

Civics' cash shortage could lead to compromises

ONE OF THE IRONIES OF THE PRESENT transitional period is that businessmen and government officials alike are scrambling to win the approval of the progressive movement.

'Community participation' is a buzzword in development circles, which basically means that it is important for those involved in development to secure the support of community organisations.

Civic associations in communities earmarked for development are thus often courted by an array of developers, engineers, planners and local government officials. All are eager to have their plans endorsed by the local civic.

Some companies, such as Murray and Roberts, appear to be making a genuine effort to become more community-oriented in their approach to development.

But other contractors want civic approval simply to assist them to win the tender for a particular project. These unscrupulous contractors often do not hesitate to offer bribes to civic officials in exchange for Sanco's stamp of approval.

Sanco is battling to raise funds, and many civic officials are unpaid full-time volunteers. It is thus understandable that civic leaders are vulnerable to these financial offers.

Sanco's deputy chairperson of the Western Cape, John Neels, tells of how a company offered him a free holiday house if he endorsed their design for low cost houses.

"There's another consultant for a firm from Pretoria," adds Neels. "He says he wants my support for a project ... and he'll look after me and give the office five computers. He's desperate,

Sanco is feeling the financial squeeze and civics are exploring 'creative ways' of funding themselves. But some of these ways could seriously compromise civics' independence, argues **KERRY CULLINAN**

because if he can get Sanco's approval for the project then everything is A okay. I told him he mustn't come here any more."

But Neels, who is in charge of development for Sanco in the region, readily concedes that civic leaders have to make ends meet.

"We get funds from our national office, who gets money from USAID, to employ two people in the region. The rest of us are volunteers. We work more than fulltime, but we also have to go to work outside."

Civics as consultants

Neels himself has no problem with civic members acting as consultants.

"If someone approaches me and says 'John, I would like you to consult for me', I have no problem if I accept as long as it doesn't promote a particular developer or affects the organisation later on. You've got to be very clear about that."

Sanco's national president, Moses



Mayekiso, says the organisation does not have a policy on civic officials acting as consultants, but he is not against it.

"We don't have enough funds to pay staff, so civics in different regions sometimes negotiate with institutions for them to pay salaries or to fund a process," says Mayekiso. "Civics can negotiate their own approach as long as the agreement is clean and the person is not bought by the institution."

"We would act as consultants, even at a national level, to secure funds for the organisation," he says. "But we have to be careful that civics are not used in a corrupt way, such as to help one developer compete against another."

There is a real danger of civic officials compromising on their independence if they act as consultants. But at the same time, a range of people — mainly academics and ex-activists — are making a lot of money as consultants. Their role is generally to keep



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■ **DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA:** Where do civics get resources to ensure they can impact on community upgrading?

their client, usually big business, informed about the thinking in the progressive movement. Should they be able to benefit from poor communities, while the leaders of such communities — who generated the ideas in the first place — remain poverty-stricken?

Contributions

Aside from individuals acting as consultants, Neels says communities are busy finding “creative ways of resourcing civics to enable them to be effective in the transition”.

He gives the example of Mossel Bay, where people occupied 202 houses owned by Mossgas, and demanded that those houses be sold to them at an affordable rate.

“I was called in to negotiate. I said if we help them to settle the selling of the houses, we want a contribution to the civic, and Mossgas agreed,” says Neels.

“The community was informed of the Mossgas deal. There must be transparency about any money that comes in. It cannot be bribery because it is an open thing. It’s just like getting commission.”

In similar deals, the Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber has given the Civic Associations of Johannesburg

R100 000 to enable them to participate in the chamber and the East Rand Regional Services Council has given local civics money to take part in a development forum.

In Tembisa, the local civic is discussing getting a certain percentage from each township household to pay for the civic’s running costs. This ‘levy’ would be collected by the local council as part of the service charges residents would have to pay once the rent and service boycott has ended.

Mayekiso says Sanco’s national office is aware of the Tembisa civic’s plan and “supports the idea that civics find ways to pay for themselves”.

“The Tembisa option is one of a number of options we are looking at. It is similar to stop orders in a trade union.”

But if the civic is dependent on the local council to hand over this amount, this could influence the civic’s independence. In addition, the civic is unlikely to call a rent and service boycott as this will effectively cut off their own funds.

The Tembisa option also means that everyone is forced to contribute to the running of the civic, whether they are members or not. Civics also do not have the same accountability to their members as trade unions, as residents

are a more scattered, diverse group than workers all employed together in the same factory or company.

Self-help

In Alexandra, the Alexandra Civic Organisation (ACO) is looking into setting up self-help projects to help finance itself. The attraction of such projects is that ACO would not be dependent on any organisation. However, the downside of such projects is that they absorb a great deal of energy and generally yield very little money.

It is commendable that Sanco is taking steps to cut its dependence on foreign funders. However, it is venturing into dangerous waters by embarking on a host of financial ventures without developing national guidelines to direct such ventures.

The ANC’s national executive committee recently adopted a code of conduct for the organisation’s officials and employees, which compels them to divulge all financial interests to a special committee.

Sanco could consider a similar move to ensure, as Mayekiso says, that agreements reached with contractors are ‘clean’ and that civic officials are not bought by developers. ■