

**EXCO MEETS THE PEOPLE IN THE FREE STATE:
A WINDOW DRESSING EXERCISE?**

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ABSTRACT

The new democratic political dispensation has posed numerous challenges and opportunities to both the government communication system and government communicators specifically. The democratic breakthrough of 1994 signaled, among other matters, an ANC government commitment to create space for members of the public to participate in building the new democratic South African state. Communication has thus been viewed as a strategic element of service delivery. Government has created a number of opportunities and structures to pursue the commitment that this accountability and interaction takes place. These include the Presidential Izimbizo and Exco Meets the People (sometimes referred to as the Provincial Izimbizo). For the purpose of this article, the concept of Exco Meets the People is used interchangeably as meaning a communication method by the Free State ANC government as well as referring to a provincial gathering organised by the Directorate of Policy Unit in the Office of the Premier. The article uses field research as the main historical research methodology. This method was helpful to ascertain the impact of Exco Meets the People to the targeted communities, and to determine the views of such communities with regard to this communication method.

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INTRODUCTION

The current context of government communication takes cue from the constitutional imperative of freedom of information founded on the objectives to make a visible shift from the apartheid state to a democratic state. The free flow of information, open dialogue, openness and accountability and media freedom are all fundamental tenets of a thriving democracy. This compels government to ensure that it maintains a continued interaction with the citizenry. This communication guarantees an informed and appropriate response to people's needs in order to enable all South Africans to become active and conscious participants in the process of social transformation. It also ensures that government is sensitive to the needs of the people.

In the Free State, when the ANC-led government came into power in 1994, political leaders in the province expressed concern that government achievements were receiving limited media coverage. The leaders alleged that, although there was media coverage, it was viewed as inadequate as it mainly concentrated on the existing factionalism, which was dubbed the "North" and the "South" divide of the ruling party in the Free State. They argued that misunderstanding between these two groups was given media coverage at the expense of service delivery that was taking place in the province. In 1998, the provincial government implemented *Exco Meets the People* (Executive Council meets the people) as a method to advance its course of communicating with citizens on the planning, implementation and successes of its programmes. Although it was pioneered by the ANC-led government, one would have expected this communication method to be apolitical. However, it is evident in this article that it turned out to be more political rather than consultative as it was made to appear.

Exco Meets the People was introduced in view of the reality that, since the Free State is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa, a large group of its inhabitants could not access the limited government information through mass media forms such as radio and television. One is of an opinion that it is from this adage that the Free State government decided on the implementation of this method of communication.

The article attempts to analyse the impact the *Exco Meets the People* communication method had on the livelihood of the Free State communities. The author argues that although the initial attempt of implementing *Exco Meets the People* was welcomed by the Free State communities, it is clear that it is a controversial issue in the province. *Exco Meets the People* is not only used to provide a platform for the provincial government's senior officials to consult their communities on difficult issues and to jointly make proposals on how to resolve them, but also for other political motives such as to mobilise followers for political objectives and to justify political actions of the ruling party. The article further argues that, if this method was effective in the province, violent protests in the townships like Intabazwe (Harrismith), Ezenzeleni (Warden), Thembalihle (Vrede), and Petsana (Reitz) could have been avoided. This is an indication that there is a communication gap between government agencies and communities with regard to the dissemination of information about the activities of the

government. This communication enables the pressure groups in the above-mentioned townships to organise, publicise and mobilise more effectively against the leadership of the ANC government in the province.

THE PRESIDENTIAL IZIMBIZO vs EXCO MEETS THE PEOPLE

Imbizo (plural *izimbizo*) is a Zulu concept for a traditional community gathering held to solve pertinent community issues. Jeffrey Mabelebele of the University of Limpopo argues that the word *imbizo* has variants in many African languages, such as *pitso* in Sepedi and *kgotla* in Setswana and Sesotho (Mabelebele 2006: 104). In indigenous African communities, the practice of *imbizo* is used to resolve pertinent community challenges through honest engagement between the communities and leadership. *Imbizo* can be interpreted as an indigenous folk medium, which allows people to use theatrical forms of communication to express their views on development plans, something which radio, film, television and print have not yet effectively achieved (Mabelebele 2005: 1).

Ngaike Blakenberg, a graduate of Carleton University, argues that in traditional African village structures, the concerns, ideas and opinions of all the people are able to occupy real space in any public discussion. For effective participation to occur there must be a commitment to freedom of expression. People must be free to speak out and represent their own interests, without fear of repercussions even if their voices are dissenting (Blakenberg 1999: 44-46). Blakenberg's sentiments were echoed by Pieter Duvenage in his article *Habermas, the public sphere and beyond* that the public sphere plays an important role in advancing forward the interests of the communities (Duvenage 2005: 3-7).

Imbizo, in its traditional form, has constituted an important aspect of the African political system for many centuries, including South Africa. It was only during the presidential term of Thabo Mbeki that the concept was revived to a position of importance in the contemporary lexicon and formal governance setting. As a result, in October 2001, Cabinet decided that – following the president's State of the Nation address – it will engage in the *izimbizo* as a communication method, using the same approach as in traditional *izimbizo*. As a folk medium, *imbizo* is rooted within the cultural milieu of the people who participate in it. Netshitomboni argues in his thesis, *Managing participatory development communication: The case for the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS)*, that this traditional approach was adopted by the ANC government because it was viewed as the best practice regarding consultative governance (Netshitomboni 2007: 126).

Long before the introduction and implementation of the *Presidential Izimbizo*, the Free State provincial government had embarked on the *Exco Meets the People* communication method – as early as 1998. The main aim of *Exco Meets the People* was to provide a platform for communities to raise their problems and concerns with senior government officials like the premier, mayors, and the members of the executive council (MECs). Different provinces adopted different names for such a

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communication method with the communities – in the Northern Cape this communication method is known as *The Cabinet Meets the People* (*Diamond Fields Advertiser* 2003: 16). In the Eastern Cape, it is known as *Masithethisane* (come, let's talk together).

Exco Meets the People as a method of communication became the forerunner of the *Presidential Izimbizo* based on the same principles. *Izimbizo* are conducted on two levels, namely the *Presidential Izimbizo* and the *National Izimbizo*. The *Presidential Izimbizo* are designed to allow the president of the country to interact with communities. On the other hand, the *National Izimbizo* allow ministers, premiers, MECs and local councillors to listen and respond to the problems raised by the communities.

Unlike *izimbizo*, *Exco Meets the People* is a forum spearheaded by the premier to enhance dialogue and interaction between senior provincial government executives and communities. Interaction through this method provides an opportunity for the provincial government to communicate its action programme and the progress being made directly to the people. Both the *Presidential Izimbizo* and *Exco Meets the People* communication methods require planning that involves extensive communication with the people in the area to be visited. In the Free State province, this communication method was initiated towards the end of Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri's term in office (1998), but was only fully deployed during the period of Winkie Direko's term as premier (1999-2004). To date, *Exco Meets the People* is still used in the Free State province.

NECESSITY OF USING EXCO MEETS THE PEOPLE

While the Constitution of South Africa amply provides for the right to access information, and the related Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000 is recognised as among the best in the world, there are drawbacks that negatively affect access. Firstly, the difficult procedure in accessing information and the prescribed fees certainly hinder access to poor people. Secondly, the exemption in the Act which hinges upon national security becomes a convenient loophole for the government to exploit when it does not want to release information which may have nothing or little to do with government security. Thirdly, the blanket exclusion of all Cabinet records is a reprehensible exemption and seriously undermines public openness, transparency and access. Section 40 of the Act inappropriately allows the government to be secretive about details in the policy-making process. This is the most contradictory aspect of the Act because it restricts access to what is arguably the most important area of government transparency and accountability to the public. Arguments such as these provided the impetus for the Free State provincial government to introduce the *Exco Meets the People* to interact with the communities.

Although interaction with the communities was deemed important, *Exco Meets the People* required, inter alia, that the ANC provincial government firmly entrench its hegemony in all sectors of the provincial community. It had to maintain close contact with the community members who in the majority voted it into power. This was echoed

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by De Villiers (2003:1), quoting Joel Netshitenzhe, Head of the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services (PCAS): “The participation of citizens in formulating decisions that affect them is most desirable. It is desirable to bring government to the man in the street.” However, the realisation of this goal would depend on the success of the communication methods used.

In the Free State, for example, *Exco Meets the People* Focus Weeks are held whereby the premier, mayors, MECs, and local councillors interact directly with communities at grassroots level. One of the key objectives of the premier’s visits is to see for himself/herself some of the challenges that ordinary citizens are grappling with, including the conditions under which ordinary people live. According to Alec Moemi, Chief Director in the Office of the Premier, there are five core issues of importance of *Exco Meets the People*, namely to highlight the following: government programme of action; achievements and progress being made by government; challenges facing government; clarifying government’s position on various transverse matters; and highlighting government expectations on envisaged partnerships with communities in development work (Personal interview with M.E. Moemi, 16 August 2007). Such a forum gives communities an opportunity to raise their concerns and suggestions directly with the premier in the presence of MECs, mayors and others. In this way, ordinary people are able to hold the three spheres of government accountable and to a certain extent influence governance and service delivery. *Exco meets the people* gatherings are held regularly in order to ensure that community problems are addressed as they emerge.

While still serving as Premier of the Free State, Winkie Direko started off with formally explaining the importance of developing the participatory character of communication within the provincial government. According to Direko, the provincial government had to speed up a method of communicating with the communities face to face. She argued that this would highlight the need for active participation and critical assessment of service delivery by communities within a democratic framework (Personal interview with I.W. Direko, 5 June 2003). Strom, in research conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), later echoed the same sentiments by stating that: “When democracy is conceived too narrowly, as simply the work of government, citizens become marginalised and democracy seems to revolve around politicians. When citizens are placed at the centre, everything looks different” (Strom 2004: 1).

Addressing the community of Luckhoff and Bethulie in the Xhariep district from 10-11 October 2002, Direko had the following to say about the *Exco Meets the People*:

Driven by strong principles of interactive governance and the resolve to take government to the people, my Executive Council took the decision to engage in an intensive programme to interact with the different communities of the Free State. Our President, Mr Thabo Mbeki, has encouraged us to work towards effective, transparent and cooperative government that is inclusive and that ensures efficient service delivery. The *Exco Meets the People* campaign has taken us across the five

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districts of our province. We have been able to visit different towns in these districts. The comments, questions and concerns that we have received through this campaign have enabled us to be more considerate and strategic when planning on socio-economic development issues (Direko 2002: 1).

It is clear from this statement that the provincial government wanted to achieve popular control over decision-makers that would ultimately end poverty, minimize unemployment and homelessness, and restore human dignity to the Free State communities.

Exco Meets the People makes it possible to create a distinction between four levels of information, generated at the community engagements. The first includes issues of a more general nature relating to provincial and national policy issues, for example the question of unemployment where opinions expressed forms part of the general policy conversation. The second level of information relates to individual issues such as an individual's experience with reporting crime, or problems surrounding access to social grants. The third level of information involves the status policy implementation such as the rate at which houses are built, or access to basic needs like clean water. The fourth level of information is feedback and evaluation on whether government initiatives are achieving what the communities expect. From the above description of the programme setting, as well as the actual event, it is clear that participation by various levels of government, including community members, becomes a central activity to which many can contribute and listen.

One may argue that at face value, *Exco Meets the People* is presented by the Free State provincial government as a communication method to deepen participatory democracy and public participation, especially for the poor. It is clear from this campaign that the ANC-led provincial government is able to popularise and give practical meaning to its long-held ideological positions. Direko argued that, through the use of this communication method, the ANC government intended to keep its ideologies alive in the consciousness of the communities in the province (Direko 2003).

This author argues that although this communication method plays a significant role in promoting communication between government structures and the communities, in the Free State this method goes far beyond being a mere method of communication. It also entails gathering a rich body of information that can be used to inform future policy decision-making processes and to improve the management of implementation. One notable fact is that it appears that this method is used to strengthen the ideological positions of government and the ruling party amongst the masses. This however qualifies as a rapid and cost effective way of policy evaluation that could potentially lead to policy change, cancellation thereof or even the introduction of new items on the policy agenda. It has all the potential to qualify as effective method for instilling people-centred governance and making people understand how a democratic government works.

In the Free State, the success of this communication method contributed towards the drafting of the Free State Development Plan (FSDP). This three-year plan identifies five key areas that the provincial government focuses on in order to better the lives of all Free State citizens. These areas include: economic development and job creation; providing sustainable infrastructure development; investing in people development; ensuring a safe and secure environment; and effective co-operative governance. Through *Exco Meets the People*, the FSDP was promoted amongst the communities. Communities were encouraged to become involved in the implementation of this plan through various projects and programmes outlined in it (*Free State Government News* 2002: 4).

Another notable factor about this communication method is that the actual day on which the *Exco meets the people* takes place is usually regarded as a day of large scale community interaction with the premier. This could be anything from visiting schools for educational purposes, to attending events such as empowerment projects. During the official *Exco Meets the People* gathering, the premier, as well as MECs and preferably also councillors of specific local governments, are present to assist resolving issues raised by community members and following up on undertakings given during the meeting. These arrangements facilitate communication across language barriers and assist in giving confidence to any member of the public to pose questions in his/her home language to the government officials, or explain issues that they deem to be important.

One advantage of using this communication method is that it is not orchestrated, and that any local community member present is free to take part. After a set of questions have been asked or comments have been made, the premier requests the MECs to assist or comment on specific cases. If issues cannot be dealt with, they are taken up after the meeting on a formal basis by the Office of the Premier. Issues which require attention are therefore dealt with, and followed up. Relevant individuals and/or affiliated stakeholders are contacted afterwards in order to clarify or understand the specified issue. Another important factor is that, during these gatherings, neither the premier nor the MECs make formal political speeches (Personal interview with Oupa Khoabane, 9 July 2007).

Netshitomboni argues that language usage is one of the determining factors for the success or failure of a particular communication project or campaign. In pre-1994 South Africa, government communication was largely conducted in either English or Afrikaans, at the expense of other African languages. The dawn of democracy necessitated a paradigm shift from the exclusive use of English and Afrikaans to the recognition and use African languages (Netshitomboni 2007: 166). Although the South African Constitution recognizes the previously marginalised African languages there is still a bias towards the use of English in government communication.

This author has noted that, in many of the *Exco Meets the People* campaigns held around the Free State, African languages were predominantly used, except at business

gatherings, which are mostly held in the evenings with the business communities. It is against this background that the use of language in government communication methods like the *Exco Meets the People* should take into consideration the fact that languages carry with it the pride of its speakers because they are able to best articulate their feelings and needs in their own languages. It is important therefore to note that, in order to reach all people, it is necessary to communicate with them using the language they understand. The importance and the preference of the language used is illustrated by the fact that, during Direko's premiership in the Free State, in most of the *Exco Meets the People* she attended, she would spread the HIV/Aids awareness campaign to the communities through her popular warning to girls that: "Banana le seke la iketsa dimatras" (*City Press* 2003: 2). With this slogan, Direko warned girls not to engage in sexual activities and she likened such girls to mattresses.

Through the use of the *Exco Meets the People* campaigns, the provincial government is able to uncover corruption and listen to some of the problems affecting people. During one such gathering held in Memel in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in 2003, Direko discovered that some councillors and teachers were living in RDP houses. Some people had even managed to secure more than one RDP house. It was through such a gathering that she also discovered that people in Memel were still grappling with the bucket system and a shortage of water, despite these services having been budgeted for by the provincial government (*City Press* 2003: 2).

CHALLENGES POSED BY EXCO MEETS THE PEOPLE

Following the local government elections in December 2005, the ANC government acknowledged the weaknesses in local government, which were addressed through the implementation of Project Consolidate, Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and the Provincial Growth and Development Plans (PGDPs). In most municipalities there were communication gaps between councillors and the community, which often resulted in public discourse expressing mass dissatisfaction about non-delivery of services. This situation led to political instability in the approach to local service delivery. This had a detrimental effect on public confidence in local government with regard to capacity to deliver, thus posing the following challenges: dealing with negative perceptions of local government; increasing the profile around the objectives of Project Consolidate; projecting all spheres and programmes of government in an integrated manner; and positively profiling municipalities which are facing service delivery challenges, and those that are performing better. The implementation of a communication method such as *Exco Meets the People* therefore provided the provincial government with an opportunity to meet the people and listen to them.

In view of the fact that this method was initially intended to open communication channels between government and the communities, it is important to note that political developments have affected the functioning of *Exco Meets the People* and its role in community engagement in the Free State. In some parts of the province where traditional leadership is still in existence, the emergence of the elected local

government leaders is seen as a threat amongst other traditional leaders – hence, in some instances this method is perceived as an ANC provincial rally by such leaders (Personal interview with E. Tsebela, 22 September 2007). It is therefore imperative for this communication campaign to take into consideration the cultural paradigms of a community within which such a gathering is to take place. Although a needs analysis is conducted through pre-visits, this analysis focuses only on the political needs of the people without taking their cultural background into account. Such a needs analysis would help to prevent situations in which irrelevant solutions are provided to a particular community, or solutions are provided where a community does not have any serious problems.

It is sometimes through gatherings of this nature that certain members hold the ANC government ransom by threatening not to vote for the ANC if their demands are not met. This dissatisfaction in the province led to the mushrooming of the so-called “concerned groups” who accused the provincial government of not providing adequate services to their communities. These “concerned groups” voiced their dissatisfaction through a series of violent protests in some of the province’s townships.

This author is of an opinion that only black communities are targeted by *Exco Meets the People*. This was disputed by Oupa Khoabane, Deputy Director in the Office of the Premier, when he indicated during an interview that all the community members in the target area are invited, irrespective of racial classification. He further argued that *Exco Meets the People* gatherings are usually preceded by road-shows to schools and project site visits before heading to the venue. In most cases, huge tents are erected to accommodate members of the community (Khoabane 2007).

Although one acknowledges the importance of having pre-visits before that actual *Exco Meets the People* gathering takes place, this allows a subtle power play and domination by the ruling party in shaping consensus and consent in the target group. In most cases, the government officials come to such gatherings with pre-conceived ideas of the expectations of the communities. Therefore the initial aim of interaction between the provincial government officials and the communities targeted disappears, reducing this communication method to one-way communication rather than an intended interaction. This approach therefore creates the impression that this communication method is not about the partnership between the provincial government and the communities, but about government and what it wants to communicate. Consequently, some people have claimed that the *Exco Meets the People* communication method is nothing but a “window dressing exercise” by the provincial government.

Mabelebele (2006: 9) argues that, just like *izimbizo*, the *Exco Meets the People* is also time-bound. It takes the form of a one-time event during which all the participants exchange views and perspectives on issues affecting them as a community. Secondly, it is based on an agreed programme and rules of engagement. Thirdly, it has a defined place and occasion for delivery and regularity (Mabelebele 2006: 9). Another visible shortcoming of using this communication method is the problem of effective

management. Sometimes coordinators become biased when setting the agenda in the *Exco Meets the People* planning phase. At some point, these gatherings are then reduced to platforms for demands and complaints to government officials. This was evident during the *Exco Meets the People* gathering held in the Thembalihle township at Vrede in 2003, during which community members held placards reading: “We need water and houses”; “We don’t need any more meetings”.

Another aspect that frustrated the attendees of such gatherings was the responses given by provincial government officials when asked questions by the public. In Thembalihle, for example, one student from the local high school asked the MEC for Education about the lack of Learning Support Materials (LSMs) in schools. Instead of addressing that problem, the MEC humiliated that student by telling him that during the apartheid era they were not complaining about learning materials, and that students are taking advantage of the ANC government. He further stated that the purpose of learners to attend school is to get educated, rather than to complain. Such a response is an indication that, although the intention of *Exco Meets the People* is to interact with the communities, sometimes this interaction is compromised by the same government officials who initiated it (Personal interview with M. Ncongwane, 9 December 2006).

The problem with *Exco Meets the People* is that the decisions on the intended outcomes of this communication method are taken with little or no input from the beneficiaries. This is largely because what is finally communicated is informed by government’s national communication strategy. Although this communication method implies that senior provincial government officials are expected to obtain first-hand information about the lives of the people they lead, collate the findings during the visits to the communities and thereafter devise forms of intervention to address the problems that they have identified, this is not happening in reality.

Another noted problem of *Exco Meets the People* in the Free State is limited time provided for question and answer sessions. This compromises the ability of those in attendance to thoroughly discuss the issues that they may want to raise with the premier or MECs. This could be because the communication messages are finalised long before the actual *Exco Meets the People* takes place. This strategy leaves no room for issues that are beyond the designated scope to be considered. However, this was disputed by M.E. Mosala, former Deputy Director in the Office of the Premier. Mosala stated that the fact-finding missions were carried out in order to brief the premier and other senior provincial government officials regarding the needs issues of the community targeted for the gathering. The intention was to inform these officials so that they could prepare themselves thoroughly and each provincial department could have a representative present to answer the community members’ questions on behalf of his department. Fact-finding missions were conducted along these lines. Sometimes government departments consider the magnitude of an issue and make relevant referrals. This means that delays with regard to such referrals and a lack of commitment from other departments are perceived as incompetence on the part of the Premier’s Office in addressing the problems (Interview with M.E. Mosala, 8 June 2007).

One would expect that, after a fact-finding mission has been completed, this should be reflected in the communication strategy of the provincial government. It could be argued that most communication between the representatives of the government and the communities should take place once the fact-finding mission has been completed. The purpose of this communication would be to inform the people of what would be done about the issues discussed with senior government officials during the *Exco Meets the People* gathering. Extensive publicity-generating communication currently takes place before the *Exco Meets the People* gathering, but not much is communicated with regard to the issues identified as requiring attention from the provincial government. Even if little or no progress is made with the issues raised during the *Exco Meets the People* gatherings, it is still important to communicate the situation to the communities, as this could help to build a culture of trust. Otherwise, this reduces *Exco Meets the People* to a top-down communication approach.

Although the purpose of *Exco Meets the People* is to provide an opportunity for the majority of the people to speak, the venues arranged for these gatherings are often not large enough to accommodate the people. Sometimes these venues are filled by the youth section of the population. This may be attributable to the fact that older people are at work when such meetings are held. In most cases, such meetings are held during the day. The fact that the venues are too small to accommodate a large group makes it practically difficult to thoroughly elaborate on some issues raised, and for the government representatives to adequately respond to such issues. Sometimes people with genuine community concerns cannot be accommodated inside these venues due to the inadequate size. In some cases, questions posed to the government officials are not fully addressed due to time constraints. This shortcoming is sometimes interpreted by the community as an attempt by the government to play a cat and mouse game. This author has witnessed community members asking questions dragging on endlessly, so that they are actually making speeches instead of asking questions. Some people who are asking questions tend to elaborate on personal issues that are often of no concern to the community.

One community leader interviewed at Thembalihle acknowledged the commitment of the MECs in solving their problems, but lamented the fact that no time-frames were set in that regard: “Having the *Exco Meets the People* campaigns is a marvelous thing, but we keep on getting promises after the campaigns and nothing is done about the issues raised. It seems as if the government is willing to assist, but it does not have the necessary tools on how to assist. I think there should be time-frames set on the resolution of the issues raised. That will help the community not to engage in violent activities, as we saw in 2005. Most people in our township think that these gatherings are just ‘window dressing’ activities from the government. Although there are recordings done on the issues raised, it is clear to us that nobody cares to make a follow-up thereafter” (Personal interview with M.D. Tsotetsi, 9 December 2006).

One tends to agree with the observation made above by Tsotetsi that a speedy response from government in addressing issues requiring urgent attention could erase the

perceptions of communities about the *Exco Meets the People* communication method, namely that it is just a public relations exercise. The lives of members of a targeted community should improve after an *Exco Meets the People* gathering. It is ironic that the so-called “concerned groups” who lamented the lack of services started in the townships where such gatherings were held. Although the visit achieved the broad objective of the *Exco Meets the People*, at Thembalihle it had many dimensions. As some residents noted, there were disappointments when the tight programme did not allow the premier to meet all who wanted to do so, to feast with them and to enjoy their performances. This is due to the fact that the campaign can be taxing to the politicians, who have to travel vast distances to meet the people.

During her Budget Speech in June 2004, the premier of the Free State, Beatrice Marshoff, called for the intensification of the *Exco Meets the People* campaign. In her speech she indicated the following:

The Executive Council has endorsed the Governance and Administration Cluster’s Programme of Action for the current financial year. One of the key result areas that is envisaged includes a review of the Exco Meets the People campaign, including the name, as well as the integration of national izimbizo with provincial izimbizo. The technical cluster will be further charged with the responsibility to re-organize the campaign in such a way that research is undertaken on a variety of government services prior to campaigns. The research must cover areas such as housing, payout points, social grants, hospitals and other government centres where services are rendered. EXCO Meets the People campaigns must have mechanisms in place to determine the impact of dialogue with communities (Marshoff 2004).

This statement by Marshoff shows that there was a need to put into perspective what the government wanted to achieve with the *Exco Meets the People*.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the communication method of *Exco Meets the People* is a noble idea if the end product could be properly monitored. Participation at community level should be necessitated by the fact that there is a need to consolidate democracy. In order to build and consolidate democracy at both national and provincial government level, it is important for the communities to engage in communication methods such as *Exco Meets the People*. Looking at this method as adopted by the Free State provincial government, it is evident that the communities are generally not involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation thereof to allow a certain measure of improvement. This lack of effective public participation compromises the democratic principles that underlie democracy. One may argue that, in order to sustain democracy, communities should understand the nature of their participation and how they should participate.

This author’s observation is that, at many of the *Exco Meets the People* gatherings, the issues raised are predictable. Unemployment, poverty, roads, land and housing are but

a few of them. If the issues are known, why is the provincial government embarking on such campaigns? As indicated in this article, it can be argued that holding such gatherings helps the provincial government meet the people and hear their concerns. It can also be argued that this is in line with government accountability and participatory democracy. It is well and good for political leaders to account to the people, but it remains to be seen if these gatherings are helping the people who need service delivery more than merely providing a sympathetic ear. One needs to establish whether *Exco Meets the People* gatherings are not actually ANC rallies in disguise.

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