

# The South African Presidential Participation Programme (Presidential *Imbizo*): Engaging Communities for a Better Life

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## Abstract

The South African Presidential Participation Programme (*imbizo*) encapsulates an active reciprocal participatory programme through which South African citizens provide feedback on policy delivery in a typical bottom-up approach, engaging the political and administrative leadership directly. The *imbizo*, in its traditional form, has constituted an important aspect of the African political system for many centuries, especially in South Africa. It is only during the presidential term of Mr Mbeki, the President of South Africa, that the concept was revived to a position of importance in the contemporary lexicon and formal governance setting. Nevertheless, many challenges are faced to understand and manage the real value of such a participation system in South Africa. This deliberative approach is in line with the dominant discourse of alternative policy-making processes as encouraged by the United Nations for the future of reviving the public management system internationally and is worthwhile pursuing notwithstanding implementation challenges that are faced. This paper, for the first time, describes the *imbizo* as a South African indigenous participatory programme, uniquely driven directly by the President of South Africa. The paper highlights the challenges and opportunities this programme offers and positions the *imbizo* in the prevailing debate on public governance and the theory on deliberative policy-making internationally.

## Keywords

Participation, South Africa, policy process, *imbizo*, deliberative theories

## Introduction

The term *imbizo*<sup>1</sup> derives from the South African Zulu language, meaning “gathering”. As a contemporary working definition, *imbizo* demonstrates itself as an organised event. The President and other officials visit remote areas in South Africa, where they meet with ordinary people who gather in a village, or in the vicinity of a township or town to exchange views on the status of service delivery and problems communities experience with public services (SA GCIS 2000). The *imbizo*, in its traditional form, has constituted an important aspect of the indigenous African political system for many centuries, especially in Southern Africa. The general interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> *Imbizo* is the singular form for “gathering” in the Zulu language and *izimbizo* is the plural form of the same word.

attached to the *imbizo* is one of being a communications tool. However, this can be unnecessarily limiting since its potential goes far beyond being mere communications. It includes gathering a rich body of information that can be used to inform future policy decision-making processes and to improve the management of implementation. The *imbizo* qualifies as a rapid and cost-effective way of policy evaluation that could potentially lead to policy change, cancellation thereof or even the introduction of new items on the policy agenda.

Furthermore, policy needs to be maintained and this can only be done through policy evaluation, which relies on up-to-date information. This information is obtainable through the participation of local communities and therefore assists with what Lindblom (1990) describes as a process of interminable inquiry which allows for effective and creative problem solving.

The information gathering, as well as the monitoring and evaluation potential of the *imbizo*, should be made more explicit and better institutionalised if these initiatives are to come to their full potential.

The Presidential *Imbizo* is in line with more recent developments in the larger field of public policy and public administration. These new developments embrace greater inclusivity and participation of communities and citizens in decision-making. They also give credence to perceiving effective organisational structures akin to networks, aside from the more traditional perceptions of hierarchical and market structures.

To understand the deliberative value of the South African Presidential Participation Programme (popularly known as the Presidential *imbizo*) the paper is structured to explain the current context of the South African transformation to democracy in view of the fact that participation has been part of the ideology of the current ruling party (the African National Congress (ANC)) for many years. Secondly, it is also important to explain and understand the international calls for participation and building a networking policy community from the United Nations to adapt to an ever-changing public management environment. In the third section the paper introduces the methodological description of the *imbizo* planning phases and to what extent participation is inclusive. The fourth section provides a general analysis of the successes and challenges of the *imbizo* covering the first cycle between 2001 and 2005. Lastly, the paper will conclude that the Presidential Participation Programme and South Africa have some insight to offer to improving citizens' lives as well as strengthening democracy directly.

### **Transformation to a democratic state and understanding the South African context**

The Republic of South Africa's pre-1994 history of *apartheid* reflected an authoritarian style of governance, which was exclusionary in character and minority-based in most of its political activities. After the un-banning of the African National Congress (ANC), Mr Nelson Mandela's release from prison in the 1990s and the first democratic elections held in 1994, South Africa set out to establish a developmental, inclusive, participatory and democratic polity. South Africa is a unitary state, with nine provinces. It is a deeply divided society on a range of fronts, of which class, level of urbanisation, race, ethnicity and language divisions are only a few of the social and demographic factors with which government has to contend.

According to Mr Joel Netshitenzhe, Head of the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services (PCAS), and Rev. Frank Chikane, Director General in the Presidency (2003), the challenges faced by government during the "First Decade of Freedom", between 1994 and 2004, were those of transforming institutions — establishing within these institutions a democratic character, while dealing with the "legacy of *apartheid* and integrating South Africa in a rapidly changing global environment". The re-engineering of an inclusive and interactive developmental state demands the creation of institutional structures that have as their base transparency, equality and accountability as well as a democratic society (as reflected in the South African Constitution, 1996). These structures should further be based on principles of equity and non-racialism. Therefore, the entire policy landscape, in terms of substantive matters, structures as well as process, was re-engineered to reflect the democratic character of the Constitution of South Africa. These changes included entrenching a democratic civic culture with the capacity to participate in policy making (Mbeki 1997). The organisational and struggle (activist) culture of the African National Congress (ANC) (the governing party) included strong features of participatory democracy, which were carried over into the current dispensation. The goal of a "people-centred" state is entrenched in the vision and political leadership of Mr Mbeki, through the establishment of participatory discussion and various presidential working groups as core features in the restructured Presidency, as well as the Presidential Public Participation Programme (also called the Presidential *Imbizo*).

While still serving as Deputy President (1997), Mr Mbeki started off with formally developing this indigenous participatory character within government by asking a decisive question: "What is the role of civil society in the transformation and consolidation of the democratic state?" This thinking anticipates the limits experienced by government as a solitary actor in the political arena. It also highlights the need for active participation and critical assessment by citizens of service delivery within a democratic framework, as argued by Strom (2004, p. 1). She warns that "when democracy is conceived too narrowly, as simply the work of government, citizens become

marginalised and democracy seems to revolve around politicians. When citizens are placed at the centre, everything looks different”

The Presidential *Imbizo* is one mechanism through which South Africa's leadership has, in effect, done *exactly* that by working towards a government that is “people-centred” and policies that favour all South Africans.

### **The international foundations of participatory change**

Public participation and deliberative thinking are not new to the study of policy-making. Fischer (2003) concluded that deliberative approaches emerged due to the limitations of the dominant empiricist approaches and the fact that these approaches were removed from “normative realities”. The “neglect” of values and social reality, as well as the need for “interpretive inquiry” urge governments to think differently in relation to citizens' participation. Realistically “citizen participation is the cornerstone of the democratic political process” (Fischer 2003, p. 205).

Therefore, many participatory studies emerged and the call for more participation in relation to better governance and rediscovering of a civic culture is echoing internationally. Examples such as the “Better Together Report: Restoring the American Community” emanating from the Saguaro<sup>2</sup> Seminar on Civic Engagement during 2000 have suggested that “America faces a civic crisis” due to the fact that Americans were no longer participating politically due to an erosion of “social capital”. This report suggests, inter alia, that there is a need to view government and civil society as complementary and therefore to optimally “foster greater democratic deliberation” through strengthening organisations which connect citizens and government, broadening the role of citizens in restructuring government as well as developing participatory citizens.

Recent studies conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 22 developed and developing countries on civil society and governance <<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/civsoc/docs/reports1.html>>, links with the current debates on the methodological questions of how to accommodate and define civil society's role in a modern-day democracy. These studies include, in some cases, very specific foci such as Constitutional reform in Kenya, budgeting, or the development of a democratic civil society after changes in governments, e.g. Mexico.

Furthermore, the study by Goetz and Gaventa (2001), “Bring Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery” proved to be very interesting, as it highlights the importance of enhancing

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<sup>2</sup> Better Together Report: Restoring the American Community can be found at <<http://www.bettertogether.org>>.

“voice” or participation in making policy decisions, as well as assisting with monitoring and evaluating if policies are to be effective.

Other studies focusing on minority groups in Australia and the USA are also worth noting as they contribute to the body of thinking around participation and the impact these acts have on development or self-determination. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development founded by Professors Cornell and Kalt (2003) which focuses on the tribal governance of American Indian minorities and conditions needed to achieve self-determined social and economic development has contributed to the thinking around participation and decision-making. This study proved that to achieve a workable development agenda and strategy for American Indian reservations, issues such as sovereignty, backed by capable government institutions, as well as cultural matters are critical to social and economic development. Therefore, when looking at the outcome of the study it is clear that tribal authorities have to consult with their tribes to understand what policy requirements or changes are needed as well as allowing and teaching tribes and tribal authorities to think differently about policy, development and their roles in these activities.

Australia has also conducted a significant body of research especially relating to engaging Australians. Amongst others, the civic engagements in Western Australia, lead by the Premier together with Aboriginal Australians on historical policy imbalances acknowledge that “a large part of the problem has been policies formulated without the active involvement of the very people whose lives and livelihoods are going to be affected by them and whose support is needed for their success”. As in the case of the American Indians the study focuses on minority groupings. However, principles highlighted by the Australian case such as respecting culture, linguistic diversity and the importance of committing to engagements especially in relation to government and senior managers in such an organisation. Issues such as clarity on reasons for the engagement, realistic goal setting and seeking advice from existing networks in Aboriginal communities are highlighted and have contributed to better governance.

The past three sessions of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) reflected on the challenges faced by many developing countries in view of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The unconvincing foundations of traditionally orientated public management systems are challenged by a volatile international arena and rising demands by citizenry for service delivery. Accordingly, CEPA (2002, 2004, 2005) has recognised the need to review the implementation of policy decisions as well as the requirements for institutional readiness to accommodate the increased societal pressures, in the midst of diminishing resources. The CEPA meeting in April 2005 acknowledged the need for partnership building and

more inclusive decision-making as key thrusts for the revitalisation of public administration in general and more specifically to ensure reaching the MDGs within the specified time frame. Additionally, aspects such as the strengthening of integrity, transparency and accountability are also highlighted as they are fundamental to any democratic system of governance.

The strengthening of institutional processes partially includes (as the CEPA also recommends) widening the space for participatory practices, for which the necessary capacity need to be created and a change in the dominant perspective regarding policymaking processes and public administration are necessary. These participatory spaces can be created in a myriad of ways, for example, through collaboration, deliberation and the development of policy and issue networks. Participatory approaches have a positive impact on policy development and governance due to the fact that citizens are close to service delivery points and directly exposed to ineffective processes in the public management system. Building a bottom-up approach becomes critical not only for corrective action but also for better control on scarce resources in developing countries.

Weeks (2000) promotes a “revitalising civic culture,” which enables government to take effective action on policy issues. Frederickson (1982, p. 502) initiated this idea twenty-three years ago, when he called for an initiative described as “a new civism”. This “civism” is “intimately tied to citizenship, the citizenry generally, and to the effectiveness of public managers who work directly with the citizenry”. Cornwell and Gaventa (2001, p. iii) call for the expansion of the concept of “social citizenship” entailing the social rights, responsibilities and accountability through various direct forms of democratic governance, which also entail participation and the impact it could have on policy formulation.

Notwithstanding a great many efforts, participatory methodologies are still struggling to be mainstreamed in public administration and are in general poorly institutionalised, given the competition from methodologies deriving from positivist and economic frameworks. Frederickson (1982, p. 505) poses the very important question of how the public service would cope with uncertainty and where information would be collected from to manage policy failures *before* they reached crisis proportions. Frederickson suggests that within the context of modern organisational theory and more specifically, the principal of decentralisation, an understanding of the policy process and the inclusion or involvement of the citizenry, would make effective policy-making and governance a reality.

Researching the Presidential Participation Programme in South Africa, is an initiative that allows for understanding “interactive governance for which communication and direct interaction of political figures lead to the stimulation of dialogue between government and the ordinary citizens

of South Africa" (SA GCIS 2000). It provides an opportunity into "normative realities" of South Africa. This unmediated interactive programme forms the focus of this paper and sheds light on processes that are firmly under the spotlight given the shift in the participatory direction of public governance (as opposed to managerialism) that has occurred in the past two decades. The programme allows government to be in touch with its citizenry, to access raw data and public opinion on policy issues. It has all the potential to qualify as an effective programme instilling "civism" and people-centred governance. It further has the potential to provide the basis for cost-effective monitoring and evaluation practices that are better suited for the context of developing countries than some of the more positivist and economic-based M&E systems that are so in vogue (see Juma and Clark (1995); Dryzek (1997); Fischer (2003); Dunn (1994); Booysen (2002)). The Presidential *Imbizo* has largely gone unnoticed for almost five years by political and policy scientists even though it has so much to offer in terms of participatory learning.

The *imbizo* participation programme is embedded in the post-positivist theories of policy-making and analysis. It is discursive, giving recognition to lay and indigenous knowledge systems, given the fact that it attributes value to subjective experiences of reality. As such it moves beyond traditional decision-making and policy analytical approaches that are mechanistic, rational in orientation and expert-dominated (Lindblom 1990; Dryzek 2000).

Indigenous African participatory and inclusive, discursive practices capture Frederickson's views and meet contemporary requirements of building participatory networks for better policy-making and implementation. They pull together various elements in governance as well as elements of the policy-making process.

Deliberative theories generally encapsulate continuous contributions by way of the "will of the people" (Bohman and Rehg 1997). They also give rise to the concept of a learning organisation, in which language and communication is seen as a way of experimenting with the citizens' views on certain policy issues (Juma and Clark 1995, p. 127).

According to Bohman and Rehg (1997, p. x) deliberative democracy refers to the idea that legitimate law-making originates from the public deliberation of citizens. Accordingly participation is a cause of empowerment. However, what these theories capture is the importance of the post-modern discourse. It deals with policy-making in such a way that it emphasises the realm where reality and theory meet on a level that adds value to policy making. This is underlined by Immanuel Kant's (2003) terminology of bringing about the "the public use of reason".

### **Methodology of the Presidential Public Participation Programme (*Imbizo*)**

The term “*imbizo*” is not new to the South African context. It has formed part of the African indigenous knowledge system for many years and carries the traditional association of a gathering between the community and the leaders (heads, *indoenas* or chiefs) of a tribe. Important community matters are raised and discussed, whereby the chiefs of the tribe respond. This process of listening to the people, prior to decision-making by leaders, dates back to the pre-colonial era in African history. Many descriptions of this form of participation could be traced back to African songs, poetry and indigenous knowledge systems, such as discussions with elders in many African tribes. Information from these traditional oratory systems is rarely documented and not easily accessible in standard repositories of knowledge, e.g. libraries and more recently the Internet. This is due to forces such as colonialisation and the marginalisation of the African continent. The lessons that these practices have to offer have accordingly been denied to contemporary engagements on the entrenchment of democratic behaviour, other than through means of regular elections.

After a Cabinet decision in 2000, the *Imbizo* programme has found a place in the modern democratic South African government system, which promotes active involvement and direct participation of the public on various levels in the implementation of government programmes.

Between 2001 and 2005<sup>3</sup> the President completed the first official cycle of the Presidential *Izimbizo* in the history of South Africa. The table below summarises the schedule of *izimbizo*:

**Table 1. Provinces of South Africa and years visited by the Presidential Imbizo**

<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>
Limpopo	Free State	North West	KwaZulu-Natal	Northern Cape
Eastern Cape	Gauteng	Western Cape	Mpumalanga	

The Presidential *Imbizo* stretches over two and a half days and constitutes site or project visits and community gatherings. During this period the *Imbizo* allows for individuals or community efforts (projects) that contribute to the building of a democratic, developmental state which is acknowledged, or for such communities to assist with the highlighting of issues where difficulties are experienced and making suggestions as to how to resolve difficulties. All issues raised are

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<sup>3</sup> The paper draws on research conducted by Odette Hartslief for the purposes of a MA dissertation entitled “*Imbizo: a participatory policy mechanism in the African context*” at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

captured by scribes, appointed by the Government Communications and Information System (GCIS) and the Presidency, during the course of the Presidential *Imbizo*.

For methodological clarity, the institutional process of the Presidential *Imbizo* can be explained in three phases: an *Imbizo* planning phase, the actual *Imbizo* event and the post *Imbizo* phase. In practice the whole process relies heavily on an integrated approach, with clear and decisive decisions as well as research by the implementation task teams working on the project. To understand the complexity of the interaction and planning process it is important to recall that South Africa has three spheres of government; National (headed by the National Executive), Provincial (headed by a Premier and Provincial Executive supported by an administrative head which is called a Provincial Director General) and Local or Municipal Government (Headed by a mayor and supported by municipal managers as well as councillors at a district level). The interaction between the three spheres of government is bound to protocol roles. All three phases of the *imbizo* have to take cognisance of this complex set of intergovernmental arrangements. The three phases can be described as follows:

### ***The Imbizo Planning Phase***

The planning phase includes protocol, negotiation, as well as logistical and primary research work in preparation for the actual *imbizo*. This phase includes various processes such as:

- Establishing the dates and the provinces to be visited
- Writing to the Premier of the province according to normal state protocol, informing the Premier about the planned visit to the Province and Provincial Government
- Requesting projects relating to government, or within the Government Programme of Action as set out by the President's State of the Nation Address each year (Mbeki 2004/5), and areas where assistance is needed. These projects emanate from the provincial goals set the previous year and the current year based on the National Government's policy directives.
- Requests to National Departments to submit project proposals for consideration on the program, are forwarded by the Presidency. Input is also requested from the Policy and Co-ordination Unit in the Presidency (PCAS).
- The appointment of an ad hoc coordination team on a provincial level
- The appointment of a Presidential program team including representatives from GCIS
- The first meeting between the coordinating teams normally establishes the necessary boundaries, including an understanding of the concept regarding the *Imbizo* process and guidance on projects or areas to be visited by the Presidency and the Province
- Negotiating the program
- Embarking on site visits of each project or program
- Coordination of the project (event).

The agenda setting and negotiation of the programme is a difficult and time-consuming process. The programme has to reflect an acceptable balance with diversity and variety, while still focusing on the day-to-day realities of policy implementation and contributions from people in the activities of the government. The programme does not highlight the exceptional projects but rather highlights the normative realities of South Africa with difficulties and policy triumphs. The intention is not that this is a “window dressing” exercise, but rather real-life policy laboratories from which powerful lessons can be drawn to improve on government performance. The programme is not one of manipulating the “voices” and the projects of citizens. The programme setting phase is un-orchestrated as a result of the required goal of a legitimate “inclusiveness” public participation programme.

#### *Co-ordination of the Imbizo*

The *Imbizo* team consists of various sub-teams functioning parallel to the main process. These sub-teams include research; communications; and logistical expertise.

The co-ordination of the Presidential *Imbizo* is led by the Presidency. The whole process is overseen by two of the most senior officials in the Presidency, i.e. the Deputy Director General Communications and the Director General of the Presidency. The Presidency briefs the Director General of the Province, the Heads of Departments and, closer to the event, the Executive of the Province to finalise and clarify the concept of the Presidential *Imbizo* and the projects included in the final programme.

The content of the programme varies according to the proposals received. The character of the province and its people are considered, in order to enhance the opportunity of community participation in rural and urban areas. A typical two-and-a-half day *Imbizo* programme includes:

- a stakeholders’ meeting (meetings with business, academics, civil society and religious leaders participating)
- two to three community *Imbizo* gatherings (community based — rural and semi urban areas)
- three projects/site visits per day
- “*Imbizo* on Air” radio phone-in program.

#### *The programme negotiation and site visits*

The programme planning takes approximately two months. Various meetings and site visits commence during this first month. All information on projects is collected and analysed by the Presidency.

The coordinators communicate on a one-on-one basis with community members and local project managers to understand the significance, development and difficulties of the projects. The specific areas are also located in different parts of the specific province to ensure that rural communities are reached. The projects chosen are usually of an interesting nature with lesson-drawing potential. These projects typically create an impact on the community, such as providing employment, skills development, poverty reduction, empowerment, emerging farming projects, water projects and schools. All of these relate to government programmes or policies.

### *Research*

All project proposals and input from various role players are considered in order to make an informed motivation on the value the President could add by visiting the area or any other important focus point during that specific period. A balance of projects emanating from government's prioritised program of action and community initiated self-help projects are preferred. With reference to the first type of project the President may highlight issues such as the registration for social grants and identity documents which form part of a specific campaign by the government. A briefing document is drafted for the President containing basic profiles of areas visited and projects highlighted and in some cases, more detailed information on issues pertaining to difficulties or issues on grass roots level, is singled out by the negotiators.

### ***Actual Imbizo Event***

The actual days during which the *Imbizo* takes place are usually regarded as days of large-scale community interaction with the President. This could be anything from visiting schools for educational purposes, to attending events such as empowerment projects. The official *Imbizo* gathering takes place with the Premier as host, as well as all Provincial Ministers of the Executive Council (MECs) and preferably, councillors of the specific local governments. Senior bureaucrats are also expected to be at the meetings to assist resolving issues raised by community members and to assist with follow-up on undertakings given during the *Imbizo*.

A master of ceremonies fluent in the indigenous languages spoken in the specific area manages the official community gatherings. These arrangements facilitate communication across language barriers and assist in giving confidence to any member of the public to pose questions in their home language to Members of the Executive and the President, or explain issues that they deem to be important. This is an un-orchestrated process and any local community members present is free to take part. After a set of questions is asked or comments made, the President requests Members of the Executive to assist or comment on specific cases. If issues cannot be dealt with, they will be taken up after the event on a formal basis by The Presidency. Provincial, as well as National Government structures, are informed on issues which require attention and follow-up.

In most cases, these community gatherings also allow for information sharing by the Government. Information and other public service stands are set up to provide prioritised public service rendering such as assisting in cases relating to social grant applications and citizen services rendered by the Department of Home Affairs and other relevant departments

#### *Visiting projects*

The President interacts directly with the community members involved with projects that are visited, such as a shelter assisting the destitute, or a women empowerment group running a feeding scheme. This part of the *Imbizo* program allows for meetings of a more individualised nature between the President and individuals involved with or benefiting from projects or service delivery points. It allows for example the President to visit an individual in a government subsidised house to understand either if the housing scheme is a success story or possibly of poor quality or the President will physically engage in registering the elderly for an old age grant. If specific issues were raised with the President, officials from The Presidency compile an *aide memoire* and deal with this information shortly after receiving it. Relevant individuals and/or affiliated stakeholders are contacted afterwards in order to clarify or understand the specified issue. In some cases The Presidency dispatches an ad hoc team to assess a situation after the formal *Imbizo* programme and later bring in the necessary departmental resources to investigate the problem.

#### *The "Imbizo on Air" radio phone-in programme*

The radio phone-in programme is hosted by both the President and the respective provincial Premier. The public is provided with a toll-free telephone number and on phoning in has the opportunity to communicate directly with the President and Premier. Issues are noted and captured by scribes as the need arises. None of these calls are screened or pre-recorded. All questions are live on air.

#### *The stakeholders meeting*

The stakeholders meetings are generally focused on a strong business contingent with an economic focus on growth and development. The format of the meeting is more formal but still based on interaction between the President and the audience. Business raises issues to which the Provincial Government and/or the President respond. Usually these meetings are focused on those parts of the economy in a particular province that contribute to the local economy. The formats of these meetings vary from hosting them at a strategic venue such as a dormant airport which could assist with developing an industrial development area, to a small fishing community and other businesses if a town has been affected by market fluctuations or unemployment due to

the closure of businesses in an area. The idea is always to attract attention to challenges or under-exploited opportunities. South Africa is a country that has various economic challenges and therefore the President pays specific attention to the business community.

### ***Post Imbizo phase and follow-up***

After the actual event, the Premier's office submits a report with direction on problem solving, if required. The Provincial Government is also required to report on issues on a regular basis to The Presidency to indicate how issues were handled or are in the process of being dealt with.

The official report received from the Provincial Government is circulated to the Presidential Policy Co-ordinating and Advisory Services Unit (PCAS), to the Director General, the Minister in The Presidency as well as the project team leader from the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS). The issues covered in the report should be analysed for accuracy and consistency.

The Presidency identifies and monitors precarious issues directly, by appointing an ad hoc team to re-assess the relevant issue. This team consists of officials from the relevant National and Local Government structures to assist with problem solving. In some instances, it may be necessary for the President to facilitate the formation of public-private partnerships (PPPs) or joint interventions to overcome particular precarious problems.

### **An assessment of the Presidential *Imbizo* 2001–2004 in terms of the literature**

Essentially, the Presidential Participation Programme could be a very effective mechanism in all stages of policy (from decision-making, through implementation, to monitoring and evaluation) that displays the requisites to revitalise the public service management system, as identified by the UN. Despite various studies by a large network of deliberative thinkers, and except for a myriad of focussed tools and instruments such as participatory budgetary analysis, experiments in terms of citizens' juries, as well as opinion and customer satisfaction surveys, a strong and unmet need remains with government decision-makers to holistically integrate the citizenry's views in all stages of policy, but specifically on progress with implementation and evaluating impact. Public servants need to accept that the public has a right to have an opinion and a right to demand a change on how public services are delivered (as mentioned by Frederickson 1982, p. 501). Over and above, local knowledge often holds the key to solving the problems experienced with implementation.

Through understanding the value of the information gathered at *izimbizo* speedy analysis of policy issues — less rigorous in terms of M&E design requirements but more appropriate for the

South African situation as a developing country — can be undertaken. The entire administrative process can greatly benefit from this timely information and analysis becoming available. The *Imbizo* is likely to suffice quite adequately for this purpose. Such speedy analysis reflects the prevailing opinion of local populations and exposes bottlenecks for effective policy implementation at short intervals, in order to be of relevance to the government. The development toward snapshot policy evaluation and monitoring in South Africa can give effect to “argued and informed policy making” as advanced by Lindblom (1990).

Clearly, when looking at the works of Frank Fischer and the OECD on “engaging citizens”, as well as that of Cornwall and Gaventa (2001), there is a changing role for citizens worldwide in terms of performance measurement and participation in democratic settings. The question then, is whether South Africa forms part of this revival? How has / can African political thought (be) added to the groundswell of opinion on this issue?

A study on the Presidential *Imbizo* proves that South Africa indeed *does* form part of this revival by the introduction of significantly important initiatives that are intended to bring citizens central to the entire governance process. The *Imbizo* process allows for the following:

- Establishing whether or not policy is still on track with the desired goal it is intended for
- Informing the annual Government Plans of Action (thus assisting with policy co-ordination to some extent, but to which more expansionary attention should be given especially in relation to the value of raw data gained from the *Imbizo*)
- Cornwall and Gaventa (2001, p. 8) as well as Robertson (2005) support such an approach and elaborate that the involvement of citizens in monitoring through new policy spaces enhances public and direct accountability through which policy-making can be shaped
- Easy access to information and feedback systems, allowing effective monitoring for policy implementation and evaluation of intended policy outcomes and trend analysis
- Opening the opportunity for performance measurement by citizens as proposed by Behn (2003, p. 587) and the “management for results” in future public management
- Identifying weak political structures or individuals within the policy implementation and decision-making cycles
- Informing decisions as to when to discontinue a programme — if gains are low and losses are high
- Strengthening and mobilising partnerships for measurement of accountability and transparency (CEPA 2004)
- Improving on local democracy and informed decision-making as advocated by Lindblom (1990) while at the same time allowing the center (of government) an oversight role, which is a

pre-requisite in situations where capability constraints clearly evident at the lower levels of government

- Civic education or citizens learning and strengthening the knowledge base through information sharing, therefore adhering to the CEPA (2002) notion of an outward orientation to all segments of society
- Participation also redefines the legitimacy of African knowledge systems and therefore can in the context of what Cornwell and Gaventa (2001, p. 8) explain, test a new layer of “expertise”
- Re-evaluating civil rights and responsibilities (Cornwell and Gaventa 2001)
- Facilitating access to information and communication with the public
- Redefining the roles of political office-bearers and public officials
- Allows for “nation building” in a society deeply divided by past inequalities (as also set out in the Harvard Study, 2003).

The Presidential *Imbizo* program is unique in the sense that the President of a country participates so directly with its citizens. It allows for a President to listen to the citizens. The President does not make a formal/ceremonial speech during the community events.

The Presidential *Imbizo* makes it possible to create a distinction between four levels of information, generated at the community engagements. The first includes issues of a more general nature relating to national policy issues, for example unemployment where opinions expressed makes up part of the general policy conversation. The second level of information relates to individual issues such as an individuals’ experience with reporting a crime, of which the police made no arrests, or such an individual not being able to access an old-age grant for which he/she may be qualified. The third level of information involves the status of policy implementation (trends analysis), such as the building of houses or access to clean water in that specific area, but on a provincial level by more than one community member. The fourth level of information is feedback and evaluation on whether government initiatives are achieving what the citizens want and need.

From the above description of the program setting, as well as the actual event, it is clear that participation by various levels of Government, including community members, becomes a central activity to which many can contribute and listen. The potential policy feedback, agenda setting and information gathered from this interaction have tremendous value to assist with a bottom-up understanding and improvement of public service management in general. An unintended spin-off is better coordination and integration across government activity, but also leveraging resources from other sectors in society, notably business.

Furthermore, as indicated previously, the traditional African practices of discussion have created an African communal space for interaction and legitimate contributions by communities to attain accountability from policy-makers on policy (Van Hensbroek 1999). Contemporary literature uses the concept of the “democratic palaver” for this kind of activity (Van Hensbroek 1999, p. 189). Boyte (2004, p. 20) also notes that the “explicit retrieval of African traditions of collaborative works challenge more than 2000 years of political theory”. In South Africa the realisation of that collaboration and participation through the establishment of the democratic state and by creating a people centred space through various systems has proved Boyte’s stance to be correct. More important is that the *Imbizo* seems to capture both the progressive perspectives of participatory policy-making in the Western literature as outlined above and African tradition in terms of decision-making. *Izimbizo*, therefore, serve as a potent example of the indigenisation of political and administrative mechanisms that enjoy “best practice” status in developed countries, as well as in multi-lateral organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. *African political discourse has opened an alternative intellectual option for good governance in a democratic context.*

The challenge, however, is situated in the effective management of *izimbizo* as a program and how information is collected and could be incorporated into a place in the policy-making process. The risk of program coordinators being biased when setting the agenda in the *Imbizo* planning phase will have to be taken under serious consideration. The key to success for the *Imbizo* program as a whole lies in the post *Imbizo* phase. The issue with which the government is confronted, is either to develop the post *Imbizo* phase as an informative, functional catalyst (Robertson 2005) in the policy-making process, or sacrifice this potential if it is going to be run as an established, yet sporadic communications event, with varying media coverage and no further constructive participatory impact or outcome. This is a risk the *Imbizo* is currently facing due to the limited analytical engagements with information generated through the process.

Robertson (2005) also warns that the *Imbizo* idea of participation should not become limited to a platform for demands and complaints because the value of the program would be lost. The *Imbizo* should encourage constructive discussion and listening, as the program matures within a formal democratic political system.

Strengthening the institutional capacity in The Presidency will provide strategic direction on public management over time, as it currently lacks the capacity to further develop the program. A better understanding of and role clarification between units doing follow-up research and policy recommendations need to be ensured.

Skills development in terms of policy-making, as well as analysis and improved capability when it comes to effectively interpreting the raw data from the *Imbizo*, is needed to make conclusions on policy trends and to share such information with the Executive and National Departments for action and consideration.

Some local newspaper headings are stipulating that, if community difficulties are not handled, *Izimbizo* would merely become “talk shops” (Msomi 2003). Other headlines, such as “Mbeki lends an ear to the people” (Dlamini 2003), highlight the fact that the President is aware of development difficulties. To add value, public servants and the Government will need to take issues raised very seriously and seize the opportunities for monitoring and exposing real difficulties on the local government level in a policy context.

*Imbizo* is not without difficulties. The monitoring and follow-up on various issues are time consuming and, in some cases, of a very sensitive nature. The fact that hope and expectations from communities are growing has the potential of becoming problematic amidst the ever-present challenge of sustainability in the form of continuous feedback to the affected communities.

Improvement on reporting and understanding of what the *Imbizo* entails by the media can also enhance effective participation. Currently media reporting seems weak and reflects a misunderstanding on the broader importance of participation in a democratic context. Accordingly, they under-sell the importance of the Presidential *Imbizo* and the issues raised by members of the public as significant forces of influence on the Government’s functions to initiate new forms of development and assistance in order to encourage effective service delivery overall. South Africa can learn from the Australian case especially in relation to the reasons for engagement. One of these is communication about the opportunities the *imbizo* provides to the citizens of South Africa. This is not necessarily communicated optimally.

After an interview with the Deputy Director General: Communications in The Presidency (Morobe 2005), it was clear that future of *imbizo* will be focusing largely on strengthening local government structures. Visiting these structures in various parts of South Africa to understand and further assist with development and service delivery on local government level is an immediate goal. It can thus be expected that target areas visited will become smaller, but that the depth of understanding and intensity of focused attention on smaller areas will become greater.

The strengthening of local-partnerships is becoming critical in the South African context where the intention is to re-define the social contract between state and citizens. Active citizen participation through empowerment is recognised as an essential factor in this equation of the

aim is diminishing poverty. To accomplish this, the Presidential *Imbizo* encourages local communities through communication and participation to get involved and share outcomes and lessons learnt, thus exponentially multiplying the knowledge base and avoiding that communities each have to individually learn their lessons the hard way.

Since running this program, the Presidency has in fact encountered the unexpected problem of growing numbers of people attending these gatherings. In actual fact, this reflects positively on the willingness of communities to become active participants in policy-making for an effective public service management system. In such situations the Presidency is confronted with the paradox of having large crowds attending the *izimbizo* but yet having to scale these numbers down to smaller groups of people allowing effective communication with the President. Therefore, The Presidency will in future also have to look at shorter and less formal *Imbizo* visits (Morobe 2005).

The Presidency is focused on spending time on the interface between the Government and citizens and ultimately bringing people closer to government. South Africa displays a truly unique deliberative spirit because the interaction transpiring between the President, the Government and its people is not a common occurrence in the political sphere. The positive reach of these *izimbizo* is critical, especially for the reason that criticism in the media and by opposition parties has implied that the President is not a “people’s person”. Furthermore, it is also a “perception management strategy” (Gumede 2002) which assists with government’s communication, research and policy coordination.

Morobe (2005) stresses the development of a skilled base of scribes with the necessary local political and social knowledge together with skills in understanding local languages. These skills sets have proved to be particularly problematic given the fact that the use of the local indigenous languages is encouraged during the *Imbizo* deliberations in order to facilitate participation by the local population. Note that after the completion of the report on a particular *Imbizo* the affected Provincial Government submits a report, which feeds back into the governance system and without skilled scribes and sophisticated translators much of the information will be lost. Morobe acknowledged that the post-*Imbizo* phase needs strengthening but also reminded that the programme only completed its first cycle and that there are some opportunities to learn and strengthen within the process.

## **Conclusion**

The Presidential Public Participation Programme is still in its infant stage, needing guidance in order to develop into a strong force for policy making. It is a program representing shifting

paradigms and dynamic interactions, reflecting the demands of a country truly enveloped in the African Renaissance. The program requires creative and innovative leaders and managers capable of recognising the full potential of this mechanism to take up the challenge and broaden its purpose. The program is a wonderful African innovation. It has the potential of being a method of understanding development and policy impact better. It closes the interface gap between civilians and the Government and it opens a new dimension between Western politics and African politics. The seeds of *Imbizo* lie with the African people, the challenge of its sustainability lies with continuous interaction and the promise of execution with its leaders. Its growth potential lies in the international public administration community learning more about it and keeping an open mind as to how to replicate it in their respective settings.

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