

A model to administer our informal settlements

Local government must prioritise the smoother delivery of services to the most marginalised, writes **Mirjam van Donk**

THE VISION of active citizenship that is enshrined in South Africa's constitution has not yet been realised in the public participation models set out in laws and practice.

In particular, poor South Africans have little voice in the processes of local-level development that impact directly on them. The response from the government to this criticism has been to talk up the country's municipal ward committee system, which it sees as a proxy for public participation. While ward committees in some areas have notched up important achievements, these committees cannot adequately ensure the participation of residents in development that affects them. In particular this is so for residents of South Africa's growing informal settlements.

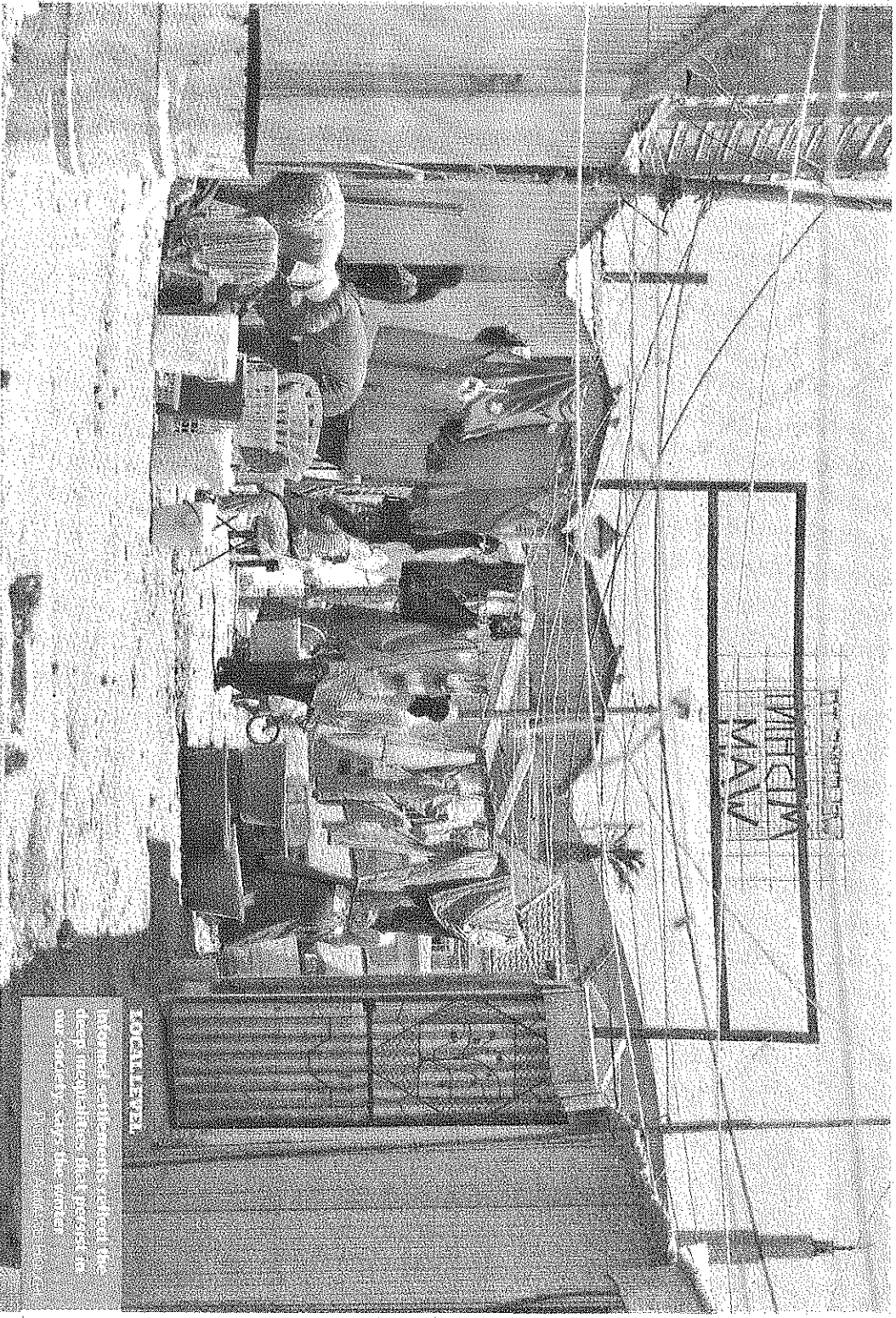
Ward committees are elected structures chaired by the local ward councillor. They are meant to reflect the diversity of a particular ward, and positions are voluntary. A major limitation is that municipal wards are large structures, representing thousands of people, which means that when development is being planned at the neighbourhood level, the elected ward committee may not include representatives of the neighbourhood in question. This disjuncture is in evidence across the country, and contributes to the complex and myriad factors driving service delivery protests with the government and citizens at times seeming to speak past one another.

As we approach the second decade of our democracy, there is room for a frank evaluation of what has and hasn't worked when it comes to local participation.

In contrast with South Africa, participation models in other countries of the global south have been able to deliver better returns for residents and have tackled issues of inequality with more success.

In particular South Africa can learn a lot from Brazilian cities where partnerships between citizens and state have been able to speed up the delivery of housing. A particularly successful element of the model that has developed in Brazilian cities like São Paulo is the depth of participation by citizens and civil society.

To address the weaknesses of the current participation model, particularly regarding upgrading



informal settlements, the Isandla Institute proposes a new method of participation that links project level participation to city level planning.

This does not require formal changes in legislation or policy, but a commitment from municipalities to hear from and hold meaningful dialogues with the communities they seek to serve when planning and implementing development interventions, particularly in informal settlements where the poorest and most marginalised live.

Informal settlements have grown rapidly in all our major cities and towns over the past 20 years. In 1994 there were an estimated 300 informal settlements. In less than two decades, this number has increased almost ten-fold. What is driving the continued growth of informal settlements is not well understood and few municipalities have a comprehensive list of informal settlements with details of their size and composition, priority needs and potential for incremental upgrade.

One way of improving base level data about informal settlements and ensuring that development interventions are appropriate is through a change in mindset about public participation.

Currently the approach to participation could be described as "compliance driven" with Integrated Development Planning and other processes designed to meet the needs of legislation and no more. Even municipal officials acknowledge that public participation is implemented without being

tied to budgets and that feedback to communities on the outcomes of participation processes is rare.

To address this gap for the most marginalised and poorest residents of towns and cities Isandla Institute has proposed a set of new forums that can be mixed and matched based on local conditions. The first of these is a project-borough level.

These should be established in the project initiation stage of an informal settlement upgrading process with community members, representatives of the ward committee, the local councillor, project staff and officials. It should agree on priorities and trade-offs and should actively shape the project.

Skilled social facilitators should facilitate the election of representatives to this forum. At the meso level, learning forums should be established comprising community members and officials and facilitated by the academic or non-governmental sector.

These should act as a stimulus for innovation and peer-learning. At the city level, a "planning for informality" forum should be established comprising elected representatives of stakeholder groups, community members, key organisations, experts and relevant municipal departments and led by a senior member of the municipal council. Its deliberations should inform policy, planning and the development of systems. These structures would represent a substantive deepening of citizen participation from the current low base.

Informal settlements, perhaps more than anything else, reflect the deep inequalities that persist in our society. As we move toward the third decade of democracy, local government in particular has an obligation to prioritise this challenge, or fail another generation of children who are yet to taste the fruits of our democracy.

● *Mirjam van Donk is the director of Isandla Institute, a public interest think-tank*

CONTACTS

Switchboard 021 488 4911

Executive Editor 021 488 4503 fax 021 488 4793 email lyriha.aimes@nl.co.za
News Editor 021 488 4536/4546 fax 021 488 4156 email argusnews@nl.co.za
Subscriptions Customer Care 080 022 0770
fax 021 488 4173 email renee.stevens@nl.co.za

CONTACTS

Press Council

The Cape Argus has committed itself to The Press Code of Professional Practice, which prescribes that news must be reported in a truthful, accurate, fair and balanced manner. If we don't live up to the Press Code, please contact The Press Ombudsman, 2nd Floor, 7 St David's Park, St David's Place, Parktown, 2193 or PO Box 47221, Parklands 2121, or e-mail pressombudsman@ombudsman.org.za (www.ombudsman.org.za) or telephone 011 484 3612/8.