

Reflecting on 20 years of Public Participation from 1994-2014

Roundtable hosted by the Gauteng Legislature, 3 March 2015

Notes taken by IAP2 Southern Africa

IAP2SA was recently invited to attend a roundtable hosted by the Gauteng Legislature on 3 March 2015. The Theme for the day: “Reflecting on 20 years of Public Participation from 1994- 2014”.

The roundtable was attended by official delegates from the Legislature, officials from the Department of the Public Protector's office, as well as representatives from various NGO and civil society organisations.

Participants were given a platform to engage on the following questions:

- What is meaningful public participation?
- What are the preconditions for meaningful public participation?
- How should meaningful public participation be conducted?
- What are the noticeable achievements to be celebrated in terms of public participation?
- What are the current deficits of public participation?
- Way forward in the area of public participation.

Outcomes of the discussion

Participants were in agreement that Public participation is crucial to allow civil society to voice their opinions and be able to influence the decisions made by Government.

Since 1994, South Africans have been provided the ability to participate and have been able to express their freedom due to a democratic society sphere.

However, there are still a number of significant barriers to effective public participation. These include:

- **Language barriers** – most public documents are made available in one language, English, and the technical jargon in particular limits effective commenting by civil society;
- **Time constraints of meetings organized** – Most of the community members or public meetings are held during the week and in the morning to limit community involvement. This violates the rights of people to speak as per the Constitution of our country;

- **Limited ability to influence outcomes** – Communities most often are requested to participate in IDP processes when decisions have already been taken by the Government and no feedback is provided after all these processes have taken place;
- **Loss of trust** – There has been so much violence, protesting and dissatisfactory situations due to the lack of trust in the State. People have lost faith that the State can meet their needs, due to empty promises, nepotism, corruption etc.

Recommendations made by participants, including IAP2 SA

1. Legislature public participation processes must be open more to civil society and the principals who make decisions must also be part of the Forums to engage with communities without fear of intimidation.
2. Public Participation must be combined with Public Education. Civil society must be educated in these processes and be allowed to express their views.
3. Listening and implementation is important. Civil society burn infrastructure and undertake proteste as they are frustrated. By doing so they hope that they will be heard.
4. More reporting and monitoring of IDP processes must be implemented.
5. Our situation of lack of public participation is not peculiar to SA. Other countries around the world are experiencing even more. We must appreciate the platform and there are good public participation processes that have been held and have led to community upliftment.
6. Definitions need to be clearer, e.g. P2 compared with Community Engagement vs Consultation.
7. What is needed is collaborative P2 process design needing 50% of the time and budget.

The next session will be held in April 2015