

Shaping a new future in our cities

There is a growing consensus in favour of single non-racial municipalities in South Africa, with initiatives to this end proliferating throughout the country.

DAVID SCHMIDT reflects on the important implications of this thrust towards democracy at local government level.

THE DEBATE about the future of South Africa's cities is taking on a growing importance and urgency.

It is in the cities where change is happening most dramatically and where South Africa's political, economic and social crises are concentrated and experienced in their most acute form. There is a growing recognition that South Africa's ability to build an effective non-racial democracy depends upon our ability to constructively transform our cities.

In the city/local government debate there has been a growing consensus in favour of single non-racial municipalities that would have been unthinkable even a year ago. The Cape Municipal Association says all races should serve in and vote for a single local authority. Eskom states that electricity supply authorities can only provide electricity to townships in an adequate manner if they are structured across racial boundaries. The Urban Foundation in its recently released policy document titled "Policy Overview — the Urban Challenge" states that "the racial base of the (local government) structures is at odds with the realities of the emerging, economically-integrated and growing cities". Extra-parliamentary civic groupings across the country have mobilised around calls for "one city" and "a single tax base".

Certain key concepts — "open city", "one city" and "democratic city" — have become part of the language of the debate about the future of the city.

"Open city" refers to the abolition of the Group Areas Act and racial discrimination in city government. It does not, however,



Tembisa . . . one of many poor areas that would require a redistribution of resources

address the question of local authority boundaries that have been established by apartheid considerations.

The "one city" concept refers to the redefinition of city boundaries in terms of functional and economic criteria to ensure that all local authorities are viable entities. It recognises that black areas subsidise white areas through their labour and purchasing power, but do not at present receive the benefit of the rates generated in these areas.

The "democratic city" idea concerns the question of how the city is to be structured and managed to ensure effective democratic government and maximum participation.

Talks between white local or provincial

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authorities and extra-parliamentary civic groups to discuss development issues such as electricity provision, land allocation and new ways of governing cities have been conducted in a number of towns and cities.

The negotiations between the Soweto People's Delegation and the Transvaal Provincial Administration has been a landmark event in this regard and has prompted a range of similar initiatives across the country. Mamelodi, Daveyton and Leandra, for example, have formed similar "People's Delegations".

Meaningful negotiations about the

restructuring of local authorities have not been possible, however due to the absence of any agreed national framework within which such negotiations should take place. For example, the Soweto People's Delegation in its demands for the extension of the tax base specifically refrained from making proposals around one political structure for greater Johannesburg because it considered this to be a constitutional issue for the whole nation.

IN JUNE, the government unveiled its proposals for such a framework when it released the report of its Thornhill Committee for comment. Legislation based on this report is currently being drafted.

The report proposes negotiations by leaders of all races in each city for a new local government system and suggests that they consider five different constitutional options for a new city government. These are:

- Racially Separate Municipalities. These will be allowed only if each municipality within the city is financially viable. If cities opt for separation, the white city will have to transfer some funds to black areas and some business areas will be included in the black municipality. Thus, white cities that opt for segregation will not avoid financial responsibility for black areas.

- Local Service Committees. Separate local authorities but with a joint "services council" administrative body. The option is similar to the present Regional Services Council system.



● Neighbourhood Committee System. This will be a common local authority made up of non-racial geographically-based neighbourhood management committees with a single tax base and administration. This would allow local communities some power to control their "own" affairs. Richer, mainly white, areas could use this to dilute the power of a majority local government.

● Majority Rule Municipalities. A single municipality elected on a common voters roll, which could be qualified by "minority protections".

● Other Options. This would allow any combination of the above, or any other locally negotiated model.

The Thornhill Report represents a significant departure from previous government thinking in that it offers the following four

respects:

● The idea of "local option" - that local authorities can have a variety of constitutional and institutional forms within a framework of broad national guidelines, as opposed to strict centrally legislated local structures.

● The idea of "negotiating a local option" - that the only acceptable forms of local government are those negotiated by all the people of the city. Thus, white municipalities can only choose to maintain racially separate authorities if they can negotiate this at a "local indaba" involving all residents of the city.

● The idea of "negotiating a local option at a metropolitan level" - that the new system would have to apply to the entire metropolitan area. The report is vague on what constitutes the metropolitan area and suggests that it is limited to the "white" city together with those townships which were part of the municipal area before separate township administrations were established in the 1970s. This is a narrow conception.

● The idea of "economic viability" - that whatever system is negotiated must be economically viable. This necessarily involves a redistribution of resources from the "white" city to poor areas and is related to the demands of various community organisations for "one tax base".

The fundamental problem with the Thornhill proposals is that they suggest a procedure for negotiation that itself has not been negotiated. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the committee

conducted most of its investigation prior to the developments of February 2.

THERE is a strong perception in ANC and MDM quarters that the proposals are an attempt to remove issues of local government from the national negotiations agenda and provide a variety of mechanisms for entrenching apartheid and "white" interests at a local level. It is likely that any attempt to legislate these proposals and prescribe them as the framework for local government restructuring will be strongly resisted, and will undermine rather than foster the possibilities of constructive negotiations.

The proposals and an acceptable national framework for restructuring local government are, still being discussed in community organisations however and there has not as yet been any official response to Thornhill.

A framework regarding the process and content of local government/city negotiations needs to be negotiated at a national level. Key areas where overall national guidelines need to be established would include:

- The definition of metropolitan and town boundaries.
- The financing options available to cities and towns.
- Representation and procedures for local government.
- The relationship between national, regional and local government.

It is broadly acknowledged, however, that there are significant differences between various regions and that the details of any constitutional arrangement for local government would have to be negotiated at the local level.

Until such a framework is negotiated, the present times offer a range of possibilities for local level negotiations. Talks about development issues and resource allocation will continue and become more widespread.

In addition, there is recognition from within the ANC/MDM civic movement that the restructuring of local government to create interim alternatives needs to be examined. However, an important proviso is that these do not pre-empt national negotiations.

LOCAL negotiations are not one-off events but are part of an on-going process. They do not begin after national negotiations but take place simultaneously in a mutually complementary and parallel way. In this, they have a vital role to play in stabilising, entrenching and giving momentum to national negotiations.

It is further through involvement in the development of democratic government structures at a local level that participation in the transition process by the people can be maximised and where we can most favourably begin to build a democracy in which all South Africans can actively participate.

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SCHOOLS

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FUTURE

conference

SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE CONFERENCE

CAPE TOWN SEPT 21-23

I dasa, in conjunction with a broad range of educational institutions, seeks to draw together all parties in the Western Cape with a direct interest in school education at this conference.

The aim is to examine the demands that the future will make on education and to devise practical strategies to bring about non-racial schooling.

It hopes in this way to complement national initiatives for a unitary education system and to contribute to the development of effective and equitable non-racial schooling in South Africa.

The conference has its origins in the "open schools" issue. Student referenda, school committee deliberations or polls of parents on this topic have been features of the life of many white schools in Cape Town during the past few years. More than 40 schools have indicated their willingness to open to all.

Yet there has been little response to the debate within the black community where it is perceived as a "white issue" that holds no promise of positively affecting the crisis in black education.

Instead, there is concern that the inevitable drift of better scholars to formerly "white" schools will further reinforce the poverty of township education.

Consequently there has been a growing recognition that the concept of "open schools" needs to be deepened. It cannot be isolated from the educational needs and demands of the black community.

The emphasis of the conference will seek to address the issues as part of the creation of a new single non-racial education system capable of meeting the demands of all South Africa's people.

The conference logo embodies many of its concerns:

- the putting together of heads to resolve a common problem.
- the parent-teacher-student triad that is the school community.
- the coming together of people from the various apartheid education departments to work towards a non-racial unitary system.
- the symbol of light and hope - the "sun" - that will be created through the process of working out a common future together.

For further details of the conference, contact David Schmidt at Idasa, Western Cape, (021) 22-2150.