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ACCOUNTABILITY

NEVA MAKGETLA: Replace top-down delivery with citizen participation

Any democratic process has to balance the need for technical expertise and economic realism against the aim of empowering citizens and communities

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Residents outside Johannesburg protest over a lack of service delivery. Picture: SOWETAN

Most community protests aren't about policies or premiers; they're about long interruptions to the water supply, debates about who gets RDP houses and the candidate list for city councillors, or public works jobs. They erupt after months, sometimes years, of complaints and objections.

Protests ultimately reflect a failure of governance. State officials can be astonishingly unresponsive, watching a problem blossom from complaints to full-blown crisis without developing any urgency about remedies.

In Marikana the expansion of the platinum mines in the early 2000s brought an influx of tens of thousands of workers in areas without a housing industry. Many could find rooms only in dirty, dangerous informal

settlements.

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The government seemed oblivious to these conditions until the miners went on strike in 2012 and 2014. It promised to fast track housing for the miners. A task team was set up, meetings were held with officials from across the state — and almost nothing improved in the informal settlements. There was no visible effort to put up street lights, improve sanitation or clean streets. Three years later the government unveiled 300 RDP houses and 300 rental units. RDP housing is means-tested, excluding virtually all miners. Protests and illegal occupations ensued.

The governance challenge in Marikana, as in similar situations of apparently wilful blindness by government officials, reflected the failure to listen to communities and be accountable to them. The closed planning and decision systems set up under apartheid continue to insulate and isolate officials from the constituencies they are now supposed to serve.

Most government systems don't make it easy to object. People can submit a complaint, but the adjudication mechanism is usually internal, secret and hard to appeal. As a rule, the burden of proof is on the public rather than officials.

People who have received an inflated bill from Johannesburg know the drill. They send their well-reasoned letters and evidence off into the void. Sometimes after years they get agreement to set the matter right. Nonetheless another threatening letter arrives a few days later and the cycle starts all over again.

The shroud of secrecy established under apartheid, precisely to prevent public oversight, adds to the lack of accountability. Officials don't have to justify a refusal to share information. Instead, the public must apply for it, sometimes even go to court. For real accountability, confidentiality for government information should be the exception rather than the norm.

A competent democracy requires not a paternal state but an empowered electorate.

That demands systems that facilitate, encourage and capacitate collective action by historically marginalised and silenced groups. Decision-making systems should proactively create opportunities and resources for community organisations, unions and other stakeholder associations to help shape and monitor government programmes.

Any democratic process has to balance the need for technical expertise and economic realism against the aim of empowering citizens and communities. The procedures inherited from apartheid tilted this balance far too heavily towards official authority. Transforming those systems to empower the public, and particularly the historically silenced, is central to improving governance and ending the cycle of crisis and protest. It is also central to social cohesion.

In the Constitution, dignity is second on the list of human rights. Making that right a reality requires far greater efforts to replace the oppressive, secretive and top-down systems set up under apartheid with more open, accountable and participatory processes.

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