

## **Executive summary of the DDP public forum on community protests**

**Thursday, August 20, 2009, Southern Sun Elangeni Hotel / Durban**

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Professor John Williams from the School of Government at the University of the Western Cape presented a highly informative and illuminating perspective on the reasons for post-apartheid South Africa's surfeit of community protests. According to Professor Williams, South Africa's democratic order is characterised by limited citizenship participation in politics and governance, a shift from racial apartheid to class apartheid, the creation of a black middle class as a buffer against the poor and extremely high levels of poverty. Thus, South Africa's democratic citizenship has been one of minimal political equality and substantive economic inequality.

He contended that South Africa's good governance framework is tainted by the fat salaries that the political elite are earning, their extravagant spending habits and the corrupt tendencies of some public officials. Hence, to get on to the party list in order to be considered for public office has become a business, he charged.

Meanwhile, the state's inert bureaucratic norms and procedures impede social delivery to poor communities. He illustrated the inordinately long time that it takes to get a housing application approved in the City of the Cape, for example. The bureaucratic process involves 10 steps and takes between 18 to 24 months to pass. Yet, in 2008, the City of Cape Town has failed to spend 60% of its capital budget that was meant for the construction of houses whilst more than 400 000 or approximately 15% of citizens in Cape Town, mostly black, are in need of houses, he argued.

Furthermore, Professor Williams slated the Department of Housing for building housing structures without considering their quality or poor people's need for other social amenities. As a consequence, many poor communities have and continue to languish in parlous and squalid conditions due to a lack of water, electricity and sanitation, which breed disease and fuel child mortality. On the other hand, those with access are frequently disconnected from basic social services, like water and electricity. Curiously, he indicated that the wealthy in Cape Town owe the municipality up to R1, 75 billion, i.e. 70% of debt [arrears for electricity, rates] – yet their services are not discontinued at gunpoint as in the case of the poorest 30-35% of people on the Cape Flats who owe the Council R750 million for services.

According to Professor Williams, what is required is a radical transformation of South Africa's political and economic institutions. It means organising and mobilising the poor and unemployed to struggle for a more substantive participatory democratic order that gives ordinary people political power to decide over the salaries of the political elite and how and on what budgets must be spent, like in Brazil, India and Venezuela. In addition, the economic barriers between the rich and poor have to be eliminated. He

asserted that South Africa's disproportionately poor and unemployed have been bearing the brunt of the economic concessions of the pre-1994 negotiated settlement between the democratic (majority) black government in waiting and its white predecessor.

Most participants felt that the presentation was informative and that it broadened their horizon of the inefficiencies that plague the state's bureaucratic apparatus and the political and economic deficits that undermine South Africa's core constitutional values of equality, democracy and social justice. Ronnie Veeran, a local DA councillor, wanted to know why poor people are still voting for the ANC when they are disenchanted with the ANC government. Professor Williams' response was that racial identity is still the main determinant of how South Africa's majority cast their vote and that for most ordinary people the ANC symbolises liberation. Zwelibanzi Mpehle observed that protests are a reality in South Africa and as long as politicians are living lavishly they will continue. Themba Ndlovu felt that whilst the presentation was thought provoking and informative, it did not peer into "the grassroots-based bread and butter issues". Henry Mokootle said that his shack-dweller community in Cato Crest is planning a social delivery protest and that the information will help them to understand the bigger picture.