

Enhancing Community Participation in the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) Process in South Africa

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Executive Summary

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is an important tool for local government in South Africa, guiding the strategic planning and development of municipalities. Despite its importance, there are structural and operational issues that hinder the IDP's effectiveness, particularly regarding community participation. This policy brief is based on action research conducted as part of the COMPACT programme, and the findings and recommendations are related to a comprehensive chapter on participation in the IDP process, contained in the COMPACT Consolidated Technical Findings Report. The research found challenges in relation to the following: community perceptions and experience of the IDP process; institutional arrangements and coordination; poor organisation of IDP meetings; declining community attendance patterns; and inadequate quality of participation.

The policy brief sets out recommendations to rebuild trust, improve planning outcomes, and ensure that development is people-centred. These include: reframing the IDP as a developmental tool and encouraging a participation culture; deepening how community participation is measured; improving institutional coordination; enhancing communication and transparency; increasing youth engagement in the IDP process; improving meeting accessibility, inclusivity and quality; strengthening civic education; institutionalising community feedback and monitoring; and strengthening collaboration between stakeholders to improve participation.

1. Introduction

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is an important tool for local government in South Africa, guiding the strategic planning and development of municipalities. Despite its importance, there are structural and operational issues that hinder the IDP's effectiveness, particularly regarding community participation. Community participation is the active and meaningful involvement of citizens in the planning, decision-making and implementation of development initiatives. In the context of local government, community participation serves as a means through which communities can influence policies, express their needs, and hold public officials accountable. It is a process meant to empower communities to become co-creators of development, rather than passive recipients of services.

In the context of the IDP process, participation is both a constitutional right and a developmental imperative. Unfortunately, in South African municipalities the IDP participation process is often reduced to a compliance or 'tick-box' exercise, with limited meaningful community engagement. There is a high level of community dissatisfaction due to unmet promises and lack of service delivery in municipalities, particularly in informal settlements where residents feel neglected and face difficulties with accessing basic services. This policy brief draws on action research from the COMPACT programme to propose strategies for enhancing community participation in the IDP process.¹ It positions community participation not only as a legal requirement but as a prerequisite for successful local governance and service delivery. As one community member explained: "They should involve us and, hear us in everything we do or asked for, because the municipality is the community and without the community there is no municipality." Community participation is important for policy development, project prioritisation, oversight and monitoring, and building trust between communities and municipalities. While this policy brief focuses on community participation in the IDP process, COMPACT has also produced policy briefs on strengthening ward committees and on improving communication in municipalities.

2. Background and Context

The Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process is a legislated process that produces a five-year strategic plan for a municipal area. It is intended to align municipal planning with community needs and national and provincial development goals. The IDP is meant to be participatory, inclusive and responsive. The Local Government: Municipal Systems Act provides for public participation in local government, requiring municipalities to develop mechanisms for public participation in their decision-making processes, including the development of the IDPs and budgets.

This policy brief is based on action research conducted as part of the COMPACT programme.² Between 2022 and 2024, COMPACT conducted research in two phases. The first phase included interviews and focus groups with over 370 participants from 12 municipalities, including mayors, speakers, municipal managers, senior managers, municipal officials, ward councillors, and ward committee members. The second phase involved citizen engagement workshops with over 260 community leaders, ward committee members, and representatives from civil society and community-based organisations across the 12 partner municipalities. COMPACT also conducted observations of IDP meetings in several municipalities. In terms of the research findings, six key thematic areas were identified: IDP public participation process, ward committees, communication, operational planning, performance management, and the political-administrative interface. Lessons learned from the ongoing development and piloting of tools as part of the COMPACT Toolbox are also provided.

¹ COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa: A Consolidated Technical Findings Report on Action Research at 12 Local Municipalities: <https://pari.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/COMPACT-Consolidated-Technical-Findings-Report-FINAL-November-2024.pdf>

² The COMPACT programme is a partnership between the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI), the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and Integrity Action (IA) co-funded by the European Union. COMPACT works with 12 partner local municipalities across 6 provinces in South Africa. The programme has the goal of enhancing local government planning and accountability through public participation. The specific objective is that public participation in municipal planning processes is meaningful and contributes to service delivery which better meets all citizens more especially low-income residents' socio-economic needs. See <https://pari.org.za/compact/>

3. Research Findings

The COMPACT action research made several findings in relation to community participation in the IDP process in South Africa.³ These are related to the following: community perceptions and experience of the IDP process; institutional arrangements and coordination; poor organisation of IDP meetings; declining community attendance patterns; and inadequate quality of participation.

3.1. Community Perceptions and Experience of the IDP Process

Community members largely perceive the IDP process as a compliance exercise rather than meaningful engagement, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and frustration. Residents, particularly those in informal settlements, report feeling neglected and expressed deep frustration over unfulfilled promises and inadequate access to basic services. The participation process is often viewed as tokenistic, with decisions already made before community input is sought, while IDPs frequently fail to reflect the priorities expressed by communities during consultations. Communities also report limited transparency, with poor access to budget and planning information and no feedback mechanisms to inform them how their inputs are used or incorporated into final plans. This ineffective community participation leaves residents feeling excluded from decisions that directly affect their daily lives and wellbeing.

3.2. Institutional Arrangements and Coordination

Community participation in the IDP process is significantly hampered by poor coordination between key municipal institutions, including the IDP Office, Office of the Speaker, and other departments. There are also challenges with coordination across local, district, provincial and national government in terms of planning. This institutional fragmentation creates barriers to effective community engagement, as residents often receive conflicting information or face bureaucratic obstacles when attempting to participate meaningfully in the planning process. The weak participation of external stakeholders, such as sector departments, further limits communities' ability to engage with the full range of services and development issues that affect them. While internal municipal stakeholders generally fulfil their mandated roles according to legislative

requirements, their limited capacity often translates into inadequate support for community participation initiatives, resulting in rushed consultations, insufficient outreach to marginalised communities, and poorly facilitated public meetings that fail to capture the full spectrum of community needs and priorities.

The IDP Representative Forums and ward committees in municipalities are participatory structures established to promote inclusive governance and ensure that community voices are integrated into municipal planning. IDP Representative Forums are designed to bring together a broad spectrum of stakeholders - including civil society, business, and community-based organisations (CBOs) - to engage in discussions, negotiate priorities, and monitor the development and implementation of the IDP. These forums are intended to serve as platforms for consensus-building and collaborative decision-making, ensuring that the IDP reflects the diverse interests of the municipality. Ward committees are tasked with facilitating direct community input by organising localised planning processes and linking ward-level priorities to broader municipal strategies. However, both structures face significant challenges that hinder their effectiveness. Ward committees are often politicised, with party interests overshadowing genuine community representation, while IDP Representative Forums frequently suffer from limited capacity, poor coordination, and inconsistent participation. These issues undermine the credibility and functionality of these participatory structures and highlight the need for institutional support, depoliticisation, and capacity-building to ensure these structures fulfil their intended democratic and developmental roles.

3.3. Poor Organisation of IDP Meetings

The organisation of IDP meetings is often hindered by significant barriers to meaningful community participation, with short notice advertising and ineffective communication methods resulting in consistently poor attendance. Meetings are frequently scheduled at inconvenient times and held in locations that are difficult for residents to access, particularly affecting working community members, parents with young children, and those without reliable transportation. These logistical challenges are compounded by inadequate communication strategies that fail to reach diverse community groups, with many residents learning about meetings only after they have occurred or receiving information through channels they do not

³ COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa, pp. 25-84.

regularly access. The combination of poor timing, inaccessible venues, and ineffective outreach fundamentally undermines the inclusivity of the IDP process, as those most in need of municipal services - including residents of informal settlements and marginalised communities - are often the least able to overcome these participation barriers, resulting in planning processes that fail to capture the voices and needs of the most vulnerable community members.

3.4 Declining Community Attendance Patterns

Community participation in IDP processes has been significantly undermined by declining attendance patterns, particularly among youth who feel disconnected from municipal planning processes that fail to address their specific needs and aspirations. This decline in participation stems largely from communities' growing fatigue with "empty promises" and the persistent lack of implementation of projects that were prioritised in previous IDP consultations, creating a cycle where residents lose faith in the process and withdraw their participation. The erosion of trust has been particularly damaging to sustained community engagement, as residents who have repeatedly shared their priorities and concerns without seeing tangible results become increasingly reluctant to invest time and energy in what they perceive as ineffective consultation processes. Despite this disillusionment, community members paradoxically call for more frequent public meetings throughout the year to engage on key issues, suggesting that their desire for meaningful participation remains strong but requires a fundamental shift toward more responsive and accountable municipal planning processes that demonstrate genuine commitment to translating community inputs into concrete service delivery improvements.

3.5. Inadequate Quality of Participation

The quality of community participation in IDP processes is severely compromised by municipal failures to facilitate meaningful engagement, with meetings frequently deteriorating into complaint sessions where residents air grievances without receiving constructive responses or actionable solutions from municipal officials. This dynamic is further exacerbated by language barriers that exclude significant portions of the community from meaningful participation, as meetings are often conducted in languages that do not reflect the linguistic diversity of local populations. Communities consistently report that they are not provided with useful information, data, or technical explanations that would enable them to engage substantively with municipal planning decisions, leaving residents to participate based on incomplete understanding of budgetary constraints, technical requirements, or implementation timelines. Community members feel that they are being "talked down to" by municipal representatives.

The lack of meaningful municipal feedback during and after consultations further undermines participation quality, as officials often fail to explain how community inputs will be considered, what limitations exist, or how priorities will be balanced against available resources. These participation challenges are compounded by systemic municipal weaknesses, including insufficient community participation strategies, inadequate resource allocation for meaningful engagement processes, and a lack of essential planning and facilitation skills among officials responsible for managing community consultations, ultimately creating a cycle where poor-quality participation leads to ineffective planning and further community disengagement. Community members called for the participation of municipal officials at meetings, and not just ward councillors or political representatives, as they are able to explain service delivery related issues to them.

4. Recommendations for Enhancing Community Participation in the IDP Process

The COMPACT research has made several recommendations to improve community participation in the IDP process and ensure these voices shape service delivery and development in municipalities.⁴ These recommendations are related to: reframing the IDP as a developmental tool and encouraging a participation culture; deepening how community participation is measured; improving institutional coordination; enhancing communication and transparency; increasing youth engagement in the IDP process; improving meeting accessibility, inclusivity and quality; strengthening civic education; institutionalising community feedback and monitoring; and strengthening collaboration between stakeholders to improve participation.

4.1. Reframing the IDP as a Developmental Tool and Encouraging a Participation Culture

Transforming community participation requires shifting the IDP from a compliance-driven exercise to a genuine developmental and participatory planning tool that prioritises community needs. This transformation must be supported by comprehensive civic education and awareness campaigns that promote meaningful participation and help communities understand how their inputs directly influence municipal planning and service delivery. Municipalities must move beyond meeting minimum legislative requirements to actively fostering an environment where community participation is valued and integrated into all planning stages, demonstrating that community voices matter and that participation leads to tangible improvements in residents' lives. Public participation needs to be properly resourced and supported by municipalities. There is also a need for municipalities to ensure that officials involved in public participation are adequately trained to engage with the communities. Shifting the culture in municipalities requires political will from the top, and an intentional focus on including citizens and community groups in development.

4.2. Deepening How Community Participation is Measured

There are challenges with the manner that municipalities are measuring community participation, with current methods offering only a shallow approach to monitoring how well a municipality is doing on involving communities in municipal affairs. COMPACT has developed a Community Participation Index which has six dimensions, including one on community participation in the IDP process (a case study has also been developed in terms of the development and piloting of the index). The indicators related to this dimension are around the following issues: IDP process plan; IDP Representative Forum; community-based planning; public meetings; advertising of IDP meetings/engagement opportunities; organisation and accessibility of meetings; purpose of meetings; attendance of community; stakeholder engagement; language; attendance of officials at meetings; quality of participation in meetings; and minutes of meetings. The indicators are framed as normative statements based on legislative and policy requirements, and comprehensive descriptions are provided. The index provides a basis from which municipalities can assess how well they are doing in terms of community participation.

4.3. Improving Institutional Coordination

Effective community participation requires strengthening collaboration between the IDP Office, Office of the Speaker, and line departments to ensure coordinated and coherent engagement with communities. The IDP Steering Committee in a municipality must include both political and administrative leadership to facilitate integrated decision-making and eliminate the institutional fragmentation that currently creates barriers to meaningful community engagement. This coordinated approach ensures that communities receive consistent information, face fewer bureaucratic obstacles when participating, and can engage with the full range of municipal services and development issues that affect their daily lives. Ward committees need more support and resourcing to undertake the necessary work of encouraging and facilitating community participation in municipalities.

⁴ COMPACT (2024) Public Participation and Municipal Planning in South Africa, pp. 137-140.

4.4. Enhancing Communication and Transparency

Improving community participation requires using both traditional ('old school') and digital ('new school') methods to advertise IDP meetings, ensuring broader reach across diverse community segments. Municipalities must provide meeting agendas and accessible summaries of IDP documents in local languages to enable meaningful engagement, while establishing regular feedback loops that inform communities about how their inputs influenced decisions and the progress of implementation. This transparency builds trust and demonstrates accountability, encouraging sustained community participation by showing residents that their voices are heard, and their contributions lead to tangible outcomes in municipal planning and service delivery. Importantly, digital methods of engaging communities are not a replacement for in-person meetings but should rather complement these spaces.

4.5. Increasing Youth Engagement in the IDP Process

Reversing declining youth participation requires developing targeted strategies that actively involve young people through school-based IDP education programmes and dedicated youth-focused forums that address their specific concerns and aspirations. Municipalities must prioritise youth-relevant issues such as unemployment, skills development, and recreational facilities within IDP planning processes, demonstrating that young people's voices are valued and their needs are central to municipal development priorities. This targeted approach helps rebuild youth confidence in local governance while ensuring that future community leaders develop the civic knowledge and engagement skills necessary for sustained democratic participation.

4.6. Improving Meeting Accessibility, Inclusivity and Quality

Meaningful community participation requires scheduling IDP meetings at convenient times and accessible venues that accommodate working residents, parents, and those without reliable transportation. Municipalities must provide transport assistance and appropriate support for people with disabilities and residents in remote areas, while avoiding the clustering of wards to ensure localised engagement that reflects specific community needs and priorities. These accessibility measures are essential for inclusive participation, ensuring that the most vulnerable and marginalised community members - who often have the greatest need for municipal services - can meaningfully contribute to planning processes that directly affect their lives.

There are opportunities around improving the methods and practices of public participation in municipalities, and there are various approaches that could substantially improve the participation process. Municipalities should consider a ward-based planning approach that is not only concerned with identifying the development needs and challenges in the ward but is also in finding ward-generated and ward-driven solutions. Everyone in the ward participates in community-based planning. As a result, all stakeholders bring together their wealth of knowledge in identifying and analysing the development requirements of their ward, seek viable and sustainable solutions and work together to mobilise resources to implement their proposed solutions.

4.7. Strengthening Civic Education

Enhancing community participation requires conducting ongoing civic education that informs residents about the IDP process, stakeholder roles, and practical ways communities can influence municipal planning and decision-making. Municipalities must utilise ward committees and community-based organisations (CBOs) as key channels for disseminating information, ensuring that civic education reaches diverse community segments and builds the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful engagement. Jargon-free information in local languages should be widely accessible. COMPACT has developed an accessible guide that sets out the different phases of the IDP process, as well as a poster that visually represents the process (together with the roles of all stakeholders and timeframes). A sustained educational approach helps communities understand not only their rights to participate but also how to effectively articulate their needs, navigate municipal processes, and hold local government accountable for responsive service delivery.

4.8. Institutionalising Community Feedback and Monitoring

Meaningful community participation requires developing robust mechanisms for tracking community inputs and providing regular reports back to residents on implementation progress, challenges and outcomes. Municipalities should utilise ward committee reports and community monitoring tools (like COMPACT's CBM approach) to inform ongoing IDP reviews, creating transparent accountability systems that demonstrate how community priorities are being addressed and where challenges exist. This institutionalised feedback approach builds trust by showing communities that their participation leads to tangible results while providing valuable data for improving future planning processes and service delivery outcomes.

4.9. Strengthening Collaboration Between Stakeholders to Improve Participation

Municipalities should be promoting collaboration between all relevant stakeholders, including senior politicians, ward councillors, municipal officials, ward committees, civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based structures, and community members. Collaboration is a deep form of participation defined as the pooling of different stakeholders and their skills, knowledge and resources to achieve innovative responses and solutions in response to a common challenge that none can address on their own. The COMPACT Local Government Collaboration Model provides one entry point to implementing a more collaborative governance approach between stakeholders. A case study has been developed on the model, as well as a facilitation guide for those who would like to implement collaboration workshops in a municipality. Municipalities should prioritise clear communication channels, co-planning, and multi-stakeholder engagement sessions that promote transparency and accountability. Stronger collaboration can help restore trust, improve responsiveness, and enhance the overall quality of public participation at ward level.

5. Conclusion

The IDP process holds significant potential to transform local governance and service delivery in South Africa. However, this potential can only be realised through genuine, inclusive, and transparent community participation. Municipalities need to move from a compliance-orientated approach to public participation and move to one where proper bottom-up ward-based planning takes place and impact is felt in communities. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this policy brief, municipalities can rebuild trust, improve planning outcomes, and ensure that development is people-centred.

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