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■ **CIVIL OBEDIENCE:** The developmental role of civics needs more debate

Civic development

The incredible breadless sandwich

IN "DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY", Monty Narsoo puts forward a "technical" solution to the intensely political issue of who controls development.

He argues that because of their mobilising nature, civic associations are suited to perform programme work — an area of broad mixing-and-matching and consensus-building activity which fills the gap between *formulating development policy* and actually *delivering the goods* by means of specific projects.

It's a tempting solution. But can you make a sandwich with just the filling?

Is it possible to assign the civic movement such an intermediate role in development when the state's role is unknown and there is a virtual absence of special interest groups ready to take on project work at the coalface?

Narsoo's proposal for a division of development labour in the sphere of civil society is argued on the following

'Doing what comes naturally: A development role for the civic movement', by Monty Narsoo. Published by the Centre for Policy Studies.

Reviewed by **JO-ANNE COLLINGE**

lines: Civic associations, born of and tempered in the liberation struggle, were hugely successful at resistance and mobilisation and became the pre-eminent voice of the community. Seeking a new role as apartheid gave its dying kicks, the civics fixed on development — where they aimed to ensure that the voice of the community would continue to be heard.

But the "community" proved to be a bit of an illusion: "The fact that people live in a particular residential area — even if it is one in which they were

forced to live — does not dissolve the real interest differences between them," Narsoo observes.

Neither, he says, is "civil society" particularly "civil". He insists that many rosy-coloured definitions of civil society have given "insufficient attention to contending forces and the conflicts of interests within it. This creates crucial problems for an understanding of civil society's role in development."

Narsoo looks at three initiatives — in Phola Park on the East Rand, the Johannesburg inner city and the Free State town of Tumahole — where civic associations and more narrowly-organised structures clashed over the implementation of development projects.

In Johannesburg's flatland, the civic blocked attempts by a tenants' organisation to acquire and manage the buildings they presently rent. Although this move was made on the basis of the civic's concern that the rent should be

replicable, Narsoo observes that the conflict coincided with old splits in the civic.

In Phola Park, the civic association's redevelopment plan for the settlement was derailed from below, by sectors of the community to whom change represented a threat: illegal immigrants and criminal gangs. Their links to a strong defence unit gave them the capacity to challenge the civic.

In Tumahole the viability of a co-operative brick-making project was threatened by the civic's claim on the project for free material for its new office.

Controlling development

Narsoo concludes that the "interest differences within civil society are such that civic associations cannot, as they *tried to do in the three examples quoted*, assume control of development projects for entire communities." Not only is this undemocratic, he suggests, but solutions devised at one level simply will not work at another.

So, he assigns the "levels" different technical tasks in development. The general programme functions go to the more broadly-based civic associations; and the practical tasks of project implementation to the narrowly-based neighbourhood or special interest groups.

Programmes are there to "provide an environment which will enable projects to prosper" and to ensure projects can be replicated and effectively reach all eligible groups. "Programme work involves building policy, designing plans, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of policies and plans, and achieving consensus among a range of stakeholders and beneficiaries."

In passing, Narsoo considers the possibility that the power will not be tamed by the neat layering of functions, that technical solutions do not answer political problems. But he more or less sets this worry aside and gets on with the civics' job description. For me, this job description remains unreal; it has no roots — precisely because the issue of power, which lies at the heart of the problem, has been overlooked.

What if Narsoo had taken a different turn early on in his analysis and broadened his examination of civil society and conflict?

There is a tendency in some circles to treat "civil society" almost as a fetish

— to view it as a thing apart, as a self-contained entity. The dynamic relationship between civil society and the state, sectors which surely define and re-define each other in any reasonably democratic society, just doesn't seem to enter this debate often enough.

When it comes to development, state resources and state policy are surely going to be the compass-reading from which most other initiatives are going to take their bearings. It is puzzling that Narsoo so completely discounts this.

Because during this transition phase, it is precisely the absence of clear policy within state and other institutions with development resources which makes it so easy for established community organisations to play the kind of gate-keeping role he describes in his *Hillbrow case study*.

The change to a legitimate, popularly-elected government will have a profound impact, not only on relations between structures of civil society and the state but *among* organisations of civil society. As local government claims its share of seasoned activists; as specific interests become more pronounced and better organised, it is by no means clear where civic associations will shake down in the scheme of things. It is also highly likely that local government will define within its own functions certain direct development work, including programme creation and implementation.

The ability of community groups — be they civic associations or other interests — to impose their will, will also inevitably be altered.

Dirty fighting

The drift of all this is not to suggest that with the advent of democratic rule there will be an automatic end to dirty fighting and power-play over development resources. It is to suggest that the rules of the game will change profoundly, and that the way in which groups within civil society engage the democratic state will be crucial.

The process has the potential to give relatively powerless groups increased clout and access to resources — to "empower" them, in current jargon. It has equal potential to reinforce the (sometimes stifling) grip of established groups or to establish patterns of outright patronage.

This strand of power won't go away if it is ignored. And it is likely to repeatedly encroach on, if not subvert, "technical" divisions of development labour which Narsoo so carefully develops.

But if we suppose, for argument's sake, that some agreement could be reached and safeguarded, in terms of which civic associations were assigned responsibility for development programmes, would they be the right structures for the job?

My impression is that Narsoo is right when he says that some civic associations would be particularly well-equipped for the package of activities the programme implementation entails — marshalling support, building consensus, combining expertise, particularising policy. But the emphasis falls on *some*. These would be civic associations, usually in larger centres, which have played a central role in peace talks, local government negotiations and the building of development trusts.

But I feel uncomfortable with generalisations about constituents of "the civic movement". Civic associations are as varied as the communities from which they spring. For every common problem they experience, there is a unique feature to be found. It is not even correct to say they are all products of long years of resistance — *a whole crop of civics sprouted in the summer of 1990, after Nelson Mandela's release*.

For every development case study where the civic association blundered by overlooking special interests, one could probably be found in which projects succeeded due to the civic's flexible approach to relatively mild social differences. A whole number of civics, I believe, have succeeded in project work; there is no reason why they should not continue doing it; and their circumstances present limited programme responsibilities.

In sum, I found Narsoo's booklet challenging. While I recognised immediately the problems he raised provocatively and pertinently, the solutions he offered exercised my imagination painfully. I just could not make the ideas sit comfortably within my understanding of development and the struggle for development. ■