

ALTHOUGH FEW PEOPLE IN Pietermaritzburg's low income communities are aware of it, a forum of all major players in the city has been meeting over the past year.

It is remarkable that the forum could sustain itself alongside bitter regional strife. But what has made this possible, whose interests prevail and what has the forum achieved?

The forum started with pronouncements about a 'mini-Codesa' in June last year. This set the tone for the initial period, which focused on political restructuring (its one facet), rather than social transformation (its other facet).

Much of the forum's driving force has stemmed from elites across the political divide, with minimal influence and participation from the disenfranchised.

The political facet

Debate in this facet has been centred on one-tier versus two-tier local government. However, all parties have been hesitant to commit themselves to a fixed position.

After an initial flurry of curiosity, most working groups now have apology lists outstripping attendance. The active composition of all forum structures is overwhelmingly weighted in favour of statutory groups and business.

Representatives from democratic structures are invariably non-township based and participation is patchy. Community based formations are very weak, and seem unaware that their fate is being decided upon. In short, the playing fields are far from levelled.

Inkatha has told the forum it will never accept nationally determined guidelines on local government, and favours a local solution. Groups to the right — from the city council to Inkatha, the National Party (NP) and Democratic Party (DP) — have come out against interference by an interim metropolitan council. The assumption is that it will be business as usual under an umbrella 'coordination' structure.

The Natal Provincial Administration (NPA) — which administers about half Pietermaritzburg's population — has refused to join the forum, despite protestations by the ANC and Inkatha to the minister of local government. It has also refused to fund the forum,

Forum yet to prove itself

Pietermaritzburg's 'mini-Codesa' is far from perfect, but its mere existence in the war-torn region is amazing.

ANTON KRONE reports



■ **HIDDEN AGENDA:** The white council has tried to entrench development at Ambleton

although it is purported to have a budget for this. Clearly, the NPA has its own agenda aimed at preserving regional control under an alliance of conservative forces still punting the Interim Measures Act.

Without NPA membership, the forum is fatally flawed. However, it has launched, and parties have signed a statement of intent committing themselves to a policy framework for managing the city.

Developmental facet

Developmental issues were initially overshadowed by a political agenda. However, the occupation of land within the municipal borough precipitated a crisis in the city, which the forum had to confront if it was to retain any credibility.

These new settlements are bounded by Indian, coloured and white communities, whose conservative interests

are represented at the forum via the Indian and coloured local affairs committees and white farmers' associations. The settlements are demanding permanent status while their neighbours are clamouring for their removal.

The city council burnt its fingers last year trying to remove the Happy Valley community. Paralysed by division over whether to remove or upgrade these settlements, it has been incapable of responding.

The democratic alliance and NGOs placed the matter on the forum's agenda and have pushed for a resolution. Indications are that permanent recognition will be granted to these settlements.

A policy framework has also been drawn up for managing the city. This rules out unilateral state restructuring,

binds parties to transparency and accountability and prioritises development.

Provision is made for community controlled development, infill and densification. Developments that relegate the poor to the periphery are ruled out, and permanent recognition

to areas like Happy Valley is planned.

Although there is now a common framework, unilateral decisions from the council have persisted. The council has referred its 'hot potatoes' to the forum, but still acts unilaterally around hidden agendas. For instance, it has attempted to entrench Ambleton — a development rejected by the democratic alliance — by providing funds for a community development trust.

In short, the forum is yielding mixed results. The democratic alliance's capacity to engage is weak. However, the forum is forcing parties to confront the hard realities of what it takes to provide good government and promote real development. Parties have also discovered more common ground than expected in such a polarised region. ■

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