

The multitude of local forums that have sprung up over recent years have played an important role in establishing democracy in South Africa.

# For(u)ming the future

But do they have a place now that a democratic government has been installed?

SALEEM BADAT investigates.

**S**OUTH African democrats have been highly innovative in creating organisational vehicles for the decades-long struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist democracy. The period after February 1990 has been no exception: Democrats have drawn on their creativity and talents to establish a new form of organisation, the forum, as a means to deepen democracy.

As negotiation became the major instrument of national politics, social movements and civil society formations seized the opportunity for extending this process. Thus, alongside the Multi-Party Negotiating Process dealing with constitutional issues, national, regional and local forums mushroomed around areas such as the economy, housing, electricity, transport, local government, education and training, health and youth development.

In the main, the former National Party government was hostile to the idea that these forums should negotiate reconstruction. At best, while ostensibly open to forums, its conception of these bodies remained close to the toy telephone, reminiscent of the racial and ethnic advisory councils of grand apartheid.

By contrast, civil society formations such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African National Civic Organisation took the view that forums were much more than informal advisory and consultative bodies. Forums were mechanisms for ending unilateral restructuring by the government. They were the means to address crisis issues; to build agreement on core values, policy goals and frameworks; to negotiate the restructuring and reconstruction of social services; to extend decision- and policy-making processes to constituencies and stake holders directly affected by them.

The National Party was reluctant to concede such powers to forums, no matter how representative and inclusive they were. It was therefore not surprising that it often took a combination of mass action, vigorous persuasion and the intervention of the business sector in a broker's role for negotiating forums to establish effective functioning.

For example, the National Economic Forum resulted in part from the 1991 two-day general strike of 3,5 million people around an increase in Value Added Tax and the National Party government's unilateral economic restructuring. Similarly, the National Education and Training Forum was partly the result of a teachers' strike combined with militant demonstrations by students around examination fees during mid-1993.

Considerable time, human and financial resources have gone into forums. What they have achieved varies from forum to forum. By and large, forums have been least successful in relation to implementing programmes and delivering social services. They have been more successful in limiting unilateral restructuring by government.

Their greatest success was in contesting, and sometimes revising, the policies of the National Party government; securing information and

data crucial for policy planning; and developing policy frameworks for reconstruction. They have also served as training grounds by exposing activists to the more technical aspects of governance, administration and delivery of social infrastructure and services. Finally, they have incorporated a much broader range of constituencies in policy deliberations, at the same time legitimising the involvement of civil society formations in decision- and policy-making processes.

The real value of forums may ultimately lie in their potential to contribute to institutionalising far more transparent, accountable, participatory and democratic modes of decision and policy making.

Despite this it is difficult to predict how they will develop and whether they will necessarily continue now that we have a democratically elected government. Much will depend on the positions adopted by civil society formations and the approach of the new government.

In very general terms, three scenarios can be envisaged:

- Civil society formations accept that forums, in addition to providing a means to address issues and influence policy during the transition period, were essentially mechanisms for blocking unilateral restructuring by an illegitimate government. While mechanisms for broad participation in policy making are considered important, the role of forums is interpreted as ending with the installation of the democratically elected government.

- Civil society formations persuade the new government to make forums statutory bodies. In this scenario, forums could replace many of the existing, and often unrepresentative, statutory bodies such as the Housing Advisory Council and the Universities and Technikons Advisory Council. Whether the function of statutory forums would be advisory or would include a degree of autonomy or a policy role would be a matter for negotiation between forums and government.

- By agreement between government and forums, existing statutory bodies are reconstituted (and new ones created) as more representative and transparent structures. Forums continue to exist, but as advisory and consultative structures. The statutory bodies would be responsible for convening forums at regular intervals.

Although the new government is committed to broad participation, the size of statutory bodies is likely to be limited by considerations of efficiency, effectivity and cost. Forums have the advantage of being considerably broader-based than statutory bodies. They offer an opportunity for regular structured interaction between government, statutory bodies and constituencies. Most important, perhaps, they provide the possibility of holding both government and statutory bodies accountable and responsive to constituencies. ■

*Saleem Badat is a senior researcher at the Education Policy Unit of the University of the Western Cape.*