



Realising effective and sustainable democratic governance in Southern Africa and beyond.

THE IMPACT OF DEMOCRACY ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE SADC REGION

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, significant changes have occurred in the mode of governance within the Southern African region. Political centralisation, which had dominated the region assumed various forms such as mono-party democracy (e.g. Tanzania, Zambia), one person (e.g. Malawi), military rule (e.g. Lesotho and Democratic Republic of Congo), while apartheid in South Africa has been increasingly replaced by political liberalisation. This essentially represents a new set of political cultures in the region which emphasises pluralism as against the centralisation of power that was once the hallmark of the one-party era.

The coming of multiparty democracy was hailed as a victory for the people. It was assumed that people would participate in the affairs of the state after elections were held. The fight for independence on the continent and democracy thereafter, were as much as about freedom, as for participation in state decisions. Citizens' participation was somewhat assured in the new dispensation. This paper grapples with the complex interconnection and interface between public participation and democratic governance on the African continent in general and Southern Africa in particular, after a decade of electoral democracy.

The first section presents a conceptual framework for the understanding of public participation. The second section assesses the form and content of the current political liberalisation (or democratisation) in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) since 1990. The third unravels the essence of citizen participation, both at the national and local level. The fourth looks at some of the factors that hinder public participation, ranging from the structures of local government, parliamentary representation to the behaviour of leadership. With the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) already endorsed as Africa's blue print for development), the paper alludes to people participation in this continental programme.

Public Participation

Public participation is one of key principle of democracy and is undoubtedly a crucial determinant of the nature of the democracy. A democracy revolves around the people and provides an explanation of why it is important to emphasise the importance of public participation. Just as participation is necessary for democracy and good governance, it is also critical to societal development.

There are different types of citizen-government interaction:

- Citizens' action which is initiated and controlled by them for a purpose that they determine. e.g. by means of lobbying of

parliamentary committees, public demonstration and protests¹;

- Citizen involvement, which is initiated and controlled by government to improve and /or gain support for decisions, programs and services, e.g. by means of public hearings, consultation with advisory committees, and attitudinal surveys;
- Electoral participation, which is initiated by government according to law in order to elect representatives;
- Obligatory participation, which involves mandatory responsibilities of citizens, such as taxation and military services.

While all these forms of participation are important, electoral participation remains the most crucial. The recent upsurge in interest in public participation in both developed and less developed countries is based on several democratic values:

- The value of equality refers to the democratic principle that all citizens should have an equal opportunity to exert influence through political activity if they choose to do so;

¹ Among the most demonstrable ways to assure civil society participation, the following can be mentioned: ensuring public access to government information; requiring certain types of government meetings to be open to public observation; conducting public hearings and referenda; ensuring freedom of expression

- The principle of popular sovereignty refers to the notion that government is a creation of the citizenry rather than a separate entity standing above it. This does not mean that every interest can be satisfied all the time; but over the long term, the state must be sufficiently sensitive and responsive to the needs of the people, so that all share a sense of mutual commitment;

- The quality of citizenship refers to the idea that the politically educated citizen is able to exercise judgement, contribute to debate about polity, is aware of societal problems, and of the difficulties in finding solutions to them. Proponents of public participation believe that it counters the sense of powerlessness among the poor and minority segments of the population. In this way, public involvement provides for the political education of the public. Through participation, individuals gain the confidence that comes from shared control of public actions.

Political Liberalisation in SADC

Since 1990, when democracy began spreading over the continent, electoral processes have been the most critical moments in African countries' political life. The African continent, especially the Southern African region, has made significant progress in institutionalising electoral democracy over the course of the past decade. Botswana has been a democracy since 1966. It is one of the

relatively stable and matured democracies in the region and on the African continent. In 1991, the peaceful political transition in Zambia, which paved the way for the return of democracy, inspired other countries with similar experiences of one-party state wishing to democratise. Since then most of the SADC countries, with the exception of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola and Swaziland have held more than two general democratic elections.

Democratic changes in the different countries were brought about by pressure from above (the international community) and from below by civil society groups. In this processes, and despite their weaknesses, civil society "in form of trade unions, women's organisations, churches, civil and human rights groups, media associations, lawyers' associations and other professional and non professional groups" have contributed to the emergence of a multiparty democracy in the region.² But what is democracy? There exists a general understanding concerning the essentials of democratic life that apply universally:

- Democracy means that there should be periodic (or regular) and genuine elections and that power can and should change hands through popular suffrage and not coercion or force.

- In democracies, political opponents and minorities have the right to express their views and have influence (i.e. more

² SAPES/UNDP/SADC, SADC Regional Human Development Report 2000, SAPES Books, Harare,2000

than achieve representation) in policymaking process.

- There should be the opportunity for alternation in governing coalitions; that is, voters should be able to remove certain politicians from office and replace them with new leadership.
- Democracy means that there should be respect and protection for basic civil and political rights.
- Democracy entails certain development, economic and environmental rights such as clean water, housing and opportunities for employment.

According to Bujra and Buthelezi, cited democracy denotes the “ability of the citizens in society or participants in an organization to effectively take part in the choice of their representatives or leadership and to effectively participate in the decisions made on issues that affect them or society in general.”³ As a system, democracy should be biased in favour of social justice and equality of access to national resources.

Undoubtedly, elections play a critical role in the nurturing and consolidation of democratic governance in Africa as a whole and Southern Africa in particular. This is the case because elections allow citizens to exert their own choice and voice to appoint both local and national

³ Cited in Khabele Matlosa, *Electoral System Reforms, Democracy and Stability in the SADC Region: Comparative Analysis*. (EISA Research Report No 1). Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, Johannesburg, 2003, p4

leaders to run national affairs on their behalf. Their critical importance notwithstanding, the most important value of elections and their outcomes lies in the electoral system that each country adopts. While elections basically refer to a process of selecting local and national leaders on a periodic basis defined in a national constitution, an electoral system refers to a method of selecting these leaders and translating votes into parliamentary seats. Quoting Reynolds and Reilly, Matlosa argues that “electoral systems translate the votes cast in a general election into seats won by parties and candidates. An electoral system encompasses procedures, rules and regulations for the electorate to exercise their right to vote and determines how elected Members of Parliament (MPs) occupy their allocated seats in the legislature.”⁴ It is through the electoral system that the representation and inclusion of minority and disadvantage groups is achieved.

There are many electoral systems throughout the world. In SADC there are two which are predominant—proportional representation and the First-Past-the-Post system. Each political system offers benefits and disadvantages in terms of representation and accountability. For example, South Africa, in 1994, chose Proportional Representation to achieve unity through representation but the system is being criticised for its lack of accountability and effective participation. Indeed the electoral system adopted by South Africa has achieved a great deal of representation of minority groups, and of women in parliament, but does not provide for the accountability of MPs to their constituencies. Most SADC

⁴ *Ibid*

countries use the First-Past-the-Post System (Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Botswana) which is limited in term of representation but is potentially able to offer a greater level of participation and accountability by MPs to their constituencies.

When people vote for representatives in an election, they are voting for them to make laws and policies and to ensure that these are carried out. But people participation should not end with voting. Citizens have to participate on an ongoing basis in the process of making laws and policies and in their implementation. Citizens have the constitutional right to be involved in these processes in all spheres of government. And the First-Past-the-Post System is renowned for advancing participation.

Interface between Democracy and Participation

To paraphrase John Stuart Mill “ most of the classical theories of democracy are predicated upon an assumption that even if individual values are not relative, true only for citizens who hold them, then at least absolute values cannot be known or communicated from others.”⁵ Classical theorists maintained that, lacking knowledge of universal truths upon which to establish political authority, individuals in society must be accorded maximum opportunity to pursue their own goals and self-defined values, and to do so in self-determined ways.⁶ There

⁵ J.Stuart Mill (1998), *Utilitarianism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p61

⁶ Mesharch Katusiimeh; Civic Education and the Promotion of Participatory Democracy in Uganda. Paper presented at a conference on Strengthening African Initiatives through

is no doubt that the pursuit of individual goals in any given society brings conflict between citizens. Classic theorists, including Mill, concluded that the sum of individual values or majority rule could be the basis of law established by popular consent. The majority preferences were to be identified through citizen participation, and the widest possible involvement of citizens in the political process was to produce a synthesis of the diverse and relative values of individual citizens into a unified, if still not absolute, basis of authority. Thus in classical theories of democracy, consensus replaces truth, as the source of authority and individual participation in the polity is the procedure that identifies consensus.

While there is no doubt that the right to vote is the first primordial act of participation, the question that needs to be asked, is to what extent these rights have translated into credible participation of citizens in the day to day activities of the state in SADC? Participation is an essential pre-requisite for good governance as it improves information flow, accountability, due process, and give voice to those most directly affected by public policy.

Legislation alone cannot ensure people's participation in governance. During the authoritarian regime, for example the Mobutu's regime, referendums were used to force a fearful people to legitimise government policy proposals. It seems that in the post one-party state, however, legislation has merely instituted the participative mechanisms

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already at work. The only difference today is that we have active opposition political parties, civil society organisations and the media, which are allowed to organise freely. A general observation is that notwithstanding achievements in multiparty democracy, many elections have not translated into citizen participation in state affairs between elections. It seems that citizen participation in SADC is limited to the ballot box with very little involvement in policy formulation and implementation. While electoral democracy has afforded the people direct participation in the choice of their leaders, citizen participation at any particular time can be traced in part, to the nature of a political culture prevailing in a given polity. There is no doubt political culture as alluded to by many, is one of the most powerful influences that shape a political system. It creates norms-beliefs about how people should behave-and these norms influence social behaviour. Most people laboured under cruel authoritarian regimes on the continent for more than two decades. They have not adapted fast enough to the demand of the new environment. But South Africa is an exception. The culture of protest against apartheid regime has left behind strong social movements, which continue to organise around social issues and keep the government accountable.

Elitist Democracy

The challenge of competitive politics in SADC countries is that politics is still seen as elitist. The majority of the population is still excluded from active participation in political process. The political process remains dominated by a small elite, which appears remarkably similar in composition to that which

prospered under the one-party state. There has not been a fundamental paradigm mind shift from the politicians to include people in governance. The same can be said of political parties. There is no intra-party democracy in many political parties in SADC. Most political parties' activities centre around their leader. Even when there is consultation between party members, it is in most cases symbolic. There is no way public participation can be enhanced at the macro level (government) when at the micro (political party) participation is non-existent. In most SADC countries party activities are election focussed.

A cursory look at Botswana would leave observers in little doubt that liberal democracy has succeeded here more than in any other African country, post-independence. Using multiparty elections and other relevant standard indicators, one could make a convincing case for the successful institutionalisation of liberal democracy and bureaucratic modernisation. In fact, those familiar with the literature on this country are now used to the idea of its exceptional qualities. "Politically, Botswana is known to be the a rare example of functioning liberal multiparty democracy in Africa"⁷, even though its ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) is yet to experience a break in its monopoly of power since independence in 1966.⁸

⁷Holm, JD. & Molutsi, P (1992), "State-Society Relations in Botswana, Beginning Liberalisation" in: Goran Hyden and Micheal Bratton, (eds), *Governance and Politics in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, 77-96

⁸ Molokomme, A. (2000). "Building Inclusiveness in SADC's Democratic Systems: The Case of Women's Representation in Leadership Positions" paper presented at the

Botswana indeed could represent an exception to the continental norm: ethnic conflict has been very minimal; it has one of the fastest growing economies in the world; and it is the only country on the continent with diamonds that has yet to experience warlordism.

All this augurs well for liberal democracy. But a closer look reveals that the achievements of Botswana's liberal democracy are not as real as are claimed. It has been noted that patterned democracy in the form of institutional structures has not necessarily given rise to participatory politics, nor to the edification of human rights beyond token legalisms and the proliferation of associations and NGOs of various kinds reclaiming empowerment for individuals and interest groups of voluntary membership. Kenneth Good has argued that this is the case in Botswana, where over thirty five years of multiparty politics has resulted in little more than "elite democracy"⁹, and where a booming economy has not necessarily yield better opportunities and higher standards of living for the masses in general, and destitute Basarwa minority in particular.¹⁰ Whether we agree with Good's assessment or not, it is obvious that structures alone cannot replace the economic well being and strategic mobilisation needed for effective participation and formation of long-term civil society organisations with a minimum measures of stability. Basic

Southern African Elections Forum, Windhoek, Namibia, 11-14 June

⁹ Good, K., (1999a), "Enduring Elite Democracy in Botswana" in: *Democratization*. Vol 6 (1): 50-66

¹⁰ Good, K., (1999b), "The State and Extreme Poverty in Botswana: the San and Destitute," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 37 (2): 185-205

material security is needed to take attention and time away from the struggle for bare survival, towards the edification of a vibrant civil society that guarantees human rights beyond rhetoric.¹¹

Inefficiency of Parliamentary Politics

In the SADC region, public participation is very limited even in those countries using the First-Past-the Post system. One reason is simply the inability of MPs to connect with their constituencies. MPs prefer to spend their time in town than go back and interact with the people. This lack of interaction has also affected the accountability of MPs. People do not know, in most of the countries, about their MPs. A study in Zambia by Martin Kalungu-Banda and Stephen Lungu in 2001 found that the majority of local people (90 percent) find their MPs elusive and greedy people who never visited their constituencies to listen to the people's problems. This author's recent research visit to Lesotho revealed the same pattern. MPs do not go back to their constituencies, preferring to spend their time in town.¹² In South Africa, those who call for the reform in the electoral system (proportional representation) argue that MPs are not accountable to their constituency and they are ineffective since they are

¹¹ Kossler, R & Melber, H., (1996), "The Concept of Civil Society and the Process of Nation-Building in African States,"

International Politics and Society. No 1: 69-79

¹² Martin Kalungu-Banda & Stephen Lungu (2001) "Study of Good Governance at the Village Level in Zambia" "Paper presented at a regional conference "Interrogating the New Political Culture In Southern Africa, SARIPS, Harare

guaranteed party support even when they do not perform.

Nowadays, citizens not only vote but also are increasingly demanding a governance scheme free of bureaucratic and administrative corruption, patronage, nepotism, diversion of public funds and stealing of public assets; a governance approach that promotes development and equity. It is citizens who are demanding more participation in the decision-making process of public policies, as well as their implementation follow-up. Citizens expect that parties in parliament will represent them. In reality, despite of their numbers (opposition parties), with the exception of South Africa, the opposition parties in the assembly in SADC have not been very watchful and alert in the passage of bills, several being passed with inadequate deliberation.

In SADC, public consultation between government and citizens is very limited. The lack of visits by MPs to their respective constituencies suggests that the critical link between central government and local government systems is either weak or non-existent in the countryside. In turn, this means the opinions and views of local people are not given prominence in the decision-making processes at the higher levels of government. The study by Kalungu and Stephen found that the varied experiences local people have had with their elected representatives tend to influence their attitudes towards voting. Generally, however, local people seem to understand the power of the vote in terms of electing leaders of their choice to office. But, in spite of this general civic awareness, people generally appeared indifferent when it came to the

actual casting of the ballot paper. An IDASA survey found that people distrust politicians. How do we strengthen democracy when legislatures suffer from inadequate links with rural society and inadequate involvement in the period between elections?

External Factors

In many ways, external influence on African politics has been a major obstacle to citizen participation. The overbearing external influence on the democratisation process and economic policy has pushed many observers to talk of the emergence of “choiceless democracies” where Africans accept the conditionalities of policies concocted by international technocracies as the only way of appeasing the West and thereby becoming eligible for foreign aid.

All governments in the SADC region have adopted poverty alleviation strategic documents. Most of these strategies, however, have been drafted by so-called experts from the World Bank or IMF with little participation from the people. To signal foreign capital, governments must demonstrate their autonomy from local politics.¹³ The adoption of a structural adjustment programme does not enhance citizens’ participation as governments do not consult citizens and unilaterally implement this externally imposed social policy.

The negative impact of a structural programme on state’s capacity has engendered hostility to the state and

¹³ SAPES/UNDP/SADC (1998), Regional Human Development Report, *Governance and Human Development in Southern Africa*, SAPES Books, Harare, 36.

undermined its legitimacy.¹⁴ In Zambia, for example national, government programmes have increasingly ignored the problems of both rural and urban people, or delivered their solutions, which do not seem to work (crop marketing, health reforms).¹⁵ In Malawi, President Bakili Muluzi sold all his country's maize reserves on IMF advice and placed his country into serious economic difficulty and fostered widespread food shortage. This phenomenon is not specific to bad performing states or those states that are implementing the World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment programmes. In South Africa, as Steven Friedman, clearly articulates in a newspaper article "Our chief constraint to growth is not lack of projects. It is lack of broad agreement on policy."¹⁶ The government's Gear policy has been criticised for having been put in place unilaterally and attempt by government to avoid any debate that might trigger adjustment to the policy. The monopolisation of decisions by governments, on what needs to be done, when and how, is the biggest obstacle to development on the continent. It is no wonder the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. The disparity in living conditions between the rich and poor has not improved in spite of governments' policy of poverty

¹⁴ Ake, C (1996), *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 133

¹⁵ USAID Zambia Democratic Governance Project-Monitoring and Evaluation Series, Special Study No 5 "Political Participation in Zambia since 91-96: Trends, determinants and USAID program implications" by Bratton. M, Alderfer, and Simutanyi

¹⁶ Steven Friedman (2003), "To Grow and Develop We Need to Talk" *Business Day*, 28 May 28

alleviation policies and the introduction of democracy.

Community-driven development is the process by which community groups assume control and authority over decisions and resources in development projects, which affect their lives. What does this mean in concrete terms? It means reversing control and accountability from the central authorities to community organisations in the initiation, planning, implementation, operation, maintenance and evaluation of development projects with agencies playing a supportive role.¹⁷

Weak Civil Society Groups

The principle of citizen participation has become increasingly prominent in the democratisation discourse. Banded about and liberally used in policy documents, citizen participation and the involvement of civil society are perceived as essential for democratic consolidation.

One factor that remains common to most SADC countries is that organisation of civil society in the form of trade unions, women's organisations, human rights groups, media associations, lawyers' associations and other professional and non-professional groups have contributed to the emergence of a multiparty political pluralism in the region. But is this enough? A society is a living thing, and democracy is constantly developing. Elections, political parties and political leaders are only a part of this process. This is why the involvement of people is more important

¹⁷ World Report on Participation. <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/es>

than simply the holding of elections. In many instances, civil society has been left out of major political and economic decisions in the different countries on matters concerning the people. Many governments in the region see civil society positions as opposition to government initiatives, and, advocacy on behalf of public policy alternatives by civil society are perceived to be a threat to the state, and characterised as unpatriotic. In South Africa, the state pushed civil society aside in the drafting of its GEAR policy. In Malawi, “the process of democratisation appears to be as much as about social and political participation as about social and political welfare and institutional maturation. On all fronts there has been discernable movement. The 1990’s witnessed a remarkable surge in civil society in unmistakable stages of development, but failed to act in concert with the state government to pursue socio-economic programmes.”¹⁸ In Zimbabwe, the Land Redistribution Policy was implemented with no consultation with the people. There are people who will argue that it was a revolution and as such did not require broader consultation. But a revolution must have a backing of the people to succeed.

While the trend might differ from country to country, the ability of people to use the new governance systems brought about by the democratisation process to make their opinion known to those in power seems very limited, and the educational efforts of the civic organisations do not seem to work. It is not surprising that there is low interest in

¹⁸ The State of Democracy: Democracy Assessments in Eight Nations Around the World. (2002), International IDEA, Kluwer Law International, London, 50.

politics from the people across the region. Turn-out at national and local government elections is increasingly smaller. While democracy remains the preferred form of government in SADC, political participation is not high in most SADC countries. There is none of the trust and confidence between government and civil society, which is supposed to develop in a democracy. In the absence of ‘social capital’, to use Robert Putnam concept, progress of government efforts can be hindered; in the long run, communities without trust are dysfunctional and in the worst scenarios violence among contending social forces can erupt.

Zimbabwe and Swaziland are countries in SADC where governments do not leave much space for civil society participation in politics. In Zambia, civil society, despite the protest they mounted to prevent President Chiluba standing for the third term, have retired from public life. The same maybe said for the rest of the continent as illustrated by the IDASA survey. In most countries people are not committed to attending meetings, r participating in strikes or protests. South Africa stands alone in region. It has a strong tradition of voluntary and civic associations, stretching back to the long struggle against apartheid. The range of associative and voluntary organisations that represent key social, economic and political interests is extensive.

Newspapers, especially the private press, offer a window into the questioning of certain aspects of liberal democracy by citizens. These papers across the region consistently challenge states and expose abuse of power. But the mobilisation of state media by government has seriously

reduced the flow of information and hence, public participation. The church continues, across the region, to play a key role in ensuring participation. In Malawi for example, the church remains the most effective institution representing the voice of people. In 1992, it was the letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops that precipitated the fall of President Kamuzu Banda's one party totalitarian regime and ushered in competitive politics in Malawi. The critical role played by the church in the transition from one-party dictatorship to multiparty democracy in SADC has been well documented.¹⁹

Given the weakness of the civil society organisations, the level of political participation by ordinary citizens in the region has severe limitations even within the confines of the liberal democracy adopted by most states.

Focus of Democracy on Individual Rather Than on Group Rights

Popular and ideological representations of liberal democracy treat its promise of rights and empowerment for the individual as a *fait accompli*. The tendency is to minimise the power of the society, society structures, and communal and cultural solidarity by 'trumpeting instead the uncompromising autonomy of the individual, right-bearing, physical discrete, monied, market-driven, materially inviolate human subject.'²⁰ Multiparty politics is

¹⁹ K.R.Ross (1995), "The Truth Shall set you free: Christian Social Witness in Malawi" In K.R. Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays*, Mambo Press, 2-29

²⁰ Comaroff, J.L. and Comaroff, J., (1999a), "Introduction", in: Comaroff, J.L. & Comaroff, J.

seen as the sole guarantor of democracy and also as a deterrent to state control and repression. This reasoning is predicated upon the assumption of no intermediary communities or loyalties between the state and the individual as an autonomous agent who is free to elect and to be elected. When such intermediate communities are acknowledged, the tendency is to treat them as backsliding on the long march towards Western-type modernity as the civilised or the one best way of harnessing the fruits of scientific revolutions. Furthermore, assumed legal rights and political choices for the individual are automatically associated with economic, cultural and societal opportunities, often packaged and presented as though availability were synonymous with affordability.

As voters, it seems that the poor are neglected and as citizens, the poor are ignored by governments. In general, democratic dispensation has not increased the level of trust of citizens towards their leaders. A critical look beneath the rhetoric of rights appears to point to the fact that being an individual in the liberal democratic sense of the word is both a process and a luxury that few can afford in reality. As Nyamnjoh argues, liberal democracy is like a bazaar to which many are drawn but few rewarded.

Individuals attracted by rhetoric of rights soon find themselves confronted by a myriad of ways in which these rights are bargained away. Even in the United States, champion of liberal democracy

(eds), *Civil Society and Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. The University of Chicago, Chicago, 3; (See also: Young (1995), 162-166).

and its promises, inequalities of various kinds deny many in practice what is promised in principle.²¹ Being a rights-bearing individual ceases to be as automatic in reality as it is claimed in principle. To those who succeed after hard struggle, the tendency is to monopolise opportunities, since it is, quite paradoxically, only by curbing the rights of others that advantages are best guaranteed in effect. Here the best example in our region is that of President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia. After a successful campaign to win power over the UNIP, that ruled Zambia under Kenneth Kaunda for 27 years, he failed to uphold the rule of law and seriously limited public participation. Threat of serious unrest by a coalition of civil society had to be used to ensure that he did not stand for a third term in contradiction with the constitution.

Black empowerment in South Africa is another case in point. Moletsu Mbeki, in a radio interview argues that, it is serving a few and is morally wrong. This is what happened during the period of industrialisation in Europe. Some even go as far to say that there is no other way of developing than by firstly making a few very rich. This is cynical capitalism. It sacrifices the majority so as to build up the strength of the few. If black empowerment is not properly packaged to ensure equal redistribution of resource and participation in decision making, we are running the risk of destabilising society in order to stabilise capital. This might lead to social unrest.

²¹ Frances B. Nyamnjoh (2001). Reconciling 'The Rhetoric of Rights' with Competing Notions of Personhood and Agency in Botswana. Paper presented at a conference entitled "Interrogating the new Political Culture in Southern Africa. SAPES, Harare

As Dany-Robert Dufour aptly argues, under neo-liberalism, individuals feel secure only to the extent that they succeed or see themselves to be succeeding in material and consumerist terms. Since other forms of participation do not ensure material progress, to compensate for the absence of participatory mechanisms, in order to create a sense of belonging citizens create neighbourhood gangs and sects through which individuals attempt to repossess a collective identity and feeling of community.²² Hence Englund's call in his study for *Competing Registers of Moral Argument* from which Malawians draw their articulation of human rights - for social analysis 'to question the apparent naturalism' in the rhetoric of rights, by creating analytical space for marginalised 'ways of conceiving of human dignity and values.'²³

Weak Local Government Structures

The advantage of local elections is that citizens generally know the candidates well and choose on an informed basis. Local government is the closest form of government to the people and as such has potential to enhance participation. Therefore one can argue that without a viable system of local election, the transition to democracy remains incomplete.

In SADC, most democracies have reached the local level through the

²² Dufour, Dany-Robert, (2001), "*The Individual in Disarray*"

²³ Englund, H (2000), "The Dead Hand of Human Rights: Contrasting Christianities in Post Transition Malawi", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 38(4), 580-581

holding of local elections. The new system in SADC of local government finds its immediate origin in the countries' constitution. This is a dramatic shift from the one party era, when local authorities were directly under the authority of the central government. But one of the key issues has been to ensure that the decentralisation process enhances participation. Central to any meaning of local democratic governance is the concept of self-government and administration closest to the people.²⁴ In SADC, many local government structures confront major difficulties in establishing new participation norms, and in building cooperation among groups who had nothing to do with each other in the past, problems of untrained new staff and rigidities in budgets and programmes.

Furthermore, SADC governments have shown very little commitment to local government as an end in itself. Districts have no autonomous decision-making capacity, indicating continued centralisation of policy giving the impression that governments are reluctant to experiment with decentralisation: decisions still come from the centre, and are guided by standing orders on local government spending and operation. Most governments attribute this to financial constraints rather than to deliberate policy of central government. Central government relations with local government remain defined by the classical theory that it (local government) should only provide public

²⁴ International IDEA (2001), *Democracy at the Local Level: The International IDEA Handbook on Participation, Representation, Conflict Management and Governance*, 11

services in accordance with local wants rather than initiate development.

But there is a need beyond the lack of financial capacity to check the ability of local government in SADC to achieve its prime purpose: offering citizens the power to shape local circumstances and propose possible solutions. One key solution should be to directly empower local citizens. But the question is how one achieves that? There is need for people to participate in matters affecting their lives and to profit from the outcome of their efforts. One cannot minimise the necessity of letting people prioritise what they consider important and coordinate their efforts in a way that takes account of all strata of society. Why would one not have processes where people meet in a town hall and make decisions on issues affecting their society? Jane Mansbridge, in her book *Beyond Alternative Democracy*, argues that "Decision making in an alternative workplace and in a town hall meeting in New England (in the US) produced more durable policy solutions than either electoral or top-down approaches." It would be naïve, however, to assume that public participation is an easy enterprise. Communities are different and issues diverse. Often the difficult issues faced by a community are too complex and involve too many divergent interests.

An important question is why donors do not bother to fund and express interest in local government elections? This is a critical question, especially when one considers the argument that "...until elected local governments are established or restored, the task of building democracy will remain seriously incomplete."²⁵ It is here that

²⁵ *Op cit*, 26

Marina Ottawa's position can be justified: "What value is a free and fair presidential election with inadequate local councillors? What is electoral democracy when citizens are not participating in the policy formulation and implementations at local level?"

The cost of elections might be the reason why donors do not pay much attention to local government elections. Assessing a sub-regional process such as democratisation, which takes place at different speeds and directions, and at many levels, is complex. Countries, which have held local government election in the SADC region, have failed to make local government structures functional. They have argued that they have no money to do so. Those who have not organised them also attribute the lack of finance as the main reason. Is it not here that donors should commit themselves to support and strengthen democracy in the sub-region?

Conclusion

The paper argues that democracy does increase public participation. Electoral democracy in Southern Africa and on continent has afforded the people the possibility of choosing their leaders directly. It seems, however, that participation on the continent has remained at the level of choosing leaders and has not progressed fast enough to ensure citizen participation in decision-making.

The SADC countries need to empower their people so that they feel confident in their capacity to confront their own problems and find the way towards solutions. This can only happen when countries make politics into a service for

the common good. This will only take place when those in power cease thinking that people are ignorant, incapable, backward and uneducated. Instead, they should start looking for available capacity and build upon that, letting them experience the power they have by gathering them together and seeing their own possibilities. There is a need in SADC for a political approach that fosters the creation of people's power and aims at building up the common good of all citizens. It is also necessary to provide a political awareness programme that gives the vote and support to those who are willing to serve the common good and agitates against those politicians who seek their own interest.

Effective citizen participation will not happen by exhortation and beautiful speeches. It will require struggle. It needs people who have a passionate conviction and commitment to make it happen. Average politicians who are too keen on placating others so as to keep power and their seats in office and who do not interact with the people they pretend to represent, will not bring about the required changes. It is only when politicians are forced from below, that they will make the necessary decisions. This is the challenge lying before civil society. We need an organic civil society, a civil society that interacts with people on a regular basis, understands the issues on the ground and not one that tries to interpret society by sitting in big offices in town. Only the commitment of many individuals will create a movement needed to force the common good to become the basis for policy making.

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