Are ward committees working?

INSIGHTS FROM SIX CASE STUDIES

Ward committees were introduced after the December 2000 municipal elections to supplement the role of elected councillors. As such, they were intended to create a bridge between communities and the political and administrative structures of municipalities. Many observers argue, however, that ward committees are not functioning as intended and that instead of enhancing the environment of participatory governance, these structures have actually undermined it by displacing many other channels for public participation. Moreover, ward committees are usually viewed as highly partisan structures aligned to party political agendas.

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A recent study by the Community Law Centre sought to understand how ward committees are working and whether there is substance to these claims. This is a summary of the key findings.

Case studies

Six ward committees, two each from three municipalities, were chosen for the in-depth case studies. They were selected to incorporate a range of criteria, including category of municipality (one is a metro), size (number of wards) and rural/urban profile.

Findings

Profile of ward committee members

Four out of the six committees have their full complement of ten members. They appear to have a more or less even representation of men and women, with women outnumbering men in four. Four committees consist of only black Africans. In one, there are seven white and two Indian members and no black Africans. Most members are between 26 and 50. Only five are under 25, suggesting that young people are under-represented on the committees. In most cases, the majority of ward committee members are unemployed. Most have matric. Only one member was classified as disabled. In almost all cases there has not been any turnover of membership.

Roles and expectations

It appears that, contrary to the perception that roles are unclear, ward committee members and ward councillors have a reasonably clear understanding of their roles, in line with policy and legislative guidelines. The primary role of ward committees is typically seen as that of a communication channel between communities and municipalities, via the ward councillor. This appears to be the role that the committees are actually playing, to a lesser or greater extent, in the sample municipalities. It was also clear, however, that many community members see ward committees as a structure that should take some responsibility for service delivery, as if they were an extension of the

municipality. This could be a dangerous expectation, as it inevitably sets the committees up to disappoint communities and threatens their credibility. Clearly residents also have very high expectations of ward councillors as agents of delivery, with little apparent recognition or understanding of the limited powers ordinary ward councillors hold in councils. The outcome is that councillors typically become scapegoats for their municipality's inability to deliver services.

Nomination and election processes

In most cases, the nomination and election process appears to have been relatively unproblematic and more or less in line with that envisaged in national guiding policy. In one municipality, however, the process appeared to be deeply flawed and politicised. Typically, nominations for candidates to represent sectors and/or geographical areas were called for and community meetings were convened to elect committee members.

Representation

A very important question is: to what extent are ward committee members representative of the communities and interest groups in their wards? In most of the cases studied, it is questionable whether representation is inclusive and meaningful. While attempts were made in the course of nomination and election to ensure some level of representation of key sectors and geographical areas in the composition of the committees, the *process* of representation in most cases appears to be structurally inadequate. This is because the level of consultation between the members and their designated sectors and geographical areas is flawed or insufficient. Part of the problem is that ward committee members have not been equipped with the skills necessary for effective consultation with their wider sectoral communities.

Functioning

Of the six ward committees, arguably only two are functioning reasonably effectively, meaning that they meet regularly and there is some sense of common purpose and achievement in

their meetings and other activities. While some committees meet as often as monthly, the actual value of these meetings is not always apparent. In all cases, the need for further training of members was highlighted as a critical constraint to their effective functioning. In some cases, ward committees had received no training at all.

Politicisation

An often-voiced concern relates to the extent to which party-political influence impacts not only on the nomination and election processes for ward committees, but their continued functioning. The study found that in two of the wards, party politics had clearly encroached on the committees' establishment and functioning.

Influence on council decision-making

One of the more discouraging findings is how little direct influence ward committees appear to have on council decision-making. Much of this seems attributable to the lack of structured mechanisms for input from ward committees into council deliberation processes. The assumed channel is that the committee gives input to the ward councillor, who passes it on in the form of a report to the speaker, who, in turn, raises the committee's concerns with the relevant portfolio committees or puts the issues on the council agenda for discussion.

However, this does not appear to be happening in most instances. One problem appears to be that reports are either not submitted by councillors to the speaker, or, if they are, they are not processed by the speaker.

It also does not appear that ward councillors feel authorised or confident enough to raise issues from their ward committees directly in council meetings. Where ward committees have managed to get issues on the council agenda, such as through the IDP process, a major problem is a lack of funding or technical capacity for the municipality to then respond timeously to the needs and issues raised.

Support and resources

A clear finding, confirming numerous other studies, was the need for ward committees to be given more support by municipalities in order to become more effective. The training of committee members is arguably the first priority. In all cases, this was highlighted as something the committee members and ward councillors lacked. Resources such as stationery, transport and catering appear to be adequately provided by the municipalities, but the issue of an allowance or stipend for members emerged as a critical issue. Only

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one municipality currently provides such stipends, although two others plan to do so.

Relationships

On the whole, it appears that ward committees have good relationships with their ward councillors, except in one municipality where the relationship appears to have broken down completely. Ward committee members mostly felt satisfied with the level of support they receive from their ward councillors. In most cases the relationship between ward committees and other parties, such as officials, community development workers and traditional leaders, was reported to be good. Somewhat surprising, perhaps, was the finding that there were no significant tensions between ward committees and community development workers, as this is frequently raised in other assessments of ward committees. In general, ward committees also appear to have a good relationship with residents. However, an important note of caution was sounded in some of the case studies: the communities' faith in ward committees deteriorates the longer service delivery is stalled.

Comment

Here are some of the implications of the findings, and recommendations that flow from them.

- *The primary function of ward committees should be to act as a communication channel between communities and municipal councils.* They should not be considered agents of delivery or managers of development projects, as they are structurally and technically not equipped for this role. To act as effective communication channels requires a strong system of representation, both sectorally and geographically.

- *Ward committees should be more integrated into municipal integrated development planning (IDP) processes.* A central component of ward committees' communication role should relate to the municipal IDP and budget processes. They should be a key communication conduit between communities and municipalities on community priorities and development strategies.

- *There need to be institutionalised mechanisms for communication between municipal councils and ward committees.* Processes need to be institutionalised for input from ward committees to be channelled to key decision-makers in the council, such as portfolio committees and executive committees. In this regard the role of the speaker's office is very important, and the capacity of the office needs to be made adequate.

- *The role of councillors is critical to the effective functioning of ward committees.* Councillors are responsible not only for convening and chairing ward committee meetings, but also for channelling inputs from ward committees to the council. Institutionalised mechanisms to enable ordinary ward councillors to raise issues via the council are critical. How councillors understand their roles and those of the committees is also very important. They should have a strong commitment to non-partisanship and participatory development. It is also important that councillors understand a culture of participation. This study suggests that it is not necessarily undesirable for ward councillors to be the chairs of ward committees, as long as they have the necessary skills, motivation and enthusiasm to make the committee work effectively.

- *Input from ward committees needs to be acted upon, otherwise they risk becoming discredited structures in the eyes of communities.* Where it is clear that municipalities are unable to meet the demands of citizens that are channelled via the ward committee, this needs to be openly and carefully communicated back to communities, with reasons why.

- *Ward committees should be independent structures rooted in civil society.* They should not be extensions of political parties, and they should not be subject to the control or manipulation of ward councillors.

- *Ward committees cannot function effectively without receiving capacity building training* (although it should be noted that this is not the only determinant of their effectiveness).

- *Ward committees cannot function effectively without administrative and other support from municipalities.*

- *Ward committee members should receive incentives for their work.* Notwithstanding the important notion that service on a ward committee should be entirely voluntary, a stipend and other financial incentives are important, especially in situations of poverty. Committee members cannot be expected to absorb the expenses such as transport costs and telephone charges that are incurred through their participation.

- *There should be a national fund to support ward committees.* This was raised in 2003 by the National Assembly Portfolio Committee on Provincial and Local Government, following a study tour of municipalities. This fund should assist especially weaker municipalities to provide for capacity building training, resources and stipends for ward committees.

- *Ward committees should be democratically elected, representative structures.* At the same time, however, one needs to be careful about thinking that ward committees are representative of communities – they represent certain interests, but can never be truly representative of everyone.

- *Ward committees should be accountable to the communities they represent,* and not only to councillors or municipalities. There should also be clear lines of responsibility and accountability between ward councillors, ward committees and community development workers.

- *Ward committees should complement, rather than replace, other spaces for public participation in local governance.* Ward committees should be seen as only one of a number of mechanisms and channels for public participation in local governance. Councillors and officials in particular should be cautioned against seeing ward committees as *the only* representative structure of communities.

- *A range of tools and approaches to participation should be promoted.* A one-size-fits-all approach to community participation must be avoided. As far as possible, a rich web of participatory processes should be fostered, which can include community-based planning, citizen juries, area assemblies, online polls, radio talk programmes and citizen surveys.

- *Municipalities should have communication strategies to support ward committees.* Municipalities should put as much information as possible about the functioning of the municipality and programmes and projects at the disposal of ward committees. Information needs to be carefully packaged to be as accessible as possible.

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See the full report at
www.communitylawcentre.org.za.