Introduction

There is growing recognition that governance systems can shape socio-economic growth and development trajectories. This goes to the heart of the reinventing government project, which reaffirms the centrality of the state in the resolution of social and economic problems. The path of post-liberation development in South Africa reflects a desire to both stabilise the macro-economic situation as well as address the needs of the poor through reinventing government through the establishment of a developmental state.

Prior to 1994, South Africa had a history of oppression, characterised by an authoritarian system of governance that ignored the rights and aspirations of the majority of its people. Under apartheid, the government denied the majority of citizens' democratic rights and implemented a tyrannical system of rule in a secretive, top down manner. During the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, particularly during the 1980’s, the national liberation movement developed practices such as people’s power and people’s education that promoted the participation of ordinary people in the struggle, and challenged apartheid governance. The African National Congress (ANC), which spearheaded the liberation struggle, has a rich history and culture of participatory democracy.

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This tradition of participatory politics underpinned the ANC government’s approach to the transformation of the state and governance. Since 1994, many departments at national and provincial level, as well as local government institutions, have initiated a number of interventions to address issues of undemocratic and unaccountable governance. This has been especially true when departments have developed new policies. Policy papers have frequently been developed in a participatory fashion, and various stakeholders have been encouraged to add value and shape the policy content of discussion papers.

Although a number of good policies have been formulated since the inception of the democratic government, the implementation of policy and service delivery continues to challenge government at national, provincial and local level. All three spheres of government play a role in service delivery at the local level.

Greater attention is being devoted in the second decade of democracy, to the development of tools and methods that promote the involvement of citizens in service delivery. The Mbeki-government is now placing substantial emphasis on program implementation and service delivery improvement to tackle the problems of poverty. There is also growing recognition of the value and importance of consultation, and formal mechanisms have been developed to facilitate this.

**The Developmental State and the Challenge of People-centred, Integrated Governance**

The strategic objective of the second decade of freedom is to build and consolidate a developmental state in South Africa. A developmental state excels in the basics of governance and intervenes strategically in the economy to promote social development.

South African economy and society comprise a developed economy with sound macro economic management, surrounded by a second underdeveloped economy characterised by poverty and unemployment. The challenge for the developmental state is to integrate the two economies while meeting both their needs.

In order to achieve integration, the developmental state needs to be people-oriented and capable of addressing the socio-economic needs of its entire population, especially the poor, marginalized and historically oppressed. As noted, the South African state comprises three spheres of government. The quality of interaction between the three spheres
determines the impact of the state’s development efforts and is related to the Constitutional principle of cooperative governance.

The key objective of integration is to improve service delivery. Integrated service delivery is a challenge for public services globally. The quest for integration takes place at a number of levels. It involves improving intergovernmental relations horizontally as well as vertically. It also requires the integration of citizens into governance systems and processes in order to ensure that implementation of policy meets the needs of citizens. This is achieved through participatory governance.

**Participatory Governance**

Participatory governance experiences are found all over the world. Participatory governance is frequently associated with decentralization in which efforts are made to shift power and resources away from a single national centre in order to improve responsiveness and accountability. There are different types of decentralization, including deconcentration (shifting decision-making personnel from a capital to dispersed locations), devolution (transfer of authority to subnational government) and delegation (transfer of powers to public corporations or special authorities). The New Public Management paradigm, which informed public service reform globally through the 1990s, encouraged these various forms of decentralization. These were frequently linked to alternative service delivery mechanisms and institutions that challenged the traditional role of the state.

Decentralization should not, however, be seen as a necessary condition for participatory governance. A strong centre of government can promote and be enhanced by the participation of citizens in policy formulation and implementation as well as the monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation. We need to acknowledge that participatory governance should be treated as a flexible and elastic concept that is historically contingent. It refers to contexts and situations in which governments strive to be more relevant to the lives of people by increasing their role in service delivery in order to improve the quality of government services.

Participatory governance experiences are found all over the world. These experiences show efforts to consistently involve people in governance issues, the importance of communication and a vision of social transformation and development. Central to the success of participatory governance is strong leadership and a political will and commitment to
bring about changes suggested through the participatory governance experience.

Osmani has shown how decentralization and participation have been widely used and somewhat abused as terms because politicians all over the world have sought, in many instances sincerely, to increase the impact of programmes and projects on the lives of the poor. The two major stumbling blocks usually found are unwillingness by the centre to relinquish or share power and an inability amongst the weaker sections of the community to participate in local governance structures, often leading to domination by local elites. Osmani following Blair identifies the conditions under which genuine participation can occur, arguing that two related conditions are required: participation must be extensive and accountability must be ensured. These conditions are rarely satisfied and the result is that decision making processes come to be dominated by a combination of local elites and government functionaries.

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright have come up with useful pointers to the reinvention of government through popular participation by way of what they call “Empowered Deliberative Democracy”. They define this as efforts to deepen the way in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies that directly affect their lives. Fung and Olin Wright provide five case studies (some of which are also used by others in this field). Two of the cases aim to remedy failures by state agents through the use of participation and deliberation to enhance effectiveness (community policing in Chicago and a collective training strategy in Milwaukee) while in another two, left wing political parties have captured political power and seek to advance a social justice agenda (urban budgeting in Brazil and participatory village governance in India). The fifth case involves stakeholders making reforms to legislation governing protected species.

They identify three principles of Empowered Deliberative Democracy:

- A practical orientation (in that participation is geared to very concrete concerns);
- Bottom up participation; and

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• Deliberative solution generation (i.e. iterative dialogue based decision making).

They go on to identify three design principles that need to be considered when engaging with Empowered Deliberative Democratic style reforms. These design principles require:

• Devolution (because Empowered Deliberative Democracy requires a fundamental reorganization of the state apparatus);
• Centralized supervision and coordination (because accountability requires local bodies to be connected to superordinate structures); and
• Interventions should be state centered and not voluntaristic (because they seek to transform the mechanisms and institutions of state power)5.

Another important feature of participatory governance is the important role it plays in poverty reduction. It helps to ensure that policies are based on better information while building policy makers’ commitment to agreements and making the implementation of policy more effective and efficient. Some see participatory governance as the missing link in poverty reduction, usually ignored and under-utilized.

The importance of participatory governance for poverty reduction is important in the South African context where poverty remains one of the major challenges for the developmental state.

**Participatory Governance, poverty reduction and improved service delivery in South Africa**

South Africa is in its second decade of democracy. A stable macro economic framework has been created and delivered reasonable growth based on solid fundamentals, while a progressive social outlook has created a harmonious, creative and optimistic society.

Poverty and unemployment remain major challenges because economic growth has also been relatively jobless, based on modern technology and improvements in productivity and performance. HIV and AIDS are also major challenges, with South Africa having a very high prevalence rate.

The ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) enjoys very high levels of popular support, and gained a 70 per cent majority in the 2004 elections. Key to its popularity is the fact that its policies and principles

5 Ibid., 21-24
continue to be drawn from a political manifesto designed fifty years ago known as the Freedom Charter. The Charter is a popular, community-based declaration developed through participatory mechanisms describing a society in which “the people shall govern”. A progressive and socially aware party, the ANC has always been deeply concerned with the plight of people and groups who have been disadvantaged and historically oppressed.

From a service delivery perspective, South Africa faces many challenges, most relating to the need to become more effective and to achieve greater impact on the second economy. Overcoming these challenges requires the South African state to reinvent itself and to continue transforming itself in both a revolutionary and developmental manner. The public service, despite the introduction of a Citizens’ Charter known as the Batho Pele (People First) service delivery principles, retains an organizational culture that continues to be plagued by the pre-liberation era. This undermines democratic developmental goals and must be transformed.

Harnessing the potential of empowered participation through deepening democracy is pivotal in the search for improved public service performance, poverty reduction and service delivery excellence. South Africa’s rich tradition of popular participation has been translated into a number of laws, structures, mechanisms and practices beginning with the Constitution itself. Section 195 outlines principles governing the public service and states that “people’s needs must be responded to and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy making.” The chapter dealing with local government states that one of the objectives of local government must be to “encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government” (Section 152).

The National Assembly and provincial legislatures have public participation offices that have a sound record of consulting extensively with affected parties before legislation is passed.

The Imbizo is an adaptation of traditional forums at which political leaders meet with and consult communities on pressing matters and are increasingly important consultative events in the political calendar. They involve leadership of all spheres of government, and President Mbeki has placed great emphasis on the importance of the Imbizo as a consultative methodology to strengthen implementation capacity, and he himself has an extensive Imbizo program.
This institution of popular participation plays a critical role in providing a platform for the voice of the people to be heard. It also promotes accountability by ensuring broader involvement of elected representatives. The Imbizo deepens democracy by ensuring that community meetings and report back sessions inform the Imbizo process and broader policy formulation. Communities are also positive about the Imbizo, but post-Imbizo research shows that communities need immediate feedback on the issues they have raised.

The following table shows the major issues that are raised during the Presidential Imbizo sessions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Econ opportunity &amp; Development</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting Crime &amp; Corruption</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roads, transport, taxis</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional and local authorities</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social grants</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land restitution</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates how the Imbizo as an institution has grown to involve leadership at all levels and and thus been consolidated over the last four to five years:

<p>| Table 2: Imbizo Focus Weeks |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nov 01</th>
<th>Apr 02</th>
<th>Oct 02</th>
<th>Apr 03</th>
<th>Oct 03</th>
<th>Sept 04</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of events</strong></td>
<td>170</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ministers</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dep. Ministers</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Premiers</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also open days and other consultative events at which citizens are given opportunities to engage with local, provincial and national politicians as well as the attempt to nurture a culture of volunteerism (Lestema) whereby citizens assist public servants at service delivery points on a voluntary basis.

Community participation is strongly promoted at local government level. The Municipal Systems Act requires all municipalities to develop mechanisms to consult and involve communities in activities such as the development of Integrated Development Plans (IDP) and the implementation of performance management systems. The IDP is the key vehicle for participatory planning designed to ensure that the needs and aspirations of communities at a local level are integrated into Provincial Growth and Development Plans as well as the National Spatial Development Perspective.

Ward Committees are another relatively recently introduced mechanism for building local participation and comprise around 10 members of a ward chaired by the local councilor. Sometimes called development forums or residents associations, these are effectively emerging out of the civic associations and structures of people’s power established during the struggle against apartheid, and in the early years of liberation. They are therefore a new form of participatory structure constructed on the foundations of alternative sites of people’s power.

Other structures that local authorities can use to promote participation include Advisory Committees, Focus Groups and public hearings and meetings, all of which are provided for by national legislation governing municipalities.

During 2002, South Africa’s Public Service Commission, responsible for oversight and monitoring the public service, implemented a pilot study jointly with the National parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Public
Service and Administration to test a participatory governance methodology known as Citizens’ Forums.

These Forums are a unique and distinctly South African method of consulting citizens on their views with regard to service delivery and focus on a specific service in a specific place. Their strength lies in their drawing on the South African tradition of community based decision-making through dialogue and discussion.

Community Forums function as empowering, education interventions that build on a partnership based approach. The format followed to undertake the Forums varied from site to site but usually involving a public hearing at which views and opinions could be aired as well a problem solving workshop component at which suggestions for improvement could be made.

An important element of the process was reaching agreement on issues and items to be implemented by the relevant government authority based on preceding discussions on what would be done to address particular concerns raised in the public hearings.

There are of course a number of valid concerns, including issues such as representation within the forums, the ability of attendees to report back to others who could not attend Forum sessions, but none of these undo the valuable contributions that simple but useful interventions such as these can make.

In terms of the criteria provided by Fung and Olin Wright, Imbizos, Ward Committees and Citizens’ Forums largely fall within the Empowered Deliberative Democracy framework: they have a practical orientation in that they are concerned with particular services and governance practices in a particular place, they have bottom up participation in that they are open and unrestricted, and they entail deliberative solution generation. They also raise the profile of local decision-making and input in the context of centralized supervision and coordination. Finally, they are state centered, not voluntaristic, and in terms of the intergovernmental framework in South Africa provide the platform for decentralized decision-making.

**Conclusion: Looking Forward**

This paper has argued that South Africa has decisively created the space for participatory governance. Clear legal, structural and institutional frameworks are in place, although more work is required to consolidate,
deepen and coordinate these emergent practices of participatory governance.

In building a developmental state, this is an area in which requires greater focus on in future and one through which all kinds of government programmes are ensured to achieve greater impact in the longer term. This would in particular include programmes designed to tackle the issues of poverty and unemployment in the second economy to facilitate and promote sustained growth and development.

Currently, the single biggest tool to provide a minimum threshold of support is the social security system that provides mothers of young children and the elderly, as well as special groups such as war veterans and disabled people, with a small monthly grant to cover their basic needs. This is a very successful important intervention but it is currently characterized by relatively minimal participation. This would be a key area for consideration in broadening a participatory approach to governance, to ensure that beneficiaries are drawn in to maximize effectiveness of the program.

In South Africa there is a need to continue to find more and better ways to build a public service that is finely attuned to the needs of its citizens and flexible enough to provide what they require.

This must be done by creating innovative and appropriate public participation mechanisms and systems that provide for authentic consultation to take place on an ongoing basis. It is critical that consultative mechanisms not only operate effectively, but also provide clearer links to government’s strategic and operational planning procedures and to its programme structures and budgeting systems.

Government, through the Department of Provincial and Local Government, is currently preparing policy and guidelines on public participation in policy making and programme implementation at the local level. This should indicate precisely what levels of participation are required in which phases and will make suggestions on practical and realistic strategies and tools that can be applied in diverse settings.