

# Community participation & Ward committees

According to the national government, 99% of municipalities have established ward committees.

While ward committees are known to communities, they continue to attract fierce criticism. Many communities are disillusioned and feel that participation in ward committees does very little to express their voice. In many instances, they rather choose public protests or the withholding of rates and taxes as mechanisms to get their needs on the municipal agenda. The Constitutional Court has on several occasions evaluated municipalities' efforts to facilitate community participation in respect of key decisions. This indicates that the courts are taking community participation seriously.

Municipalities cannot therefore simply rely on having adopted a public participation policy or established ward committees as proof that they have fulfilled their duties. For their conduct to be in line with the Constitution, they must ensure that all participatory processes, including ward committees, are both accessible and effective in facilitating real and meaningful participation by communities in municipal affairs. The issue of community participation is thus critically important in the 2011 elections.

Whether or not a ward committee functions often depends on the ward councillor. This dependency is a concern and creates the risk of their being dominated or strongly influenced by party politics. Critics have argued that the maximum number of representatives (ten) presents difficulties, particularly for densely populated wards.

In many wards, the relationship between ward committees and other stakeholders such as community development workers and traditional leaders needs to be improved. We have argued before that ward committees are not sufficiently embedded and linked up with civil society and community-based organisations.

It has always been clear that a ward committee's main function

is to communicate with the municipality. However, many municipalities struggle to establish clear lines of communication with ward committees. Innovative communication and reporting mechanisms must be developed by municipalities to ensure that the content of ward committee meetings is not lost. Ward committees cannot function without a direct line to an official who can provide information and feedback, and generally facilitate interaction between ward committee and administration.

Ward committees can play an important developmental role if they are given a clear mandate. It is often argued that they must be involved in the integrated development plan and budget process. Municipalities are building up experience in ward-based budgeting. The allocation of discretionary budgets for wards is another example. These initiatives must be supported but also carefully guided, so that they do not disrupt the budgeting and financial management processes of the municipality.

Ward committees cannot function without resources. By law, municipalities must budget for community participation. We have argued before that a dedicated role for the Speaker of a municipality to oversee the functioning and provide support to ward committees is advisable. Reimbursing ward committee members for their expenses may assist the functioning of the ward committee. However, it appears that the payment of 'out-of-pocket expenses' to ward committee members is fast becoming the main reason for people to aspire to being a member. Municipalities should examine innovative ways to ensure that ward committees function without focusing exclusively on the reimbursement of ward committee members.



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