

Civic struggle comes of age

Just another workshop on the ever contentious issue of local government? Thankfully, this was not the case with a consultative workshop hosted by Idasa in Port Elizabeth in September.

JANET CHERRY reports



Thozamile Botha: independent civics.

MANY who attended the workshop felt it represented a real breakthrough in the politics of local government in the Eastern Cape. As one Johannesburg speaker from Planact, a research body which helps civic organisations, remarked: "In Jo'burg the civics meet the local authorities around a negotiating table. Here we are meeting in a spirit of open discussion and debate."

Innovations in the politics of local-level negotiation are not new to the Eastern Cape. In a sense, the workshop was the culmination of many previous initiatives, taking the process one step further, beyond talk and into the arena of restructuring the system of local government.

A resolution to this end was passed unanimously at the end of the two-day event, mandating Idasa to facilitate the formation of a forum – a "mini local constituent assembly" – of local government structures and civic organisations.

The consultative workshop, held over two full days, was both broad and deep.

It was broad in terms of the constituencies represented – from city councillors, ratepayers' associations, municipal officials and civic representatives from many towns in the Eastern Cape – as well as in terms of the scope of what was discussed, from transport, finance and training needs, to electoral systems and the role of civic organisation.

It was deep in that at last the rhetoric of "One City, One Municipality" began to be examined realistically and concretely, with all parties accepting the principle of a united local government system and starting to look at the nitty-gritty of restructuring.

Highlights were challenging inputs of exceptionally high quality from a range of speakers and some stimulating panel discussions.

Andrew Boraine of Planact explained how the Soweto People's Delegation had started negotiations with the Transvaal Provincial Administration over the rent boycott. The result was agreement on the formation of a representative Metropolitan Chamber which would operate until a new local government system is in place, as well as the principle of an integrated financial system for Soweto and Johannesburg.

Mike Sutcliffe of Natal University's department of town and regional planning argued for a new approach to urban develop-

ment, involving some creative solutions.

He urged people to become involved in "practical planning solutions at grassroots level", rather than replacing one bureaucracy with another. Provision of housing and transport could be seen as opportunities for providing employment rather than as problems.

A lively discussion followed in which Mr P K Botha, town clerk of Port Elizabeth, joined the panel to adroitly answer a barrage of questions about service charges, rates and subsidisation.

AT THE end of the discussion, Mr Botha, becoming frustrated with all the questions being fired at him, came out with a definitive statement to great applause: "We need one municipality for PE/Ibhayi/Motherwell; one common tariff; no duplication and no wastage in personpower."

Philip van Ryneveld of the University of the Western Cape, speaking on local government finance, put forward a set of figures showing what it would mean if the municipality and Ibhayi/Motherwell shared resources equally in an attempt to upgrade services in the townships.

He argued that by transferring the cross-subsidy from industry and commerce from the white, coloured and Indian areas to the black areas, the disproportionate spending on white areas in relation to black areas could be evened out.

However, a single tax-base would not be able to solve all problems: a subsidy of R116 million would be required to bring the black townships up to the standard of the rest of the city.

Patrick Fitzgerald of the ANC gave one of the most stimulating and entertaining addresses of the conference. Setting the scenario of "a frightening gap between the demands of the people and the ability of any future government – even an ANC government – to deliver housing, land, health and education", he stressed the role that local government could play in harnessing community creativity, energy and potential.

Criticising the "caste bureaucracy" of South Africa, which is white, male, Afrikaans, middle-class and Christian, he argued for a transformation of the "nightmarish jigsaw puzzle" of the public service.

This does not mean that existing civil servants will disappear from the scene. It means

a new model of "professional public management", which involves retraining existing public servants to be sensitive to a developmental context, attracting the "best and the brightest of the youth" to the civil service, and bringing in older people experienced in civic or trade union affairs.

Chris Heymans of the Urban Foundation and Thozamile Botha of the ANC also gave outstanding papers.

Heymans focused on electoral systems of local government, giving a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different types of voting systems. He argued that democracy and efficiency are not incompatible; that a correct balance has to be found and that democracy can be deepened at a local level through "neighbourhood committees" and community advisory committees linked to municipal departments.

Botha made a strong case for the continued existence of independent civic organisations, even when a democratic local government system has been implemented.

The notions of "accountability" and "democracy", so easily bandied about, were challenged by Botha, who argued strongly for affirmative action and positive discrimination in favour of the impoverished and homeless.

FIVE resolutions were passed:

- A local government charter should be drawn up as a guide for urban development.
- A forum of all local interest groups to address the issue of transport should be formed.
- All people have a right to basic services and all, except those who can afford nothing, should pay for services.
- Civic organisations should be autonomous, accountable and politically non-aligned.
- Idasa should facilitate the convening of a local government forum representative of the people of Port Elizabeth as a whole.

It is up to Idasa and all bodies concerned with local government in Port Elizabeth to ensure that the Eastern Cape stays in the forefront of initiatives to transform the local government system into one which is truly representative.

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