

A CIVIC ACADEMY

Towards better spatial outcomes
through enhanced civic activism and
deliberative local democracy

THE DUAL CRISIS OF SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

South African cities are faced with a dual crisis, one of spatial transformation and one of governance. Independently and collectively, these crises breed disillusionment, public distrust, frustration and anger, particularly among poor urban communities. In recent years, many of these communities have resorted to more assertive, at times even aggressive, measures to make themselves heard and seen by a government that they, to a variable degree, experience as unresponsive, indifferent, self-serving and hostile.

Poor access to public services and economic opportunity compound poverty and spatial injustice.

The **spatial crisis** manifests in the peripheral location of poor urban communities and the impoverished living conditions that characterises their settlements. Apartheid spatial planning and ill-devised programmes of the democratic government have, at times inadvertently, entrenched spatial patterns of exclusion and discrimination. Poor access to public services and economic opportunity compound poverty and spatial injustice, as experienced by these communities.

Over the past 20 years, the urban poor in South Africa have seen insufficient tangible change in their living conditions and livelihood opportunities, which has contributed to a decline in public trust, particularly in local government. Where the state has responded to these harsh realities, such responses have by and large been found inadequate or inappropriate, more often than not because of a failure to meaningfully engage local communities.

The **governance crisis** is in part caused by the lack of transformation and material changes in people's living conditions and quality of life. It is also the result of a failure of public participation structures and processes, and the (perceived) improper behaviour and ethos of government representatives.

Despite progressive public policy to promote civic engagement in local government affairs, municipal representatives frequently fail to meaningfully involve residents in the development of their neighbourhoods and cities. Current structures and methods of public participation have by and large been ineffective in enabling economically marginalised communities to voice their

concerns, engage in negotiating trade-offs and priorities, and influence the outcome of planning and decision-making processes with regard to urban and/or neighbourhood development.

Local government's inability to make citizen engagement meaningful for all parties concerned stems from various factors, including an undervaluing of the time and competencies that the municipality needs to invest in such processes. It is also clear that the ethos that drives and permits individual and organisational behaviour is found wanting. Poor urban communities often perceive local government to be unaccountable, indifferent, autocratic, selfish, corrupt and even hostile. In some instances, government's antagonism towards the poor and their grievances translates into outright contempt, as in the case of Bekkersdal where the former Premier of Gauteng told the community that the ruling party did not need their 'dirty votes'¹. In other instances, government's heavy-handed response to community-based protests – more often than not pursued as a last resort, after communities have tried various formal avenues to air their concerns – fuels anger and frustration.

While this may not be a fair reflection on all parts of local government, whether perceived or real, these experiences serve to undermine public trust in local government, which is already eroded due to the state's inability to ensure that basic needs are met and socio-economic rights are realised. To some extent at least, the crises of spatial transformation and urban governance share similar origins and features and as such these need to be addressed in concert.

¹ Lekgowa T. and Nicolson, G. (2013), Bekkersdal protests: 'Dirty votes' and the ANC in the eye of the storm, *Daily Maverick*, 30 October 2013

GROUNDING OF THE CIVIC ACADEMY CONCEPT

The notion of a 'citizenship academy' was first mooted in the draft National Development Plan in 2011 as a vehicle to strengthen active citizenship. In the final version of the plan, the specific reference to a 'citizenship academy' was removed, but its intended purpose remained.

The analysis underpinning Isandla Institute's Civic Academy Project draws on years of work on urban governance, human settlement development and state-civic relations, particularly at the local level. The issue of the trust deficit in local government, for example, has been a central theme in various contributions to publications of the Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) since 2011, such as: "Taking stock at the crossroads: Reflecting on the role of the NGO sector in enabling and supporting participatory local democracy" (2011) in *Recognising community voice and dissatisfaction*; "Tackling the 'governance deficit' to reinvigorate participatory local governance" (2012) in *Putting participation at the heart of development//Putting development at the heart of participation*; and, "In search of responsible and responsive local governance" (2015) in *In pursuit of responsible and responsive local governance*. It is also reflected in the discussion document *Living in contested spaces: The role of factionalism in local government* (2011).

In analysing the reasons why processes and structures aimed at facilitating community participation are not achieving the required outcomes, Isandla Institute has long argued that negotiation and deliberation are absent as defining features of these processes and structures. This has informed our work on alternative methods of engagement that will allow the rebuilding

of public trust in local government and that will facilitate meaningful development outcomes. In particular, our work on 'networked spaces' and collaborative planning forums is worth noting here. *This includes: Exploring the potential for 'Networked Spaces' to foster communities of practice during participatory upgrading of informal settlements* (2011); "Advancing 'networked spaces': Making a case for communities of practice to deepen public participation" in the 2012 GGLN publication; and, *Planning for Informality: Exploring the potential of collaborative planning forums. A Propositional Framework* (2013); and, "Holding the state to account through community-based monitoring", in the 2015 GGLN publication.

Similar themes are presented in Isandla Institute's work on the right to the city since 2010, including *The right to the city in the South African context: NGO submission and national roundtable report* (2011) and the academic papers *From basic needs towards socio-spatial transformation: Coming to grips with 'the right to the City' for the urban poor in South Africa* (2011) and *Exploring the potential of the "right to the City" to integrate the vision and practice of civil society in the struggles for socio-spatial transformation in South Africa* (2012).

The specific notion of a civic academy has evolved since 2012, with initial reflections and research presented in "Advancing active citizenship: A Citizenship Academy as a means to strengthen local democracy?" (2012) and "Establishing Citizenship Academies to cultivate 'cunning intelligence' and 'practical wisdom' in local governance in South Africa (2013)" in the 2013 GGLN Publication *Active citizenship matters*.



ELEMENTS OF A NEW APPROACH

A new approach is called for, one that is firmly rooted in the acknowledgement that the voices, experiences and contributions of local communities (particularly those characterised by impoverished living conditions and socio-spatial exclusion) matter in the transformation of neighbourhoods and cities. The key elements of such an approach are outlined below.

Instilling a public service ethos and having the required competence to work with local communities is vital for improving governance relationships and restoring public trust in local government.

Information and communication

Access to information is a prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement. Without it, civic actors will not be able to give substantial input into planning and decision making processes or hold government to account. Civic actors often find it difficult to access information from local government, either because they don't know who to ask or what information should be available, or because bureaucratic processes are so lengthy and tedious, or because government representatives actively resist responding to such requests. Beyond the mere provision of information, proper channels of communication between municipalities and communities are often lacking.

The importance of information and communication is acknowledged in the Back to Basics approach of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, which emphasises that municipalities should develop efficient communication systems to communicate regularly with communities and play a more active role in disseminating information to enable communities to participate in municipal affairs.

Civic organisation

Active citizenship, posited as one of the core pillars of development by the National Development Plan, needs to find expression in associational form to result in real influence (also referred to as 'democracy deepening'² – a process whereby the scope and depth of citizen participation in public decision-making is enhanced) and better spatial outcomes for poor urban communities. While South Africa undoubtedly boasts a significant amount of community mobilisation and activism, ranging from savings groups to community development initiatives to protest action, amongst others, some of these initiatives are

not well-organised or connected to other local struggles, which in turn limits their effectiveness to help bring about lasting change. At the same time, expectations that the state will provide 'a better life for all' have bred passivity and, where such expectations have not been met, disgruntlement. More attention needs to be given to strengthening community organisation and devising strategies for collective action.

Outcome-driven deliberation

In the South African context, a key failure of public participation is that it often does not result in substantive outcomes that respond to the needs and priorities of those affected. Rather than being opportunities for shared decision-making and determining outcomes, institutionalised public participation allows, in many instances at least, for consultation at best. At the heart of a vibrant local democracy sits deliberation, i.e. the principles and practices of solving real life problems through discussion, reasoning and negotiation. Deliberative democracy stresses the right, opportunity and capacity of anyone who is affected by a collective decision to participate in the decision-making process. In deliberation, participants can bring in their technical and experiential knowledge to negotiate outcomes and trade-offs. The shallow and symbolic nature of public participation in South Africa needs to be replaced by deliberative engagement, both within civil society (between local communities and civic actors) and between the state and local communities.

Collaborative engagement

Collaborative engagement between local government and other development actors, including communities of the urban poor, needs to be institutionalised and become the new norm in urban governance. Previously, Isandla Institute has referred to this as 'networked spaces'³ – structures and forums

for communities of the urban poor and government representatives (and other relevant stakeholders) to work together on tangible problems, find agreed upon solutions and act accordingly (see below). This constitutes a significant departure from current modes and forums of public participation.

State capability and public service ethos

Urgent attention needs to be given to state capability (which includes capacity, resources, and values and orientation) to address the dual crisis of spatial transformation and governance in a manner that reflects deep appreciation for the agency of local communities. This is not only about ensuring that suitable skills, competencies and resources are made available; it is also, and importantly, a matter of ethos. Government representatives need to uphold a public service ethos, in their words and actions. Both political will and personal commitment are needed to embed accountability, responsiveness, respect and humility in organisational systems and practices. This stands in stark contrast to the pervasive experience that poor urban communities have of local government. Instilling a public service ethos and having the required competence to work with local communities is vital for improving governance relationships and restoring public trust in local government.

While much of the responsibility for improving state capability and embedding a public service ethos rests with municipalities,

national and provincial government (in particular relevant departments of Cooperative Governance) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) also have important roles to play in this regard. Importantly, political parties need to ensure that their representatives live up to the values and standards required and that their organisational culture and practices do not contradict public sector norms in this regard.

Learning

The process of learning is critical for achieving better development outcomes. Current trends suggest that municipalities do not adequately take to heart the lessons from past mistakes or the elements of success in good practice examples. A culture of learning (and suitable procedures and practices to institutionalise such a culture) allows municipalities to improve relations, systems and practices. It also enables replication (or, based on lessons learned, deviation) and innovation, within and between municipalities and other actors. As the new approach to urban governance and spatial transformation requires alternative modes of relating to and acting with communities of the urban poor, a focus on learning in local government is vital. For similar reasons, urban poor communities and other development actors will benefit from an orientation towards learning.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF 'NETWORKED SPACES'

- + They are shared spaces in which capacity can be created, both within the state and within communities.
- + They provide space for the growth of skills and capabilities that can be honed only through the actual rough-and-tumble of deliberation, negotiation and collaboration between politicians, officials, civil society groups, professionals, private-sector interests and citizens.
- + They give these varying stakeholder groups opportunities to work together on concrete problems in the search for mutually satisfying solutions.
- + They need to explicitly balance the need for action grounded in the immediate priorities and needs of communities (thereby embedding their relevance for all stakeholders to participate) with their ability to contribute to long term processes of spatial transformation.
- + They should be designed to grow and deepen incrementally because acquiring a range of tacit skills and amalgamated modes of organising and acting requires stakeholders to form working relationships over a period of time, gradually expanding the focus of the working relationship and the range of included stakeholders
- + They should support different scales of planning and decision-making, and ensure that the outcomes emerging from these various scales interact with and 'feed' one another.

Isandla Institute (2013), Planning for Informality, pg 5.

² Heller, P. and Ntlokonkulu, L. (2001), *A civic movement, or a movement of civics?: The South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) in the post-apartheid period*, Research report 84, Centre for Policy Studies: Johannesburg.

³ Isandla Institute (2013), *Planning for informality: Exploring the potential of collaborative planning forums. A Propositional Framework*, Isandla Institute: Cape Town.

THE SPATIAL INTEGRATION AGENDA

In South Africa, the legacy of segregation and exclusion manifests spatially. More often than not the urban poor are forced to inhabit the periphery of cities, where opportunities for living dignified lives are limited. In this way, structural inequality is perpetuated through patterns of urban occupation. To transform divided South African cities, greater emphasis on spatial integration is required. With the term spatial integration we refer to a process whereby the urban poor are drawn into the social, economic and political life of cities. That means making the opportunities afforded by the urban environment accessible to marginalised residents by lowering barriers to participation in these aspects of urban life.

The development of adequate and affordable public transport is an important strategy for realising spatial integration. Through public transport the urban poor are able to access more easily those spaces from which they were previously excluded. This allows for greater access to livelihood opportunities, and to those facilities that are not yet found in peripheral settlements. Connections between urban centres and peripheral settlements, whether transport routes or trading zones, contribute to spatial integration. Ultimately, however, spatial integration is not only about connecting divided urban spaces, but about doing away with divisions entirely. By making affordable housing opportunities available in previously inaccessible areas of cities, the South African government can actively counter spatial segregation. Integration can also be realised through the upgrading of peripheral settlements into holistic neighbourhoods that meet the social, economic and political needs of their residents. By enabling urban residents to organise themselves, and to participate in outcome-driven deliberation, the civic academy seeks to further the spatial integration agenda.

POSITIONING THE CIVIC ACADEMY

The elements of the new approach outlined above suggest different pressure points which warrant urgent attention if public trust in local government is to be restored and better spatial outcomes are to be achieved.

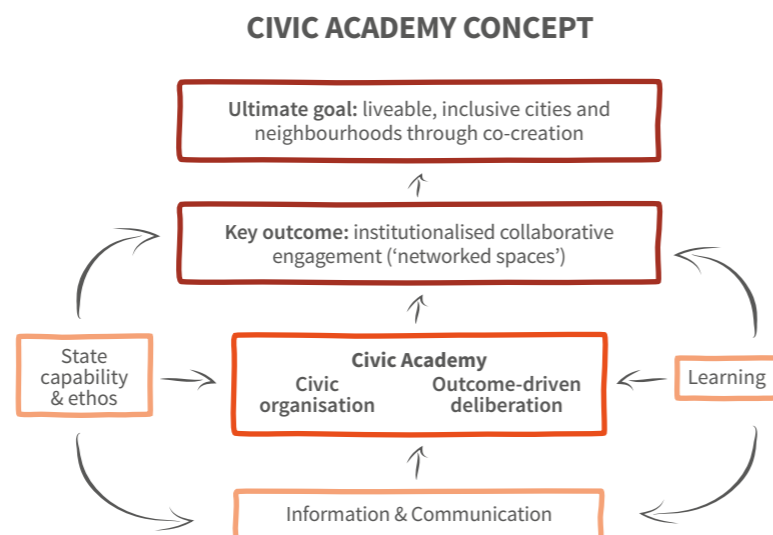
Some of these elements are the clear and direct responsibility of specific actors, such as proper information and communication systems (a municipal responsibility, with oversight and support provided by national and provincial government) and ensuring that the state has the appropriate capability and public service ethos (a shared responsibility between municipalities, national and provincial government, SALGA and political parties).

Ensuring that civic actors have both the opportunity and the know-how to engage in collaborative spaces for development is as much a government as a civic responsibility. This is where the civic academy is positioned; its main focus is on strengthening civic organisation and outcome-driven deliberative engagement.

The model below illustrates where the civic academy is expected to add value in relation to the key elements. It shows that the ultimate goal is to bring about liveable, inclusive neighbourhoods and cities through co-creation, with explicit reference

to the involvement of communities of the urban poor. This goal requires, amongst others, institutionalised collaborative spaces between local government, local communities and other relevant actors. The establishment of such 'networked spaces' is, in fact, a key intended outcome of the civic academy. It will be important to determine the character, norms and modus operandi of such collaborative spaces, rather than assuming that these will emerge organically as a result of the fruits of investment in the civic academy and state capability and public service ethos.⁴

The other elements reflected in the model (information and communication; state capability and public service ethos; learning) require attention in their own right; they are also prerequisites to the success of the civic academy. For example, for as long as a municipality drives local development in manner that is perceived as unresponsive, autocratic or hostile, civic actors will not be able to apply deliberative principles and practices in their engagement with the state.



WHAT IS INNOVATIVE ABOUT THE CIVIC ACADEMY

There are many initiatives in civil society and, to some extent, in local government aimed at enhancing civic engagement in local planning and decision making. What makes the civic academy unique is, on the one hand, its articulation to the other key elements of a new approach outlined above. On the other hand, its scope, content, methodology, participants and resourcing & management offer innovative aspects. At this stage, these are all subject to ongoing research and refinement.

UNIQUE ELEMENTS OF THE CIVIC ACADEMY

Scope	focus on improved spatial outcomes, at neighbourhood and city level (see below)
Content	civic organisation principles & practices of deliberative democracy spatial planning and urban planning
Methodology	action-learning, combined with class-style sessions focusing on knowledge and tools transfer
Participants	civic actors, with opportunities for interaction and deliberation with municipal representatives at regular intervals
Resourcing & management	to be funded by a municipality, yet run by an external stakeholder (in the non-profit and/or educational sector)

CONCLUSION

It is in the interest of spatial justice and local democracy that communities have a greater stake and voice in the transformation of their neighbourhoods and cities. This calls for a renewed focus on the core values and principles that underpin South Africa's constitutional democracy, and new efforts at institutionalising these in appropriate systems and practices.

Particular attention needs to be given to: enhancing information and communication systems; bolstering state capability and instilling a public service ethos; strengthening civic organisation; cultivating outcome-driven deliberation; institutionalising collaborative engagement; and, mainstreaming a culture of learning.

The proposition of a civic academy responds to the need to strengthen civic organisation and outcome-driven deliberative engagement. Isandla Institute is committed to further research and consultative engagements to test the proposition of a civic academy and deepen its role and functioning.

⁴ Isandla Institute's work on 'networked spaces', as reflected in the document *Planning for informality: Exploring the potential of collaborative planning forums. A Propositional Framework* is a useful starting point in this regard, but further work is undoubtedly needed.

