



Residents' Association leaders address a meeting at Port Nolloth.

PAUL GRENDON, Southlight

Local must be lekker

The acid test of democracy is how people use it at the local level ... in the cities, towns and villages, writes RALPH LAWRENCE.

A PROPER TEST of democracy in a society is how well it is practised at the local level throughout the country, in the cities, in the towns, in the villages.

There are a number of reasons for this assertion. One is the argument that a democratic system can only function as such when all its interrelated parts operate fully and in harmony with one another, at every tier, from national down to local level. Another is that although central government concerns tend to be uppermost in most people's minds, local institutions deal more intimately with citizens' basic needs - housing, health care, services such as refuse removal, and social welfare provision.

Furthermore, there is a need to counter the tendency for the state bureaucracy to form what often seems an insurmountable barrier between government and citizen. Local government serves as a prime means to achieve this, by enticing each community to become involved in looking after its own public affairs.

The advantages are manifold. For a start, local government, as the very term suggests, imparts a sense of locale: it is a focal point of the place where one belongs because it gives organisational expression to one's community. Local government is thus integral to one's citizenship, acting as an instrument of participation.

A vibrant democracy is not only receptive to participatory ventures, for this is any citizen's right, but also encourages processes of deliberation. Issues must be raised and debated; community feelings must be expressed. Individuals and organisations operating in the locale are thus enabled to become active in governing their community.

'The puritanical ethos and ideological intolerance of many a civic association bodes ill for democracy'

Tackling matters of governance in one's own backyard is often more appealing, less formidable and certainly less remote than governance at a national level. Furthermore, issues of local importance can be settled with the necessary sensitivity if those responsible for local governance have a personal stake in the community. From this perspective, local government makes for sensible, efficient and flexible outcomes.

Democracy's well-being depends on making participation and deliberation as widespread and constant as a citizenry can tolerate. Without such participation neither the spirit nor the practice of democracy can

survive. When the cry goes up "return government to the people", the quest is really for government to be more responsive to the needs of the populace. Strong local government holds out precisely this hope.

All these observations apply to the rural areas as much as to the cities. However, the focus here is on cities because it is there that the cutting edge of social change is to be found, for good and for ill. There the issues are starkest, arise first, attract media publicity and receive political attention.

The cities are the destination of those seeking to escape from rural poverty. The burgeoning populations of the cities, notably in the Witwatersrand, strain public revenue ever more, and already-inadequate services and infrastructure - housing, roads, schools, hospitals - fall ever shorter of community needs. This is the timebomb ticking in our midst.

What then are the prospects for democracy taking root in South African cities? Certainly it must be said that we confront the most difficult task imaginable, in perilous political and economic circumstances. Our cities reflect two sharply distinct political styles and credos, each the creature of apartheid, each introspective and essentially alien to the other.

The insiders are the enfranchised, whose interest in their city tends to be parochial and sporadic, enlivened only when a con-

Building capacity not a simple task

By MICHELLE BOOTH

FOR MANY people "capacity building" is yet another bit of jargon to emerge from the transition process. It has become a buzz-word in many of the forums set up across the country to address a range of issues, but it is used without a common understanding of its meaning.

To assist in the process of developing such an understanding, the Western Cape office of Idasa recently held a workshop on the subject in Cape Town. The workshop brought together a wide range of NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and funding organisations, as well as delegates from local authorities. Several of the organisations are actively involved in both the Western Cape Economic Development Forum and the newly formed Cape Metropolitan Negotiating Forum.

Organisations committed to participating in the numerous forums are under tremendous pressure to "perform", from within and without their structures. Many CBOs damaged by the repression of the 1980s have been struggling to rebuild and strengthen their organisations while at the same time meeting the demands of the various forums.

These demands are stretching the capacity of organisations in many ways, given their often limited human and financial resources. This in turn results in a limited capacity to consult properly with membership, with possible serious implications for accountability.

Effective participation in the transition processes depends not only on political knowledge and experience but also on skills and knowledge to which most communities have not had access as a result of apartheid. Disempowerment is often the consequence of the lack of information, lack of skills and weak organisational infrastructure which bedevil many CBOs.

One interpretation of capacity building sees it as aimed at addressing these lacks so that the CBOs concerned can participate effectively and on an equal footing with better-resourced organisations. In some respects this understanding of capacity building is similar to the concept of levelling the playing fields - addressing imbalances brought about by apartheid.

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lentionous matter agitates them. Hikes in property rates, zoning applications, the burden on ratepayers allegedly subsidising people who won't pay for services, the salaries of councillors - these are common causes of political apoplexy.

Insider local government elections often have extremely poor turn-outs; even by the narrow standards of the insiders, participation is low. Deliberation occurs mainly at the behest of a city council, and within its specialised committees the power politics of the cabal hold sway.

The prevailing concern seems to be with getting central government off the back of local government, and getting local government off individual backs. Local government is viewed mainly as a regulative agency, there to preserve a certain way of life in the city that is wholly congenial to the insiders.

The outsiders are those who apartheid tried to define out of existence in the cities, but couldn't. Economic imperatives dictated otherwise and the administrative and policing chores necessary for another outcome proved to be beyond the state's capacity.

Circumstances have changed somewhat but the vacuum created by apartheid plagues the outsiders still. They are still disenfranchised, for example; still regarded as objects of administration. However, they have proved far from content to acquiesce in the mechanisms of local government thrust on them in the 1980s.

As to participation, outsiders mobilised by means of residents' associations, civics, street committees. However, there is little indication that such organisations embrace entire communities. Scope for participation is thus limited to devotees, and to reluctant converts. In similar fashion, deliberation, while ostensibly welcomed, is determined by the constrictions of membership, and often monopolised by the tight preserve of the leadership.

Of course, one has to remember the hostile political climate in which such organisations began and still find themselves. Nonetheless, the puritanical ethos and ideological intolerance of many a civic association bodes ill for democracy.

Collective action is the urban outsider's most discernible political style, using direct methods of street theatre - marches, rallies, delegations of protest, boycotts, and at times violent shows of strength. For the outsiders, governmental structures are perpetrators of discrimination. Thus no compromise is possible. Outsiders often feel impelled to become outlaws in defence of their communities, in protest at their lack of rights.

While the organs of the apartheid state were the enemy, a post-apartheid society, so it

is thought, will convert them into agencies of social justice, designed and equipped to address the basic needs of the citizenry. Here lies the rub. To what extent can the local state provide services and facilities to match the expectations of the populace? And, a related question, to what extent can the worlds of urban insider and outsider converge?

The primary line of demarcation between the two worlds should disappear forthwith. Only when all are enfranchised can we start to conceive of the beginnings of political equality in this country. Only then can a sense of belonging grow in each South African, linking each to a specific locale and community.

On such foundations, agreed terms of participation and deliberation in urban governance can be forged. But getting there is proving highly problematic.

The interim proposal, of merging existing racially defined local authorities so as to yield "single city" governance, has foundered for the moment on the rock of right-wing hostility. The current govern-

ment has capitulated and, no doubt, the onus will now be on the Transitional Executive Council to find a way ahead.

Very recently, the city councils of Durban and Pietermaritzburg fended off efforts to open mayoral elections to other than the white councillors already in place. The closer to home the imperatives for political change are experienced, the fiercer the rearguard action by those who fear the future. Democracy at the local level is crucial, yet it is the most daunting step of all - for everyone, no matter their political hue.

Still, muddling along towards democracy is preferable to doing nothing. If we can proceed towards this goal in our cities, keeping our aspirations muted despite our wildest dreams, we will crack the shell around the treasure of democracy. For it is a fruit with an urban flavour, and it is not an exaggeration to say that much of our political salvation depends on the fate of democracy in the cities.

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