

# Linking communities and local government: **The Mangaung experience**

**P**ublic participation is a fundamental part of local government's planning in the new dispensation. Aside from Chapter 4 in the Systems Act, no clear guidelines are given on how to link decentralised institutions with citizens. In South Africa, and elsewhere, the links between communities and local government are poor. The initiative discussed below is one that strengthened this relationship through active community involvement in local planning.

## **Background**

Mangaung Municipality includes Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu and a rural area, and has a population of over 750 000 people. It includes the socio-economic extremes of wealthy, predominantly white suburbs, and very poor squatter settlements.

Mangaung Municipality is a pioneer in community-based ward planning processes, which it sees as an opportunity to promote participatory democracy as part of producing its integrated development plan (IDP).

## **The IDP system in South Africa**

South Africa has embarked on a process to make local government more viable and more focused on a co-ordinated approach to development. A new system of development planning has started, in which all local authorities are required to develop five-year IDPs.

## **key points**

- Community-based ward planning is a system of participatory governance
- Ordinary citizens influence the municipal resource
- It improves linkages between community, municipalities, districts and service providers within the planning area

Maximum community input into municipalities' decision making is required as part of the IDP process. Municipalities must review both community needs and processes for involving the community on an annual basis, and must also develop mechanisms for consulting the community.

IDPs have become the pivotal point around which the whole system of local government operates, with the budget as its main pillar. This process has become the main interface with the community.

However, the difficulty is that there is no effective organisational structure for participation in the IDPs. In practice two to three meetings take place, or perhaps a single workshop for the entire community in a municipality, which is extremely limited.

## **Using community-based ward planning**

Mangaung is at the forefront of establishing ward committees as the lowest tier of organised representation. It has developed an innovative system of participatory governance through community-based ward planning.

This system of participatory governance enables ordinary citizens to influence the municipal resource allocation system and as a result people, especially the poor, are able to improve their livelihoods in a sustainable manner.

Community-based ward planning improves linkages between communities, municipalities, districts and service providers within the planning area (see diagram 1).

The system seeks to decentralise decision-making in order to deepen participatory democracy.

It provides an environment in which people can contribute to local action in managing their own development, claiming their rights and exercising their responsibilities.

It aims to address the lack of effective structures for planning and managing development by developing an effective community-based planning system at ward level, which then feeds into municipal-wide planning systems, for example, in IDP.

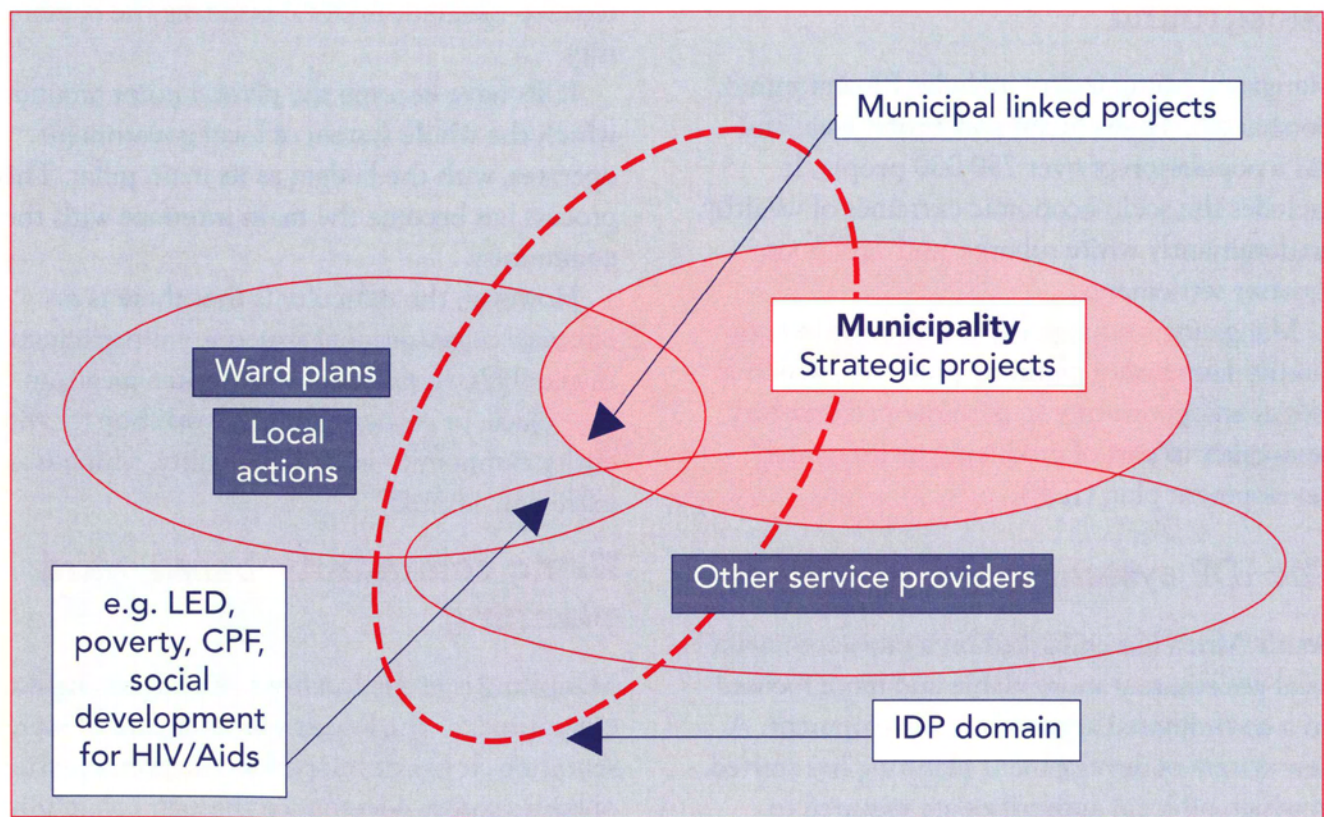
In Mangaung, community-based ward planning was undertaken between September 2001 and February 2002.

The system involved a three- to four-day planning process, using a vision-based methodology, planning with groups, and developing community actions.

The municipality provided R50 000 to each of 43 wards to support the process. Some 10 000 people participated in the planning, or 1.5% of the population.

The IDP for the municipality has drawn on this information in different ways:

- developing overall strategic priorities for the municipality (which changed considerably from the previous priorities, notably in making economic development by far the most important);
- suggesting ideas on how the overall development objectives could best be achieved (e.g. self-built rather than contractor-built housing);
- suggesting specific ideas for the municipality as a whole (e.g. for a job centre); and
- specific project ideas for the local ward.



**Diagram 1: Link between ward plan and IDP**

## Challenges

The challenge now is to support the on-going process of implementing the reporting systems and supporting wards in taking their plans forward. This is all part of the learning-by-doing process.

Many wards have already started to implement the projects identified in their plans, especially where they can act by themselves, or use the R50 000 made available by the municipality. It remains to be seen to what extent community-based ward planning will stimulate local action and local management of development.

## Potential benefits

The main difference from the previous planning approach is that community-based ward planning starts with the community's views and actively

involves poor people in managing their own development.

This demonstrates that poor people's views are important and shows that they can make a difference in building a community identity.

A key feature is the combination of people's strengths, opportunities, local indigenous knowledge and technical inputs (specialists' know-how), to find effective solutions for communities.

The difficulty with a problem-based approach is that problems are so large that the process becomes paralysed. Planning from strengths, opportunities, local indigenous knowledge and technical inputs, on the other hand, makes it possible to move forward.

Using this approach, Mangaung has developed strong partnerships with municipal stakeholders, who, through this process, take ownership of the IDP and are committed to its implementation.

The municipality promotes participatory and community-based planning in order to:

- make plans more relevant to local needs and conditions;
- increase community involvement in provision of public services; and
- increase people's control over their own lives and livelihoods.

Community-based ward planning enables the above issues to be addressed in a way that is implementable, empowering, and sustainable using available resources.

It is a holistic system that reflects the complex reality of people's lives and is linked to the mainstream planning system.

## Conclusion

This innovation has brought the Mangaung Municipality closer to its people, and has shown that it is committed to supporting their initiatives. It has given ward committees and ward councillors a clear role, and they also have a better understanding of the needs of their residents. Each ward now has a clear programme to implement.

## Mangaung workshop

A South African workshop reporting on progress in South Africa, Uganda, Ghana and Zimbabwe

Mangaung, 29–30 October 2002

The registration fee of R400 covers the conference fee, meals, and a visit to wards to discuss their experience with community-based ward planning. An extensive resource pack will be provided including a copy of the ward planning manual, a video, an example of a ward plan, and papers on the project.

Full details can be found at the Community-Based Planning page at [www.khanya-mrc.co.za](http://www.khanya-mrc.co.za), plus copies of project documents, manuals, and sample plans.

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The municipality also has a better understanding of the strengths, preferred outcomes, opportunities and risks of the different social groups within the municipal area.

This approach has brought together all sectors of the community and helped them understand each other's viewpoint, plan for a common future, and release their energy to create their own future, rather than waiting for the government to do everything for them.

The culture of dependency entrenched by the previous system of governance is thus in the process of being replaced.

Communities are beginning to realise the benefits of exerting their influence over developments in their environment.

Similarly, administrative officials are beginning to develop confidence in the ability of ordinary people to construct well-considered, practical and sustainable development programmes and projects.

Communities are gaining valuable experience in the practicalities of sustainable community-based ward planning. This has exposed them to the challenges of local governance and the need to create a co-operative framework wherein officials, elected councillors and citizens take responsibility collectively for development at the local level.

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