

# Uniting civics across the Eastern Transvaal

'Development' is another word that drops readily into conversation on the future role of the civics. 'We are looking at development in the very broadest sense,' says Lephunya. Education in organisational skills is central to this. 'We want to empower people to deal with the everyday problems that confront them.'

In essence, the civics aim to replace authoritarian, top-down planning with a process of consultation in which the will of ordinary people prevails as far as is practicable.

Some civics actually see themselves as development agents, setting up community-accountable structures to carry out projects in areas such as housing, transportation and health.

Lephunya says that they are not unaware that the challenge of the civics is partly to deliver the goods to the people, to ensure that there are real improvements in their harsh living conditions.

This is one factor in maintaining a popular base, he acknowledges, drawing lessons from the electoral overthrow of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. 'You may have very good revolutionary theories, but without delivering material returns to the people you will never remain in power.'

In the area of development the civic movement has a long way to go. It is a road scarcely embarked on and very partially understood. The inability of civic organisations to challenge the government's recent White Paper on land reform, in as far as it affects the urban homeless, is just one indication of this.

## Local government from below

In moving towards the launch of a national structure, the civic movement has a touch of the 'born again' spirit.

There is a sense of vision and renewal. Undoubtedly this is fuelled by the unprecedented acknowledgement of the influence of civics by local and regional governments.

But the launch takes place under great pressure. There can be little time for luxuriating in visions of life after the end of apartheid.

Ensuring that the transformation of local government is managed from below is surely a priority.

This will require a careful examination of goals and strategies; of the relative need for unity among civics and tactical flexibility dictated by local conditions; and of the role of interim local government in the overall thrust toward democratic rule. •

By **DOMINIC MDLULI**

I am lucky to be part of one of the most important wings of South Africa's democratic struggle — the 'civic' movement. There are hundreds of civic associations and other community organisations trying to solve the bread-and-butter problems faced by our people, mainly in the townships.

## From union to civic

My own background symbolises why this movement has become so strong. I was once an organiser of the Post Office and Telecommunications Workers Association (Potwa). But because we were successful in advancing workers' interests, the Post Office victimised me greatly, charged me with misconduct, and fired me at the end of 1988.

After I was fired, I thought I'd continue with the unions, but then I was influenced by comrade Kgabisi Mosunkutu, who is now president of Potwa, an executive of the Soweto Civic Association, and vice-president of Civic Associations of the Southern Transvaal (Cast).

Cde Kgabs taught me how to organise civics, including the the formation of street committees, block committees, and zone committees. Although some unionists were unhappy about his dual role, he made it clear that we cannot divorce the community from union activities.

## Struggles in Witbank

When I was staying in Witbank - 'Malahleni' (coal city) - the state of emergency forced the Malahleni Civic Association underground. But when we saw a newspaper article that councillors were raising rents in 1987, we took a decision to oppose the councillors, went to court in Pretoria, and won on a technicality.

Some of the civic leaders didn't have the interest of the people at heart. They opposed the rent increases, but when the municipal elections were held in 1988, they grabbed the opportunity to jump into the apartheid structures, and one was elected mayor of Kwaguqu (the black

township of Witbank). The Malahleni Civic then faded away.

Late in 1989, a new civic, the Witbank Civic Association, was formed. Even though it wasn't really ready to lead the community yet, a rent boycott was called. This came about because a municipal workers' union and a councillor exposed misappropriation of funds by other councillors which led to a R13 million deficit.

Even without a strong civic in place, the people said we must not pay our rent. With the state's concessions in February 1990, there was much self-confidence. At that time there was a national call to bring down the black local authorities. So it was easy for the people to support our boycott.

## Ready for negotiations?

In April 1990 we began negotiations with the authorities over the areas affected by the rent boycott. We even negotiated with the councillors, but when we went back to the community the people were furious, and said that if we talked to the councillors again the civic would be fired.

By now the rent boycott had reached 17 towns in the Eastern Transvaal, and in June the ANC called for a consumer boycott for the entire region. The aim was to pressure the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) to engage in regional negotiations to solve our problems.

The TPA called us to a large meeting, and made enough concessions for us to agree to end the rent boycott from 1 September 1990. Again, we took this deal back to the communities all over the Eastern Transvaal, and again the communities said that their grievances had not been satisfied. The housing problems were not solved, arrears were not written off, upgrading and community development were not addressed, and one-city, one-municipality was not even on the agenda. Therefore, the people told us, the enemy must still be opposed through rent boycotts.

## In search of regional unity

The civics weren't coordinated regionally at that time. The ANC just called





**Township neglect: Civics can play a major role in improving conditions**

them to a meeting, which some of us couldn't understand. The civics met at Waterval-Boven, only to find that we weren't ready yet to launch a regional structure. We didn't have proper mandates, nor a proper understanding of what regional unity actually meant.

Then 10 civics from the Highveld met in Breyton in late November last year and decided there must be a working group to negotiate with the TPA. Earlier, the ANC had led a working group which included a few civics, but it wasn't reporting back or getting a mandate. Worse, the TPA used this to push bad negotiated agreements which the civics could not enforce.

An accountable interim coordinating committee was needed, and it was decided that a regional civic structure like Cast should be the ultimate goal. But we are in a bigger geographic area than Cast, so we decided at the beginning that organising should occur in four sub-regions. The politics of apartheid has divided the Eastern Transvaal into three homelands (Gazankulu, Lebowa, Kangwane), Conservative Party (CP)-controlled areas, and Nationalist Party (NP)-controlled areas.

We didn't have the resources, so we approached the UDF for help. We didn't want to repeat the mistakes of the Waterval-Boven committee, which had insufficient resources. Then we wrote a discussion paper, and through the advice of service organisations we raised funds and prepared for the launch of the Civic Associations of the Eastern Transvaal. I stayed in Johannesburg for a whole month, consulting with experts on the formation of the region.

There were four sub-regional workshops. The executive committee asked me to become full-time organiser for the region, so I had to visit more than 50 different civics within a month.

The four workshops endorsed our work in February, and the Cast launch was held in early March.

### **Lessons for the civic movement**

First, the ANC played a major role in getting us to identify civics across the region. That led us to develop our own regional structure, which is autonomous from political parties like the ANC.

Today, the ANC doesn't even come to negotiations with the TPA, because the TPA broke so many agreements. But we in the civics have a mandate to keep discussions going.

We are not reaching settlements with the TPA at this stage, because before we do that we must go to a regional congress to get a full mandate. The questions we will raise at a Cast congress include which parties should be involved in joint negotiating forums, what is the financial outlook, and how best to attack the cutoffs of services in townships.

There are barriers ahead. The CP opposes negotiations and any change in our country. The civics must help get rid of these CP local authorities. If we can do this, and also move beyond protest politics into development politics, this will empower us. We must learn how to run organisations better and, I hope, to run local government. But civics must always remain independent, and act like unions for the communities. \*

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