

Civic associations face a number of difficult decisions. What is their role once a democratic government is in place? Should civic leaders serve in local government structures? At the same time, civics have to deal with deteriorating conditions in many

townships.

RECONSTRUCT spoke to civic leaders from three historically influential areas in the civic movement — Soweto, Alexandra and Port Elizabeth — about the transition and the crisis in township services.

Civics in transition

How does ACO view the recent defection of white Randburg and Sandton councillors to the ANC?

We have been negotiating with them for more than two years, and some are very progressive. Of course, they used to serve the apartheid structures but because of all the political developments, there are realignments of forces. We appreciate this realignment, as this is going to reshape the balance of forces at the local negotiating forum between Alexandra, Sandton and Randburg. I also do not think this is a sudden change of political affiliation, as a few councillors have supported the mass democratic movement for quite some time. Of course, some people will see it as political opportunism, but my organisation is seeing it as a realignment of forces at a local level.

But the new 'ANC councillors' will not necessarily take the side of the civics in negotiations.

I think that they know our stand as the civic because they have been negotiating with us. I think they appreciate our views, and will be prepared to work with us.

How does ACO see the restructuring of the Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber (WMC) to admit political parties as members and

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become a two-sided table, like the Local Government Negotiating Forum (LGNF)?

ACO supports the LGNF resolution that metropolitan negotiating forums be two-sided. We think it makes negotiations much easier if the table is two-sided.

We see the two sides being the statutory or ruling side, which will include the National Party, and the

mass democratic movement side. In KwaZulu, Inkatha is part of the ruling side. So when a forum is formed in Natal, Inkatha must be part of the statutory side.

What structures would ACO like to see established in the Witwatersrand metropolitan area? Do you favour strong metro government, with limited decentralisation to local councils?

I would support a strong metropolitan government that would be able to redistribute resources and reintegrate our previously divided communities. Allocation of resources, planning, development and budgeting should happen at the metropolitan level. But we also have to strike a balance. Local councils should also have some powers, but these still have to be negotiated.

Is the Northern Joint Negotiating Forum (comprising of the Sandton and Randburg councils and ACO) still meeting, and if so what is it discussing at present?

Yes. It is making some progress in terms of the development of the far East Bank of Alexandra and maintenance of essential services. But we have resolved that political debate should take place at the metropolitan level.

Will ACO second people to form part of the interim local councils? How will this affect ACO?



We will release members of political parties who have been called by their organisations to contest local elections. But they will go there as members of those parties. ACO will remain outside those organs.

Realistically, most civics are going to be badly affected by the elections at a regional and local level. We are already affected at a national level. I think the organisation will be able to produce a second layer of leadership. This takes time, but ACO has already started to develop this layer in anticipation of the elections, and I think we are relatively prepared.

In 1980s, civics strived to set up 'organs of people's power', such as street and block committees. Is ACO still committed to building these local democratic structures?

We are still committed to building strong organs of people's power, or what some people are calling organs of civil society.

We strongly believe these structures are going to be very important in the difficult time of reconstruction. The legacy of apartheid is going to be with us for some time, and these structures will assist us to promote participative democracy and reintegrate our communities.

How does ACO report back and get mandates — especially about complicated metropolitan negotiations — to build the participatory democracy you are committed to?

We have demarcated Alexandra into 13 areas. Two areas are not functioning because of violence.

In the other areas, we call general meetings and give reports and ask residents to give us their thinking.

The ordinary people are often well informed about the functions of local government. These meetings are very helpful to the organisation. Participation has been very encouraging, but there is room for improvement.

There has been a communication problem, as it is sometimes very difficult to simplify some of the concepts developed in these forums.

Aside from general meetings, we also have central committee meetings where binding decisions are taken,

which give the way forward for ACO. Then we have monthly meetings with fraternal organisations in Alexandra, where we report back on local government developments.

Aside from ACO, there are other civic organisations in Alexandra that claim to represent residents. How does ACO relate to the East Bank Residents' Association (EBRA) and the Alexandra Property Owners' Association (Alpoa)?

Some of these organisations were formed with the intention of dividing the community. We have had meetings with the East Bank Residents' Association to draw them closer to ACO rather than conservative councillors in the northern suburbs.

ACO enjoys support on the East Bank. People are struggling to repay their bonds and have been coming to us in large numbers for help. We are able to accommodate East Bank residents in ACO, and do not see the EBRA as posing a threat.

Alpoa has a few members. The land was forcefully expropriated from the people of Alexandra, and Alpoa says it must be returned.

We all agree on this. But we say you can't reverse apartheid suffering by creating more suffering. Some members of the community were given residential permits to stay in the backyards. It is very difficult to expect people to leave these yards without being given an alternative.

We are in the process of meeting with the legitimate home owners to try to work out a process.

Only ACO can solve the problem of the resale of property in Alexandra.

There are different interests in Alexandra, and the civic must try to reconcile conflicting interests. But if we have to choose, ACO must side with the poorest of the poor; people in one rooms, shacks and hostels.

Civics say that once a democratic

government is in place, they will be 'watchdogs'. What does this mean?

There are a lot of academic debates about the future of civics. It is very difficult to say what the role of the civic movement will be because conditions are going to change.

But the civic movement will remain outside the organs of government. It will pressurise the future government to reconstruct our country. This will not be the same pressure that we put on the apartheid government, as we presume that the new government is not going to be hostile to a reconstruction and development programme.

The civics will also help to formulate policies. I think there are going to be standing committees, and personally I would like to see some negotiating forums, such as the National Housing Forum, turned into standing committees.

I think the ratepayers' associations are also going to change, and become part of the civic movement.

If the civic movement relies on government for survival, it will be difficult for them to retain their independence

How do you see civics being financed in the future?

Some comrades argue that the civic movement should be funded

by the government, because the government is getting that money from people through taxes. Others say the civic must be self-reliant. If the civics rely on the government for survival, it will be very difficult for them to retain their independence. Then the civics will be conveyor belts of the government.

In Alexandra, we are looking into developing projects that are going to generate resources. We are looking at self-help projects such as brick-making, where a percentage of the profits will go to the civic. But these need management skills.

I think the international community will continue helping us. The international community must be persuaded to give money to the running of the civics themselves, not just to civic projects. The civic movement is very young and lacks skills. ■