Globalisation and the Paradox of Participatory Governance in Southern Africa: The case of South Africa

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Towards the close of the 20th century, developing countries, including those in the Southern African region, are being urged by international development agencies and academics from across the political spectrum to embrace participatory democracy, while at the same time liberalising their economies as the only solution to the political and economic problems. Participatory democracy is seen as a means to overcome governmental deficits, reduce information gaps, build consensus around policy, lead to smoother implementation of state policies, ensure accountability and transparency in governance, as well as enhances the credibility and sustainability of programmes, and would enhance their global competitiveness.

The debate on economic liberalisation and participatory are thus far being cast in positive terms and by so doing, its contradictory dynamics are being overlooked. This resonates in the Southern African region in general and South Africa in particular, where the democratic government is being urged to liberalise the economic and promote participatory democracy in order to make the economy globally competitive and to improve the standard of living of South Africans, especially the previously disadvantaged communities. This is at a time when the role of the state as a provider of social insurance is being reduced and is becoming more responsive to the private sector. At the same time, given South African history of political and economic marginalisation of blacks, there is a need to ensure greater participation of citizens in governance. In addition, there is an expectation that the government intervene in the economic to reduce social exclusion, meeting its democratic commitments to the electorate (especially blacks) and reduce income and wealth inequalities along racial lines. What are the inherent conflicts between neoliberal economic reforms and participatory governance that the government is simultaneously pursuing?

This paper aimed to:

• Explore the tensions and contradictions of participatory democracy in the context of globalisation in the new South Africa;

• Interrogate the links between neo-liberal economic reforms and the participatory democracy in South Africa. In particular, it will explore the question whether or not participatory democracy is inherently democratic and development enhancing.

In the basis of the analysis, the paper will explore an alternative scenario that will be relevant for policy and academic purposes for South Africa and other developing countries.

However, a fundamental concern in this paper is the inherent conflict between neoliberal economic reforms being pursued in South Africa like the rest of the region and its quest for cooperative governance. In a global world that privileges investors, what hope is there for participatory decision-making? The need to attract foreign investment, liberalise and deregulate national economies, so as to integrate into the global economy, is making states
across the globe more responsive to the needs of private sector and becoming a guarantor of capital accumulation. This has been coupled with the privatisation of public goods.

These developments, the privileging of investor interests and the state withdrawal from its role as provider of social insurance to its population, are likely to strain the relationship between the state and civil society organisations (CSOs), especially labour. On the other hand, the need for the government to reduce social exclusion by meeting its democratic commitments to the electorate through job creation, provision of social services, which require some form of state intervention, is likely to strain the state-business relations with its adverse effects on participatory governance. These conflicting imperatives of globalisation are likely to hamper participatory processes and structures. Is cooperative governance able to deal with the real political conflicts and its sources? These are questions that beg to be answered.