

## **Measuring change – Gender in the daily work of councils**

*“Sometimes being in local government is like being on a battlefield with no ammunition.”*

- Cecilia McNab-Sherally, Deputy Mayor, Rehoboth, Namibia

Inadequate lights, bins and sanitation; poor roads; illegal shebeens; meetings held in English which residents do not understand; a market day that they do not have enough information on; lack of economic opportunities and access to finance: These and many more issues packed the agenda of the consultation between the Windhoek municipality and women of Katutura, the former black township and largest high density suburb of the Namibian capital on 25 October 2006.

One of a series of “meet the community” meetings organised twice a year by the council, the meeting offered an illuminating window on the concerns of women on the ground as well as the challenges confronting councillors. In April the council meets to engage with the constituents and to collect their concerns. In October the councillors report back on the issues raised in the previous meeting.

Two councillors, Mwadhina Veico of the South West Africa Peoples Organisation (Swapo Party) and Werner Claasen of United Democratic Front (UDF) addressed the well attended meeting at the Katutura’s Women’s Centre.

At the previous meeting in April residents had raised concerns about the failure to translate City documents into local languages. Although English is the official language in Namibia, very few speak this as a first language (see Chapter two). Community members especially wanted the monthly newsletter “ALOE” to be translated because it contains a lot of information on the municipality and issues that affect the public.

The councillors agreed but cited budget constraints as the main reason for not translating all information into local languages. Councillors could not give the criteria for translating information. They said that they needed to consult with the City’s management committee and provide feedback at a later date. Sceptical residents cautioned that the City should not increase its fees to the public to subsidise the translation. They stressed that the City needed to find other, less expensive, ways of distributing information to residents in mediums that they understood.

The importance of being inclusive surfaced in the discussion on the market day being planned for November. Pensioners asked how they would benefit as they have no projects to produce goods for sale. Others raised the concern that they had no skills or experience in running such projects; some could not even read or write. There were questions about transport, safety and security. Some even complained about the short notice given.

The councillors explained that the market day was a pilot project and that next year it would be better organised and that they would structure the event to include all senior citizens. The City Police present at the meeting assured the public that there would be tight security at the venue. The councillors advised that they would inform the participants about the transport arrangements through the media.

Several questions concerned trade licenses for businesses such as shebeens; self employment and income generating projects run by women. They complained that women, who form the bulk of informal traders in the country, do not have enough information on how to go about applying for licenses to run businesses. They reiterated that much of this information is distributed in English, which they do not understand. The women lashed out at banking institutions which they say discriminate against women when they apply for loans. The procedures, they said, are onerous and banking institutions are inaccessible for women; as one participant put it: "They only look after those who have and not the "have not's".

The issue of poor sanitation in settlements dominated the meeting. Further concerns included insufficient rubbish bins; this is a health hazard because the settlements are dirty as a result of residents dumping refuse anywhere. They requested that the City provide more bins.

On water and electricity the residents complained that they can't afford some of the services provided by the City. They complained about the faulty billing system; overcharging and instances in which they had not received their bills. Councillors noted that the fact that many residents don't have post office boxes makes it difficult for the council to maintain contact. Residents complained about the long distances they have to travel to reach the municipal offices to enquire about their bills. Councillors gave the residents information on customer care centres in the City that they could go to for assistance.



**Umjindi Water and electricity project**

Photo: Nontobeko Dlamini

Other issues raised included roads and infrastructure and the fact that there were no lights in certain areas, posing a safety risk especially in the settlements where crime rates are high. The residents requested that the City and police to do something about this situation. The residents also raised the need for bridges so that all zones are accessible, especially during the rainy season when school children suffer. Residents expressed their hope that the City would remedy the situation before the next rains.

Participants felt that Katutura is neglected despite the fact that all residents pay for services rendered by the municipality. Constituents wanted to know the difference between the rates being paid by Katutura residents and those being paid by residents in the more affluent former white suburbs. The councillors avoided giving specific details which annoyed the mainly female audience.

The meeting should have ended with the election of a zone committee to act on behalf of the residents and forward their concerns to the City. The councillors noted that

residents should not wait for many months before their concerns are taken care of and expressed the hope that this committee would take up the challenges faced by residents. However, the election of office bearers did not take place as many participants had left the meeting by the time the meeting ended.

Welcome to a fairly typical meeting between a predominantly women audience and their councillors in a Southern African city; a meeting that speaks volumes about the high levels of expectation on the ground; the frustrations over historical legacies and backlogs in poor townships; and the apparent inability of local authorities to address many of even the most basic of these concerns.