

THE CASE FOR CIVICS

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INTRODUCTION

Civic organisations have played a central role in the mobilisation of oppressed South Africans for political transformation. Through the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) they fought to bring about the collapse of local government institutions. Along with other progressive organisations they promoted a culture of democratic governance among their members and produced some of the greatest leaders in our country. However, most civics have not made the transition to operating within the new democracy. This paper explores the case for rebuilding civic organisations to enable them to maximise the new political space to effectively represent the interests of civil society.

The term 'civic organisation', as used here, refers to a body representing all residents (ratepayers and tenants alike) within a geographic area from the 1970s onward. The issues in such organisations were usually related to local government spending priorities, service delivery and meeting basic needs such as housing. They also served as a vehicle for challenging the political system during the period when political parties like the ANC (African National Congress) and PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) were banned. Taylor comments that "*The struggle for representation and participation did not only take place in relation to political processes at a national level ... but was also a key element in making the Black Local Authorities ungovernable.*"

Historically, apartheid local towns were spatially segregated: white residents lived in the central area, coloured or Indian residents were accommodated in a housing scheme outside of town and no accommodation was made for Africans as they were only allowed permanent residence in designated homelands¹. The exclusion of African people led to the development of informal settlements. There were usually 2 or 3 bodies representing the interests of residents; one in the white area (known as a ratepayers association), one in the coloured area and one in the informal settlement. By the mid eighties it was more common to find one civic representing both coloured and African residents as non-racialism became a typical characteristic of progressive organisations.

The Villiersdorp SANCO branch (hereafter referred to as the Villiersdorp civic or the civic) is used as a case study to reflect on the factors that affect a civic's ability to be successful. The story of this civic organisation is a common story, reflecting the history of most other civics in the past decade. The case study is based on a series of open ended interviews with past and present leaders of the Villiersdorp civic and local leaders who observed and interacted with the civic.

¹ The terms Africans, coloureds, Indians and whites were used by the apartheid government to classify people racially. In this paper the terms are used to illustrate the effect of apartheid land and housing policies on different groups of people.

The paper will first provide an overview of Villiersdorp, the civic's history and its housing project. Thereafter, the factors that have influenced its success and weakness will be explored and finally some recommendations for the rebuilding of civics will be tabled.

OVERVIEW OF VILLIERSDORP

Villiersdorp is a fruit farming town, approximately 119 km from Cape Town. The population size is estimated at 7 000. In accordance with the apartheid government's policies, until recently, the town had no housing for African people and the coloured people lived in a township, Nuwedorp, just outside the town. This township was overcrowded as there was no growth in the supply of housing stock to meet the increasing demand. In Nuwedorp people erected shacks in their backyards to accommodate growth in their households. This was common practice throughout the country. African men, in particular, were employed on short-term contracts by farmers and lived in hostels on the farms. The same applied in other parts of the country including the cities. These hostels were called 'single sex hostels' as they were only intended to house the workforce, not their families. Many of these men worked in Villiersdorp for more than 50 years and yet they were not allowed to have their families with them.

THE HISTORY OF STRUGGLE IN VILLIERSDORP

Along with the backyard shack dwellers from Nuwedorp, the migrant workers and their wives have waged a relentless struggle for the right to land and housing in Villiersdorp. Broadly speaking there were 3 phases of struggle in Villiersdorp in the last decade:

1st phase: Starting out - mobilising around the issues, confrontational politics

The Villiersdorp civic has its roots in a committee of concerned activists who assisted African migrant workers from Transkei and Ciskei living in hostels on fruit farms where they worked. By 1989 the men on the farms had gone on strike to demand a place for their families to stay. Many of their wives came from Transkei to be closer to them. They would live in the nearby bushes until the police found and arrested them. Some men had dared to hide their wives within the hostel. Those who were caught were punished by the farmers or the police and their wives were incarcerated. Their goal, therefore was to find alternative accommodation so that they could be re-united with their families.

The struggle for the unbanning of the ANC and for democratic government was gaining momentum around the country at this time. The leaders of the fight for land were also ANC supporters seeking to mobilise their community within the context of the national liberation struggle. All those interviewed describe these founders of the organisation as dedicated, highly committed individuals. They formed an interim committee and worked tirelessly to secure a portion of land for the migrant workers to live.

A SANCO branch was formed in 1990 when the Villiersdorp civic formalised its links with civics throughout the region. The Villiersdorp municipality, like other local authorities at the time, refused to negotiate with them. They resorted to mass action in the form of a defiance campaign. This was in keeping with the mood of SANCO branches around the country who were using confrontation and boycotts as a means of achieving better living conditions. During this time the civic experienced the highest level of participation from its members. The wives of the migrant workers would squat in bushes near the hostels until they were arrested. Upon their release they returned to squat again. The police had the active support of farmers and business people who assisted in destroying shacks. In 1992, after a long struggle with the municipality and white residents, African people won the right to settle on land which became an informal (squatter) settlement known as Goniwe Park. Finally families could live together without the threat of police harassment. Coloured people who had lived for years in the council-owned houses also won the right to purchase these dwellings, thereby, securing their tenure. The civic catapulted into the driving seat of change in Villiersdorp. These critical victories guaranteed the civic's support in Nuwedorp and Goniwe Park. It remains a landmark in the history of the civic as it signifies the municipality's acceptance of the civic as the representatives of the oppressed in Villiersdorp. One of the leaders commented that the civic had become "a powerful organisation that fought for the right to live here, in what used to be a place for whites only".

2nd phase: Negotiations, proposals and policy

These achievements ushered in a new phase in the history of the Villiersdorp civic. Meanwhile the ANC was unbanned and talks about a democratic election were underway. In keeping with the atmosphere of negotiation, many forums emerged to facilitate dialogue between opposing groups in all sectors of society. The Villiersdorp civic pressed on in its battle to improve living conditions. It engaged the services of Development Action Group (DAG), an NGO specialising in technical support to civics, to advise it on strategies for negotiating with the municipality. By 1995 a Housing Forum emerged in Villiersdorp. It served as a discussion/negotiating forum representing all the local stakeholders. After many discussions a Land Availability Agreement was signed. It reserved land for housing to provide for the residents of Goniwe Park as well as those in backyards in Nuwedorp.

The civic led discussions with the Provincial Administration which led to a reduction in the price of the reserved land. The civic also negotiated a number of changes in service delivery practice with the municipality to ensure that the African population could be effectively integrated into the community of Villiersdorp. For example, Xhosa speaking staff would be employed at the local clinic.

The civic had proven itself as a force to be reckoned with. It was now in a position to influence the future of housing policy in Villiersdorp.

3rd phase: Partners in implementation

The Housing Forum proved to be a cumbersome structure for decision-making - as was the experience within other forums as well. Many lengthy meetings were held but very little progress was made. Early in 1996 a Joint Committee emerged from

the Housing Forum. It consisted of the most important stakeholders in Phase 1 of the housing development: the Villiersdorp municipality, the civic (assisted by DAG), the RDP Forum and the Ratepayers Association.

A transitional local authority had also been instituted in 1995, with former civic leaders as councillors and one of the organisation's founders became the mayor. It was within this context that the relationship between the civic and the municipality gradually became a partnership. Many of the civic's experienced leaders became councillors and now had a responsibility to act in the interests of the broader community, not just of the members of the civic. Over time the municipality displayed a commitment to dealing with the housing problem through availing its resources and also through the personal dedication of some of its officials. Both parties were challenged to overcome racial barriers in the interests of achieving the common goal.

THE HOUSING PROJECT

The civic took up various issues that affected people, however, the housing project is by far its most significant achievement. The housing project was initiated to provide homes for low income families who lived in bad conditions in Goniwe Park, and was later broadened to include those in backyards in Nuwedorp.

During the research it emerged that the civic had difficulty enlisting its first 52 beneficiaries for the housing project. The leadership had considered formal housing as the logical next step once Goniwe Park had been established. Many of the residents of Goniwe Park, however, regarded Villiersdorp as a temporary home. They were still investing in their homes in the Eastern Cape where they planned to return upon their retirement. It could be concluded, therefore, that the housing project was not a priority need for the majority of people in Goniwe Park.

The Joint Committee became the developer in what was to be a mutual build project. At the Joint Committee the civic participated in all decisions regarding the detailed planning of the project. They were considered a serious partner in this project. They ensured that one of the leaders were appointed as construction manager and that DAG became the project manager, accountable to the Joint Committee for the execution of its decisions regarding the project. The municipality was concerned about the success of this unconventional project.

In preparation for negotiations and decisions, the civic held regular meetings with DAG (who still provided advice) before Joint Committee meetings. As planning for the implementation of Phase 1 of the project unfolded, the civic also finalised the list of beneficiaries and involved them in the most important decisions related to delivery. The prospect of formal housing created great interest among potential beneficiaries. Attendance at public meetings as well as committee meetings was good at this stage.

In October 1996 construction began. Soon the civic encountered the angry, dissatisfied voices of their beneficiaries as flaws arose in the delivery system. The civic managed a brick making co-operative which supplied the blocks required on site. However, within a month this co-operative was battling to cope with the

demand from eager teams of mutual builders. The materials management system was not fully operative by the time beneficiaries needed materials. These problems were compounded by the absence of the construction manager on site as his commitments elsewhere took priority. In addition, the DAG team often changed, contributing to the obstacles to progress. In the face of problems, beneficiaries turned on the civic as it was considered responsible for the smooth running of the project. The civic in turn put pressure on DAG, its technical advisor and also the project manager. Tension between these 2 partners developed. The civic felt pressured as people constantly complained to them instead of the Joint Committee and demanded answers to their queries from the civic. The beneficiaries held the civic ultimately responsible despite the fact that the Joint Committee was actually responsible for the project. A leader stated: "This was because the people trusted the civic to take up their issues effectively. They had no faith in speaking to the white people". A beneficiary commented: "We had to push them when we were not happy although we knew that the civic was doing their best for us in Phase 1."

By 1997 the mutual groups had disintegrated and each family had to ensure that their house was built. Those with building skills progressed well while elderly people and those without skills lagged behind. The Joint Committee expected the civic to deal with this deviation from the plan but it was unable to address the situation effectively. By this time the construction manager had left the project and the civic executive was no longer attending preparatory meetings with DAG.

Towards the end of Phase 1 there were many incomplete houses and the owners of these homes even failed to respond to support provided by the Joint Committee. This emphasised the point that a formal house was not important to everyone. Phase 1 slowly came to an end and attention turned to discussions about Phase 2.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CIVIC'S STATURE

Upon reflection it is evident that certain factors have directly influenced the civic's success and its weaknesses. The following is an attempt to summarise the most important factors within the Villiersdorp context:

- **Changes in the political environment**

The civic had difficulty replacing leaders who became part of the Transitional Local Authority as they had not prepared a second tier of leadership. In 1996 democratic local elections were held and more civic leaders were drawn into the council as councillors. While this was a positive development, it also weakened the civic leadership considerably as these councillors resigned from leadership positions in the civic, leaving the reins to a less experienced team.

- **Strategies and tactics pre and post democracy**

The civic's strategies and tactics have always been influenced by the broader environment. Its shift from confrontational politics, to negotiation and partnership was in tandem with the shift in strategies used by SANCO and the ANC around the country. The period before 1994 was characterised by mass action whereas the birth of democracy introduced a culture of dialogue and representative political figures like councillors.

In Villiersdorp the civic no longer considers it necessary to fight. Issues are addressed by appealing to councillors first. Where this has not produced results the civic has organised groups of affected residents to meet councillors to pressurise them.

This method does not appeal to everyone in the community as they feel it does not always bring results. Loyalty between former comrades (civic leaders and councillors), however, also compromises the civic's ability to opt for confrontation as a means to achieve their goals.

- **Institutional arrangements within the civic**

As more of the civic's battles took place in the municipal boardroom, it had difficulty sustaining the interest of its members who were formerly rallied to march and participate in protest meetings. The entire organisation focused on the housing project. They did not elect a sub-committee to deal with Phase 1 and another committee to recruit people for Phase 2, for example. There were seldom activities of interest to non-beneficiaries. As construction took off, the non-beneficiaries became less active and the civic's support base shrunk significantly.

In addition, some members were affected by an attitude which could be observed nationwide after the 1994 national elections: the age of voluntary work was over, pay back time had arrived. Many were no longer prepared to give their time as volunteers for a good cause. The bulk of the civic's work was left to a few hard workers. These workers were also beneficiaries who had to participate in a mutual group. They found themselves torn between their own interests (completing the construction of their homes) and the management of problems at a broader level. The construction process and the Joint Committee exhausted the limited capacity within the executive committee.

In the first 6 years of organised activity there had been continuity at leadership level in the civic. Between 1990 and 1996 only one or two members of the executive changed. However, more recently the changes have been quite disruptive as they have left the civic with new, inexperienced leaders. This means that the civic is back in a learning phase despite the organisation's history and successes.

Kihato et al emphasises *"the need for education and training opportunities in empowering civil society"*. The civic's executive committee recognised the need for training to ensure that they were equipped for the huge, unknown responsibility that mutual build presented. However, after many hours spent in preparation for negotiations and then in Joint Committee meetings, many of them were unavailable for training sessions. Gradually the civic started playing a reactive role in the joint committee as the complexities of the project overtook them. A former chairman of the civic observed that the civic of 1996 did not allocate portfolios to people who were interested in the area of housing. The whole committee wanted to be involved in everything rather than give one person the responsibility. He said, "people should really choose their own portfolio as they know what they are interested in or knowledgeable on".

This was a common problem in community managed housing projects. It may be because people were engaged in an unknown area of work and that the group felt safer approaching it together rather than as mandated representatives. The absence of portfolios made it difficult for the civic to function effectively. Their performance at Joint Committee meetings became weaker and often civic delegates were part of decisions they later denied as they did not understand the nature of the decisions made.

As Kihato et al further states: *“Power is manifested in action, and in relationships between people or groups of people. It is an active process. Mechanisms aimed at transferring power cannot guarantee that its beneficiaries will act”*.

While the civic’s participation in the Joint Committee was an important step in achieving development, it was eventually negated by its inability to engage with the issues.

The civic’s relationship with DAG was strained by the dual role that the NGO played. The demands of being project manager meant that DAG was unable to put additional energy into strengthening the civic.

- **The Civic’s niche**

Particularly since the unbanning of the ANC, civic organisations have become a home for people of different political persuasions. Members are united by their common goal to improve their living conditions. As a non-partisan organisation, a civic is best placed to take up issues relating to community development.

Where the civic is the only mouthpiece, as was the case in Villiersdorp, there is no competition for its members. Despite dissatisfaction with the civic’s tactics of dialogue with councillors, members remain loyal to it as they have no option. In communities where more than one representative organisation exists, the civic tends to be more active and dynamic in dealing with issues as it fears losing support. Recently the Homeless People’s Federation and farm workers have started mobilising people for Phase 2. The civic has subsequently started registering potential beneficiaries. It could be said, therefore, that the Villiersdorp civic became complacent in the absence of competition.

The issues for a new civic movement would mainly be located in the arena of local government. This is the level of government that has the most to do with delivery. Most of the issues which civics are expected to deal with are related to lack of delivery or the quality thereof. There is a co-operative relationship between the 3 ANC councillors and the one civic-based councillor in Villiersdorp. However, they all felt that they are unable to achieve everything within the council. One of them commented: “It doesn’t pay for us to spend late nights in council meetings making decisions if they aren’t implemented. We do have some uncooperative officials, therefore, there must be a civic to ensure implementation of the decisions that are made by Council”. These community based councillors feel that civics have a role to play as they regard community input as important. Another councillor said: “We have a good relationship. We communicate regularly over issues and have made joint decisions regarding the end of Phase 1, start of Phase 2, service delivery and arrears of service charges. A change in

the mindset of people will make it difficult for the civic to become strong again. Many people are thinking of their individual needs only and not what they can gain as a group.” This correlates with Taylor who quotes from an interview: *“ubuntu gave us the strength to achieve our desired goals in the past”* and concludes *“this needs to be revived”*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Leaders in active civic organisations struggle to keep up with all the demands on their time. In the interests of consolidating their organisations they need to consider their limited resources before sending delegates to participate in the proliferation of forums that exist. They need to target forums where important decisions are made. They need to identify where it is important to be involved and, more importantly, in what way. It is sad to note that many civics believe that the only way to control the development process is through attendance at all meetings and the holding of office (becoming the chairperson). While these are important factors, civics with limited capacity have to be more discriminating about where to use their resources.
- Any civic wishing to impact on the living conditions of its members should start by doing a needs assessment to identify the needs in a participatory way. This should be followed by a process whereby needs are prioritised so as to ensure that the project receiving attention is likely to have the active support of members. This is crucial to the success of the project.
- It would do civics well to consider their role in the development process selectively. This will enable them to more effectively balance boardroom activity with participatory work.
- It is imperative that civic organisations deepen their understanding of the new local government arrangements if they are to play a meaningful role in future. The assistance of NGOs could be enlisted to quicken this understanding.
- NGOs and other professionals could also be enlisted to provide training that transforms organisational structures to gear them for effective delivery since many civics today are engaged in delivery projects. Additional training could include change management and project management. Training should only be offered to interested individuals, not those attending because they have been nominated.
- When considering the revival of civil society, we need a civic movement that represents all people - black, white or coloured. In middle class areas it would be difficult to remain exclusive as residents have become fairly mixed. In low income areas there has been less movement and these areas are still known as “coloured area” or “black township”, denoting the majority of residents. However, they form part of larger municipalities which have a range of people within their borders. This means that people would have to cross the barriers to form a united front to effect change at municipal level.

- Councillors and civic organisations both represent the community. However, in many communities they have not developed a healthy working relationship. Much focus has been given to the oppressed 'civil society', however, there has been a long history of ratepayers organisations within white communities as well. These have in many cases successfully held councillors accountable and pressured government to deliver services. It would be valuable to assess how the changes since 1994 have affected these bodies and consider what their strengths have been in the previous period. This could help to inform the relationships that are unfolding between councillors and civics.

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