundamental failure of formal participatory structures to foster effective collaborative and meaningful participatory decision-making at the local level. The current challenges facing participatory democracy at the local level thus require municipal governments to look for a variety of approaches to engage with local residents around core municipal processes.

## **Methodology**

The present study mainly employed a descriptive qualitative research methodology, based on in-depth interviews and a literature review. The primary data gathered from interviews with councillors and ward committee members in Langa was supplemented by findings from a larger study in Cape Town, with a sample of 315 including residents, ward committee members and councillors, conducted by the African Centre for Citizenship and Democracy (ACCEDE) in 2011.<sup>4</sup> Data from this study was analysed, as part of the literature review, to contribute to the results and conclusions drawn in the present study. The specific findings presented in this paper are based on data from 10 interviews, including three ward councillors, six ward committee members and one community development worker in Langa. All interviews were conducted in Langa in 2012 and the analysis and interpretations of the results presented in this paper are thus shaped by the views of the respondents in this study. A semi-structured qualitative questionnaire was administered to glean data from respondents. The process was recorded with the aid of a voice recorder and through note-taking.

Primary data from the research, on which the current study is based, was analysed and presented using a qualitative approach involving content analysis and descriptive statistics. However, the author acknowledges two limitations associated with the research methodology. First, Langa

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<sup>3</sup> South Africa continues to experience violent service delivery protests. In 2008 in Johannesburg, in the Orange Farm Township south of Soweto, residents revolted against city councillors and national electricity officials because of the unaffordable R250 installation charge for hated pre-payment (self-disconnection) meters, and a 130% increase in electricity processing prices since 2008. In the Northwest Province, in Morokweng village a dozen residents, angry about inadequate state services, were arrested for arson, public violence and malicious damage to school property. See article on 'Protest and repression in South Africa' by Patrick Bond 2012 <https://www.counterpunch.org/2012/07/17/protest-and-repression-in-south-africa/>.

<sup>4</sup> This study assessed public participation in municipal governance, and residents' perceptions of municipal service delivery and performance in three communities: Langa, Delft and Khayelitsha.

township was, at the time of the research, within wards 51 and 52, of the 105 wards in the municipality of Cape Town. The findings thus cannot be generalised to the whole municipality – as they do not necessarily reflect conditions in other ward committees in Cape Town, despite the similarities that many wards in South Africa have. Second, the data collection phase of the research coincided with the dissolution of the community’s ward committee following the 2011 local elections; hence the findings are based on the experiences and views of ward committee members and councillors who served prior to suspension of the ward.

### **Formal participatory mechanisms**

Formal mechanisms have existed since 1994 to foster interaction between government and communities, through which the latter can influence and exert control over governmental actions<sup>5</sup> that affect the well-being of communities. Through these mechanisms, citizens, including civil society groupings such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), ratepayer associations and business organisations are invited to participate and input on local decisions and policies that are designed to promote socio-economic development in the local area. These formal spaces provide opportunities for non-state actors to enforce accountability and transparency of elected or appointed local government officials and representatives. The following describes the formal mechanisms established by local municipalities in South Africa to foster public participation in local governance.

#### ***Ward committee structures***

Ward committees are formal participatory structures established in line with the Municipal Structures Act (Act 117 of 1998), with the main objective of enhancing participatory democracy in local government affairs. Since 2001, wards have emerged as important in fostering people-centred, participatory and democratic governance (Piper and Deacon 2008; Smith 2008). As outlined in the 2005 Guidelines for the Establishment and Operationalisation of Municipal Ward Committees<sup>6</sup> a ward committee is set up to:

*make recommendations on any matters affecting the ward to the ward councillor or through the ward councillor to the municipality; serve as an official specialised participatory structure; create formal unbiased communication channels as well as cooperative partnerships between the community and the council; serve as a mobilising agent for community action, in particular through the IDP process and the municipality’s*

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<sup>5</sup> At the local level, the actions of government encompass decisions or policies, including decisions about service delivery, performance monitoring and budgeting processes, which affect the well-being of communities.

<sup>6</sup> The Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Municipal Ward Committees Notice 965 of 2005 (GG 27699 of 24 June 2006) was prepared by the then Local Minister for Provincial Government, in terms of section 120, read with section 22, of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000), after consultation with the MEC’s for local government and organised local government representing local government nationally.

*budgetary process; and perform other duties as delegated by the municipality* (Mufamadi 2005, p. 8).

Ward committees are thus both communication vehicles and catalysts for transformation at the local level and, per the legal framework, should not have more than ten members in addition to the ward councillor who serves as the chairperson (Municipal Structures Act 1998). A ward committee is defined as “*an advisory body, a representative structure, an independent structure, and an impartial body that must perform its functions without fear, favour or prejudice*” (Smith and De Visser 2009, p. 10). In fulfilment of Section 73 of the Municipal Structures Act (1998), ward committee members should reflect all sections and interest groups in the community including: CBOs; ratepayers; faith-based organisations; safety and security groups; environmental groups; early education; youth organisations; arts and culture; sports; the business community; and designated vulnerable groups such as the aged, gender groups and the disabled.

### ***Integrated development planning representative forums***

Besides ward committees, IDP representative forums are established by local government, in line with the IDP legal framework, to foster stakeholder participation in the IDP process. As per the legal provisions, the IDP forum should include the following actors: “*members of the executive committee; councillors (including councillors who are members of the district council and relevant portfolio councillors); traditional leaders; ward committees; heads of departments/senior officials; stakeholder representatives of organised groups; advocates for unorganised groups; resource persons; and community representatives*” (Department of Provincial and Local Government 2001, p. 23) The IDP participatory mechanisms exists to institutionalise and guarantee representative participation in the IDP process, so that the interests of various stakeholders are adequately represented.

### **Alternative approaches to resident participation in Langa**

The following discusses alternative participatory approaches or practices to the two formal ones discussed above, based on insights from the research in Langa. However, before discussing these approaches, brief contextual information about the community is first provided.

Like other communities in the Cape metropolitan area, the participation of residents in Langa in core municipal processes is facilitated by a ward committee structure chaired by a ward councillor who represents the interest of the community (ward) on the sub-council. As indicated earlier, this research coincided with a transition period between elected councils, making its findings significant in that they uncover the alternative ways or approaches through which councillors promoted community participation in this situation. The views of ward councillors, ward committee members and the community development worker interviewed, provided invaluable insight into the current dynamics of

local participation and the strategies that were being used in the area to engage residents in local government activities.

Within the ward committee system, Langa is represented by wards 51 and 52 – a large area that encompasses different communities in Sub-council 15, and a wide range of economic activities. This area consists of five wards that stretch from Mowbray through Pinelands, Langa, Epping to Milnerton including Brooklyn, Rugby and Ysterplaat. Major roads, including the N1, the N2, Raapenberg Road, Koeberg Road, Voortrekker Road, Settlers Way and Sable Road run through the Sub-council. Wards 53, 55 and 56<sup>7</sup> also form part of this area.

### **Profile of Langa**

Langa came into being in 1923 following the passing of the Urban Areas Act and was named after Langalibalele Dube (who was imprisoned in Robben Island after rebelling against the Natal government). It is one of the oldest townships in South Africa and was home to low-cost housing for Black Africans in Cape Town, together with single-sex hostels which accommodated migrant workers in the 1960s and 1970s. The area later saw an influx of illegal residents into these hostels, bringing more balanced demographic representation to the area. However, this influx also exacerbated existing housing shortages, which forced many families to rent backyard shacks in formal housing areas, a situation which persists today (Thompson et al. 2011).

Langa's population according to the 2011 population census is 52,401, made up of 17,400 households with an average household size of three. The majority are Black African (99%). IsiXhosa is the dominant language in the area, and the housing profile is diverse: 58% of households live in formal dwellings, but 27% occupy informal dwellings/shacks in informal settlements, largely concentrated in Joe Slovo.

The census further indicates that 40% of those aged 20 or older have completed schooling to Grade 12 (last grade of secondary education) or higher; 60% of residents aged 15 to 64 are employed; 72% of households have a monthly income of R3,200 or less; 67% of households have access to piped water in their dwelling or inside their yard; 72% of households have access to a flushing toilet connected to the public sewer system; 94% of households have their refuse removed at least once a week; and 98% of households use electricity for lighting in their dwelling (City of Cape Town 2011 Census – suburb data for Langa supplied by Statistics South Africa).

The City of Cape Town defines a sub-council as *“a geographically defined area within the city which is made up of between three and six neighbouring wards. Sub-councils exist to make sure that the issues affecting your neighbourhood are heard and dealt with. There are a total of 24 sub-councils which*

<sup>7</sup> For more on ward demarcations, see <http://www.capetown.gov.za/family%20and%20home/meet-the-city/city-council/subcouncils/subcouncil-profile?SubCouncilCode=15> (Accessed 05 March 2018).

*make up the City of Cape Town's municipal structure. The sub-councils serve the residents by engaging with them on municipal issues".<sup>8</sup>*

As depicted by census data, Langa grapples with many socio-economic challenges, including increasing unemployment, crime, drug and substance abuse, and inadequate service delivery – especially health, sanitation and housing infrastructure. The hardest hit by these challenges are poor residents, many of whom live in backyard or shack dwellings. Therefore, there is considerable need to stimulate economic activities in the township, for job creation, and improved service delivery across housing, sanitation and education.

In the absence of the ward committee in the run-up to elections, this research found that several alternative participatory approaches were used by ward councillors to engage residents in local planning. While residents in Langa waited for a new ward committee to be elected, their participation in service delivery decisions continued, as ward councillors adopted specific local strategies to mobilise and inform residents about the council's decisions and developments which affected the community. This paper distinguishes two different approaches or strategies which were proven by ward councillors to be effective in promoting community participation in Langa.

### **Sectional group (or 'pocket') meetings**

Pocket meetings were used by ward councillors to engage community residents and other stakeholders in key local government activities and decision-making. This approach, as indicated by the councillors, provided a useful conduit both for disseminating municipal information to residents, and for gathering information on the community's grievances, needs and priorities.

Owing to the large number of houses in Langa, residents are divided into sections or 'pockets', with each pocket comprising up to 60 houses. Each pocket is then required to establish a street committee responsible for providing the pocket's 'wish list' which is later taken forward by the ward councillor. The 'wish list' is a written report outlining the important needs, grievances and priorities of the residents of each pocket. Once the pocket meetings are concluded, the 'wish lists' received from all the pockets in the community are tabled by the councillors for further deliberation and discussion at a mass or public meeting.

The benefits of using 'pocket' meetings to promote residents' participation in local government processes cannot be overlooked. At the outset, the approach provides a mechanism through which councillors can effectively identify the pressing needs of residents. As discussions develop, the interactions that take place between councillors and residents during pocket meetings foster

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<sup>8</sup> Cape Town Municipal Sub-councils: <http://www.qa2013.capetown.gov.za/Family%20and%20home/meet-the-city/city-council/subcouncils> (Accessed online on 05 March 2018).

accountability, transparency and responsiveness of councillors, as well as providing an opportunity to address disputes within the community.

Furthermore, 'pocket' meetings are relatively safe spaces – they provide residents, especially those who may be unable to express their views at mass meetings due to fear of intimidation by other residents, the chance to articulate their views in smaller gatherings where they feel safe. They also provide councillors with the space to understand the felt needs of individuals, and the capacities or opportunities within each pocket. Furthermore, because this approach is expected to cover all sections of the community, community participation becomes more holistic and inclusive, as pocket meetings help to gather a cross-section of input from residents regarding key municipal actions.

A key disadvantage of this approach is that it is resource-intensive and time-consuming and may not keep pace with increases in population over time. As the number of residents increases, pocket meetings may become less effective in engaging all residents. For instance, with the 17,400 households in Langa, if pockets are groups of 60 households, there would be about 290 'pocket' meetings or more. At a rate of one pocket meeting per week, it would take over five years to cover all households in Langa.

### ***'Mass' or public meetings***

In addition to pocket meetings, the second (more common) approach used by the councillors to engage residents on municipal matters was 'mass' or public meetings. In the absence of the ward committee, the research found councillors frequently convened public meetings to discuss issues gathered from pocket meetings. Mass meetings are open to all stakeholder groups and individuals in the community. The common stakeholder groups at mass meetings include: business, youth, or ratepayer associations; members of the police forum; traditional leaders; ward committee members; community development workers; health workers and school governing bodies/leaders. The public meetings are chaired by the ward councillors who also take responsibility for recording the outcomes of the discussions.

Though mass meetings often see heated debate, the approach nevertheless provides a platform to inform the community on the latest developments in the municipality, and progress made by the sub-council regarding service delivery demands and priorities. The outcomes of mass meetings are brought to the attention of the sub-council by ward councillors, and later to the chamber of the local government for final decisions on how the various ward needs that have been submitted can be met.

The merits of mass meetings are noteworthy. As pointed out by the councillor of ward 51, "*Though mass meetings are often difficult to organise, they help us to generate useful lessons.*" The approach and its process contribute to narrowing the gap between the community and government, as well as to promoting public participation, accountability and transparency by bringing together a variety of stakeholders in the community to deliberate on local issues in public.

However, councillors also revealed that – in Langa at least – participation is also heavily charged with emotion owing to poor service delivery. According to the Ward 52 councillor:

*Meetings are emotionally charged because of poor service delivery. The people come into the meeting with anger, and this makes it difficult to reach a consensus on certain important issues. Housing and illegal dumping are currently the serious issues we face as a community. People who claim to be originally born in Langa mobilise to claim rights to housing. They call themselves the concerned group and often breach formal procedures to assert their voices or claims.*

In addition, mass meetings convened in Langa to discuss development issues usually end up in political squabbles and disputes between members of different political parties in the community. An interview with one community development worker revealed that:

*Members of the African National Congress in the community have often battled against members of the Democratic Alliance during council and ward committee meetings, with disregard to the relevance of the issues being tabled for discussion. This distorts the aim of meetings and makes it difficult to reach consensus on certain pertinent issues.*

Residents’ participation in local planning is further hindered by a number of socio-economic challenges. For example, the issue of poor service delivery reduces community members’ willingness to participate in both council and ward committee meetings. Thus, participation has not necessarily improved service delivery in Langa; on the contrary, it has resulted in participation fatigue among residents who felt that no matter how many times they attend meetings, their contribution will not be considered by the council. This situation exacerbates the low levels of community participation in the area.

Another major challenge hindering community participation in the area relates to increasing poverty, unemployment and inequality. These factors make it difficult for residents to meet their basic needs. As can be seen in Table 1, most residents in Langa and the surrounding communities of Delft and Khayelitsha struggle with food insecurity challenges. Until today, many residents in these townships continue to grapple with issues of poverty, crime and unemployment, and have poor access to proper nutrition, healthcare and decent housing.

*Table 1. Household health and food security*

<b>Access to basic services</b>	<b>Khayelitsha</b>	<b>Langa</b>	<b>Delft</b>
Food to eat	44%	49%	55%
Clean water for home use	69%	70%	83%
Medicines or medical treatment	68%	75%	87%
Fuel to cook food	49%	68%	85%

Source: Thompson et al. (2011)

The urgent need of people, particularly the unemployed, to meet their basic needs, exerts a challenge to meaningful community participation in Langa. The community development worker interviewed for this study revealed that “people give low priority to participation owing to the socio-economic

*hardships that they face in the community*". As a result, public meetings convened by the ward committee in the community were often dominated by ward committee members, with few residents attending. A key highlight of the interviews with community residents was that *majority of respondents feel politicians do not care much about their needs and priorities, which re-echoes the urgency to address unemployment, inequality and poverty as these factors negatively affect residents' ability to meet their basic needs.*

Decline in citizens' trust in local government institutions posed another challenge to community participation in the area. The literature has shown that, local government, as the body closest to the people, struggles to achieve the mandate of participatory governance, quality service delivery, and improving quality of life as envisaged in the Government White Paper on Local Government (1998). This has resulted in a growing mistrust and dissent between communities and local government institutions and officials.

Interviews with community residents indicated that many are dissatisfied with local government partly owing to the municipality's slow response to community's needs and priorities. To quote one respondent, *"the municipality is taking us for a ride; they have made promises that they have not delivered, yet they expect us to remain calm and vote"*. This response suggests that municipality has not lived up to expectations in terms of effectively responding to community concerns. The councillors suggested that bureaucracy slows the pace of governments' response to communities and service delivery. It may be argued that the lack of trust in these important municipal institutions and elected representatives affects the level of community participation in municipal processes. This situation fuels sporadic violent service-delivery protests seen in various parts of the country in recent years.

Despite the opportunities associated with the pocket meetings and mass/public meetings, their effectiveness depends much on the capacity of the conveners (mostly ward councillors) to conduct participation in a manner that is open, informative, and encourages residents' participation. Among the obstacles to local participatory decision-making, political squabbles and conflicting interests among participants are perhaps the most pervasive.

## **Conclusion**

As this research has shown, in Langa – in the absence of ward committees – residents' participation in municipal processes such as the IDP was made possible through *sectional group (or pocket) meetings* and *mass/public meetings*. While these approaches have proved partially effective in fostering meaningful community participation, the responsibility rests with ward councillors and active citizens to implement them in a manner that is participatory and mirrors the diversity of the community.

In the context of this research, these approaches enabled the councillors during the pre-election interregnum to glean information about the felt needs and aspirations of the community – which was critical for appropriately aligning IDP policies and services. Information emanating from these meetings provides a basis for deliberations at IDP forums and within specific portfolio committee meetings, as well as informing projects for the IDP and service-delivery plans of the City of Cape Town.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the pocket and mass meetings discussed in this paper, they represent a small step towards hearing communities' voices and meeting their needs. These approaches are nevertheless useful for community profiling, especially in identifying community needs, priorities of relevant stakeholders, community development resources, and voices of dissent and divergent interests in the community. While the findings and conclusions drawn on the alternative participatory approaches in this paper cannot be generalised, they represent a practical account of participatory practices in South Africa's local government. Therefore, this paper stimulates discourse on participatory democracy, and its insights may be relevant to local government, research and academic communities, as well as civil society organisations concerned with issues of local participation, citizenship, democracy and local governance in South Africa and beyond.

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