

## A Framework for Applied Democracy in a Local Setting<sup>1</sup>

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### **Introduction**

This article raises discussion points on some practical questions that face an organization or group doing work to promote democratic decision-making in a community. Its reference point is the work being done by researchers and other participants to enlighten communities on democracy, and enhance democratic decision-making in Tanzanian localities. The organization involved in this work is called Research and Education for Democracy in Tanzania (REDET). As an extension of its regular work of research and conscientisation on democratisation, REDET has put in place local discussion fora in eight districts of Tanzania. A total of 164 fora have been formed. The fora serve to generate ideas on matters of local concern, while also playing the role of a 'training school' for democratic discussion and tolerance. REDET's work in these fora has consisted mainly of organizing democratisation seminars, providing facilitators for discussions, encouraging discussion of any issue that is relevant to each community forum, and keeping data on the nature and conduct of discussions from the perspective of democratisation.

The point of departure of this paper has been whether more could be done with this 'laboratory' of grassroots generation of ideas and participatory democracy. In particular, we are concerned about taking the idea of democracy beyond a theoretical discussion and keeping it practical. For this, I suggest methodologies for implementing applied democracy; propose and elaborate on areas in which REDET discussion fora members can cooperate with local authorities by acting as engines for social political well being in their communities; and indicate how the discussion fora could help in guiding local people to solve their socio-political problems.

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## **Conceptualisations**

### *Democracy*

Simply defined, democracy is the full participation of human beings in the decisions of units of society to which they belong, or the widest participation possible in decisions relevant to one's existence.

When democracy is associated with government, this definition easily translates to mean rule by the people. Many people confine the definition of democracy to notions of rule or government, even though they—as everybody else—generally use democracy to describe a far wider concept of participation in decision-making. In this sense, it is possible and legitimate to talk about democracy in a community meeting, gathered to discuss or tackle issues related exclusively to the welfare of that community, and even to speak of democracy in as small a social unit as the family.

Ideal democracy, often associated with the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, envisages the physical participation of all community members in all matters, including those related to the governance of a community. This has not happened in modern societies for three reasons. First, the perpetually expanding and complex modern societies make such direct community participation impossible, thus necessitating the mediation of representative democracy. Secondly, the expansion and consolidation of the state that has accompanied complex modern societies has tended to take away community participation even in those areas that should have been spared from such state encroachment. Thirdly, where the community has sometimes wrested an area of participation relevant exclusively to a community from the state, there has often been the danger of domination of that area by powerful and well-organized interest groups. The 'non-state' society and communities have usually fought back—where conditions have permitted—and managed to limit the reach of government, to restore community participation and, sometimes, even to free community agenda and decision-making processes from organized and powerful interest groups.

### *Discussion Fora and Democratic Participation*

The idea of discussion fora is closely related to the need to restore community participation. Its theoretical underpinnings are that over time, and even between elections, representative bodies or governing units may cease to be representative, alienating themselves from the people who delegated their power of decision-making to them in the first place. The

representatives' own peers may have some ways of helping them return to a proper representation of the people, and the threat of defeat in regularly conducted elections may also correct their behaviour. However, the most enduring means of keeping the agenda of local communities alive is to ensure a continuing community discussion of community issues. But keeping community issues alive by having a forum for discussing them alone is not enough. As indicated earlier, the agenda of the discussion might be 'hijacked' by organized and powerful groups within the communities if democracy in those communities, and in the fora, is not well developed. In addition, holding democratic discussion within communities or fora without entering their ideas into the governmental decision-making process may not be an effective way of ensuring that communities retain their part in democratic governance. So, the effective means of community participation—represented here by the idea of discussion fora, involve instituting the fora themselves, ensuring democratic discussion within the fora—promoting that democratic culture within the community, and ensuring that outputs find their way into the governmental decision-making process.

### *Applied Democracy*

In simple terms, applied democracy refers to making the idea of democracy practical or workable. In the larger national sense, this refers to actual implementation of all the tenets of democratic governance, including the holding of regular, free and fair elections; universal franchise; various fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of speech and association; the rule of law; the respect for basic human rights; and the installation of a constitution with a balance of power among major institutions of governance, as well as between the governors and the governed. In the case of small communities, applied democracy refers to the implementation of the idea that communities will have a forum, or democratic discussion of fora ideas, and a route or vessel for placing those ideas into the political system and processing them.

### **Implementing Applied Democracy**

#### *Putting the Fora in Place*

There are various forms of official local councils, which in a sense incorporate the idea of implementing democracy. Their success or failure is a separate matter for another discussion. The unofficial *REDET discussion fora* are additions to these and are a major way of effecting applied democracy at that level.

### *The REDET Discussion Fora*

In the idea of discussion fora, REDET aimed at helping ordinary people have a voice and eradicate timidity; encouraging them to believe in their own ability to solve problems they knew well; creating opportunities for them to exchange ideas on politics, culture, the economy and development; promoting a culture of respect and tolerance for each other even when they differed; and guiding them to approach problems as challenges of conflict resolution. Since democracy, tolerance, and conflict resolution were critical for the success of the fora idea, REDET provided the following guidelines for the structure of the fora and the mode of decision-making within them. Each forum should constitute of not more than 25 members who are as representative of the various community groups as possible. In particular, they were to be completely non-discriminatory in their composition, and they were to pay attention to the need for a religious, ethnic, gender, and political balance. Discussion was to be conducted democratically under a chairperson elected by secret ballot. Wherever possible, decisions were to be reached by consensus after integrating all relevant contributions (REDET, 1996).

### *Having a Democratic Choice of Agenda and Discussion*

There are several inter-related ways in which a community agenda can be set and brought to discussion. These involve recognition of the following:

- The most enduring way of ensuring community participation is to put together various representatives of the community, each of whom accurately represents a variant of the community.
- Agenda for enhancing the welfare of a community are far more likely to succeed if most members of the community, or their true representatives, have an uninhibited role in shaping them.
- All community participants *can* contribute ideas and participate in community activities.
- People do not always come out and contribute ideas at the beginning of discussion. Since the participation of most community members or their representatives is critical, it is necessary to be patient and await the contribution or input of others if such optimal participation has not been reached.
- Neither compulsion nor restraint should be involved in the discussion of, and the voting on, a community agenda.

The actualisation of the above at the fora level involves four issues. The first is to ensure that fora participants are as representative of the variants of a

community as possible. To a large extent, the composition of existing fora – which was supervised by REDET’s principal researchers in accordance with well worked-out guidelines – already reflects these variants. The fora already contain some government officials dealing with community issues, varying sections of the civil society, and varying shades of socio-cultural and political thinking. Nevertheless, the REDET structuring of these fora may not have created the perfect congregation of community representatives. In addition, the existing fora members may, over a period of time, coalesce into a separate entity that begins to lose some of its representative character. For this reason, it is advisable that *the participation of community representatives other than fora members be sought and integrated into fora discussion at every opportune moment*. One of the practical ways of doing this is to encourage agenda setters both at REDET headquarters and within the fora to *extend invitations for fora workshops, seminars, and even regular meetings to other relevant community representatives*. Thus, if one of the important agenda in a forum’s workshop or regular meeting is fishing, it makes sense to extend invitations to seasoned fishermen and women. This thinking on extended participation exists at REDET headquarters, and has been put in practice in the past. However, more of it needs to take place. In addition, agenda that originate from the fora themselves need to carry this practice from here on.

The second is that since it is important that representative participants are recognized as having useful ideas, and that they must play a role in shaping the community’s way forward, it is imperative *that all possible agenda are properly canvassed prior to meetings/discussions, that they are presented as possible formal agenda for meetings/discussions, that the formally tabled issues are further publicised within communities, and that the resolutions or conclusions of meetings are quickly and widely disseminated within communities* for reaction and possible re-tabling. This creates an open cycle of aggregation and articulation, processing, output, and feedback initially involving the fora and their community environment. Some sense of this was always part of the REDET design of the fora, but it needs to be re-emphasized now, and more must be done in practice. Spoken and written reminders to REDET operatives – and to fora participants during workshops – about the importance of accomplishing the tasks in this category is imperative. The optimal level of accomplishment may be unattainable, since a perfect processing and feedback mechanism would often need more resources than are obtainable, but it is ‘the target to aim at’, as it were.

In addition, it is important that *every representative/participant is accorded the opportunity to scrutinize and discuss everything that has been tabled*. No minority and objectionable agenda should pass unchallenged due to the preponderant influence of a more powerful section of the community or its representative. There are two major ways of achieving this in a forum setting. One is *to have a knowledgeable, firm and fair chairperson of the forum*, who can discern minority agenda of the powerful that do not enjoy the favour of the rest of the community. The other is *to have lasting discussion procedures, which ensure that no participants are inhibited, and that debate is not closed prematurely*. REDET instructions to its operatives and workshop facilitators must emphasize the importance of electing a fora chairperson of that quality, and the institution of debate procedures that match this requirement.

Third, as we have already indicated, it is to ensure that the concerns of the entire community have been accurately represented and discussed. There are two ways of doing this: one, to ensure that no participation is inhibited, and that debate is not closed prematurely. Another is *making sure that those who are usually slow to come out and speak, or do not express themselves at all, are actively encouraged to do so*. This, again, is for the forum chairperson to implement, and for REDET instructions to re-emphasize.

Fourthly, it is important that decisions are reached democratically, that is without intimidation or fear, and by consensus or majority vote. According to previous REDET recommendations, the preferred mode of agreement is consensus. This usually reflects the end of a debate that has resolved most disagreements, and it is a more favoured mode in comparison with a majority vote, which retains more of the adversarial aspects of the debate. One envisages that if the entire process of tabling issues, debating and receiving feedback on them is as democratic as outlined in this framework, there will be an increase in consensus, and more 'win-win' situations for all the variants of the community will emerge. Whatever the case may be, the point emphasized here is that *representatives/participants reach decisions freely and democratically*.

### ***Placing the Ideas into the Political System***

#### *Utilising the Existing Fora Design*

Aggregating and articulating a community's ideas is only a first step in the furtherance of community interests. The second and *most important is for those ideas to be authoritatively worked upon and implemented*. In relation to REDET fora, this is in some sense initially achieved when ideas and agenda are

debated and decided upon in a forum, and when the decisions are carried out in practice. For the most part, such implementation has involved the carrying out of minor manual jobs and follow-up tasks, such as cleaning a market, de-clogging a stream, ensuring that cattle-herders keep their animals from crops, and trying to register a forum as an NGO. These kinds of tasks are without controversy, and are within the implementation ability of the fora.

The discussion and implementation of some ideas by REDET discussion fora mimic the real and usual processing of a community's interests or demands in a political system, but the REDET system is not an authoritative political system. It is not designed to be that kind of system.

It is meant to voluntarily generate ideas and agenda for the wider community and for the real political system; and on its part, the latter may freely choose to incorporate or ignore the ideas. Since REDET will neither be part of the political system nor supplant its lower structures, the only way to ensure that important ideas generated by the discussion fora enter the political system is by maintaining a close communication link with it. Much that needs to be done in this area was incorporated into the fora design, and has been implemented. Included in the design is the requirement that a sizable number of fora members (legislators, councillors, and functional officers) be members of the authoritative political system, and that copies of reports of fora discussion be given to important government organs, such as the Ward Executive Office and the District Council. *REDET needs to continue encouraging the attendance and participation of these officials, as well as ensuring that its operatives bring fora decisions to the attention of the political system in the prescribed way.*

#### *Creating and Enhancing Extra-Fora Network*

Ensuring that there is a steady flow of fora-generated demands into the authoritative political system requires the establishment and maintenance of links with other bodies dealing with democratisation. These include NGOs, academics, and political activists (including non-fora legislators). The value of these is in having complementary clout, knowledge, and skills for placing demands into the political system. Networking with these people may entail a more aggressive publicisation of fora activities and outputs. Since the fora we are dealing with are truly local in their locations, their networking will necessarily be within their own localities.

### *Active Intervention by Fora Members*

By practice, and perhaps by design, the posture of REDET discussion fora has been quite 'laid back'. The spreading of democracy in practice, however, demands increasing advocacy. The discussion fora might need to publicize themselves more to achieve proper networking. Additionally, to be fully engaged in the practice of spreading democracy within the community, the fora might have to undertake interventions of some kind. These might include calling ad hoc meetings to discuss issues that demand a democratic dialogue to reach a resolution. They might involve the local observation and monitoring of electoral processes.

### *Resolving Local Conflicts*

All communities have become complex, and differences have multiplied. There are many problems to be solved, but hindrances to acceptable solutions abound, largely because communities are divided. Quite often an individual, or a group of people can find a solution to a conflict, but it may be rejected simply because of the identity of the person or group. On those issues in which the dispute is about a claim – say over land for grazing, water supply, and so on – many communities have discovered the modern way of court litigation. But in many instances this too is not a solution, since courts typically do not remove adversarial postures, and in some cases exacerbate them. They are also normally slow and costly.

It is for these reasons that in some countries activist community groups have emerged that advocate bringing together the entire community involved in a dispute, and giving everyone a chance to have a say in the shaping of a solution.

In these community approaches to conflict resolution, it is recognized that conflicts engender perceptions, suspicions, fear and hostilities that may all have a logic and a foundation, but which may also be modifiable or eliminated altogether (Bush & Folger, 1994). There is a recognition in these approaches that:

- Conflict is normal
- Everybody is probably right from his/her own vantage point
- Every conflict has a solution
- It is important to find a solution
- It is possible to have a 'win-win' situation



A great deal of patience is involved in this approach, though it is often found to be faster than litigation. The greatest advantage of this method of conflict resolution lies in the dictum that if all parts of a community are involved in finding solutions, conflicts can be transformed into agreements that are widely supported (Galtung, 1995).

As laboratories and nuclei of democracy and tolerance, REDET discussion fora should learn to use and actively engage in this kind of dispute resolution.

### **Conclusion**

Some of the practical ways of enhancing democracy in and around REDET discussion fora suggested here entail an expansion of fora tasks and a reorientation of goals. The implications of such work need to be examined thoroughly before any action in this direction can be taken. What I have attempted to do here is point out ways that can deepen the spread of democracy in a practical way at those grassroots locations. 'Idealists' of democracy argued some time ago that democracy needs to be seen in tangible and measurable results all the time (Sen, 1999). 'Realists', on the other hand, merely wished to record the process of democratisation as the only realistic appraisal of democracy (Dahl, 1989). In this article we have seen that possibilities for achieving both exist, and that REDET needs to explore ways of reaching both goals, as well as boldly putting some of those ways into effect.

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