

FIELD REPORT

REINFORCING DEMOCRACY: THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND COMMUNITY AGENCY

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The importance of community *participation* in urban renewal projects has gained currency over the last ten years, as a means of empowering communities and making physical improvements more sustainable in the long term (Berry, 1993). The particular importance of participation in developing sustainable public amenities has also been noted (Massam, 1993). Community *agency* places residents in an executive or managerial role, as well as in an advocacy role.

This report presents preliminary findings from a research project in South Africa's Western Cape province. Using South Africa as a case study for the workings of public–private and community partnerships in the development process, it focuses on community-driven developments in Cape Town townships and aims to contribute to the literature on community agency in the development process in general, and in developing countries in particular.

The research addressed the strengths of formal project structure in the development process, and considered its limitations. The hypothesis was put forward that although structural factors are a major influence on the success of community agency, a formal approach to project management offers a powerful tool for mitigating their impact. Five development projects in townships in the Western Cape were examined for preliminary evidence on this hypothesis (Lyons and Smuts, 1998).

We had focused on five projects which were carried out with varying degrees of success. All were developments in the sphere of the built environment, buildings for public amenities, and sited in residential areas of Cape Town's townships. All had been developed using frameworks which closely corresponded to the principles enshrined in South Africa's national Reconstruction and Development Programme.

The part of the study reported here is an ethnographic one. The method adopted was one of grounded theory. Interviews were carried out until a coherent picture emerged, which gave rise to the hypothesis put forward above. Findings presented here were based on initial, informal interviews with focus groups, community activists

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and key participants or role players in the development projects, from within the instigating communities. Consultants, who acted on the communities' behalf in drawing up briefs, designing and planning developments, raising funds, establishing or seeking out capacity building and training programmes, as well as in following the projects through to successful maturation—or to eventual failure—were also interviewed. Interview material was compiled in the form of project histories, dealing with socio-economic and political issues as they emerged in the analysis.

We found great variability among the projects in terms of their success rates, although they had been selected to be similar in terms of objectives, scale and legal structure. There was also some variability in terms of the points in the development process at which they failed. From our detailed analysis, some generalizations about the process of community agency may be made.

In terms of formulating policies as well as processes and structures which are effective in supporting sustainable community initiatives, the findings suggest that, as partnerships between active communities and other bodies become increasingly widespread, an increasing emphasis on management accountability to partners from *outside* the community will have to be guaranteed. Both spheres, and periods, of accountability will need to be institutionalized. In addition, training processes will need to be established which relate to standardized, best-practice examples. In view of the increasingly nationally driven nature of local government policy, it appears likely that in order to facilitate and encourage co-operation from local government in particular, national standards may have to be established.

In terms of issues which are of particular interest to stake holders and role players within the project process, findings suggested that training in project management should be established which identifies generic problems in the life-cycle of a project, and suggests methods of pre-empting or resolving them. Here, too, external accountability was shown to play a major role, since it has the power to halt developments until consensual resolutions can be found.

In terms of the long-term sustainability of completed buildings as well, our findings indicated the need for training and accountability. Management of the service for which a building had been commissioned, and management of the building itself after completion, were not sufficiently allowed for in either financial planning or, more importantly, training, or in arrangements for further accountability to funders. Furthermore, local political and social tensions meant that executive committees rarely felt able to impose their authority on property or service managers. The long-term viability of completed projects was heavily jeopardized by this, since intra-community tensions, financial problems and changes of context were common even after completion.

Finally, in terms of the theoretical debate surrounding the role of participatory democracy in reinforcing the democratic process, analysis of our case studies suggested that while there are initial grounds for questioning whether community-led initiatives are viable where major structural differences lead to major conflicts of interest, there are equally valid grounds for suggesting that the community-led development process may act as a focus around which breaches may be resolved. We would also argue that the democratic legitimacy of community led development lies in a clear national policy, which institutes not only the spheres of responsibility and accountability with regard to community groups, as for other institutions of governance, but puts forward a comprehensive policy, with democratic legitimacy, which identifies

the role of community-based organizations in a national hierarchy of democratic institutions.

In her spirited defence of a postmodernist approach to the analysis of urban issues in South Africa today, Susan Parnell suggests that the inter-war years in South Africa were a turning point in urban form and racio-spatial legislation in part because they represented a period of intense competition over resources (Parnell, 1996). We would argue that, in the more pluralist and democratic urban scene in South Africa today, a new urban inequality is evolving, as the current climate of intense local competition for resources is inevitably making its own mark on the built environment. It is precisely those communities which have succeeded in resolving conflict and in co-operating to create sustained, and sustainable, project structures, that have succeeded in attracting and productively utilising aid, where others have failed. In turn, the built environment of which communities shows incremental improvement and progressive expansion of available facilities, as their credibility increases both internally and externally. At the same time, communities where conflicts have not been resolved show a townscape in which stalled or vandalized developments bear witness to failed development and to the lack of new opportunities for improvement in life chances.

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