

# What Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo officials think... when they engage with park users committees

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## Parks are microcosms of our societies.

When successful as public places, they reflect and contribute to social cohesion. But they can also be marred by broad social ills – unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime, segregation. Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo has the major task of developing and managing 3000 parks, on a limited budget, and to find ways of responding to the broad social ills that affect its public open spaces. It cannot do it on its own.

City Parks used to report to the Environmental Sector in Johannesburg City Council. Since its 2011 restructuring and its merging with Johannesburg Zoo, under Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ), it has to report to Community Services. This is a major shift, from an environmental-oriented service to a people's oriented service.

For people working for JCPZ, this means a change in practice, in orientation, in professional and institutional culture. This change is challenging, all the more there are a lot of verbal abuses from park users committees used to work on their own and often frustrated by the lack of response of an often under-resourced City Park.

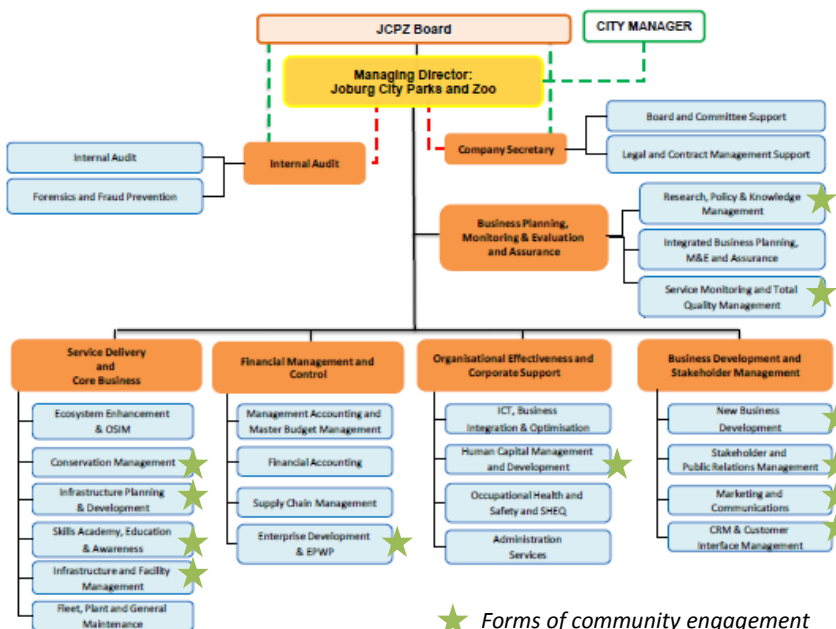
► What institutions have been set up to frame and to encourage community engagement in City Parks?

► What processes need to be followed when a park is designed, or to set up a management partnership between JCPZ and park users committees (or Friends of the Park)?

► What experiences are encountered by City officials engaging with often disgruntled communities, discouraged by decades of under-development, or chronic lack of management, in a context where JCPZ operational budget is still insufficient, and where the need for spatial transformation and the development of parks in previously disadvantaged areas is central?

**It is argued that current JCPZ institutions, processes and officials performance indicators are often not conducive to community engagement. They generally remain a tick-box exercise, generating frustration rather than the much needed long term relationship of trust building between officials and Friends of the Park, essential to sustainable parks management. As a consequence, JCPZ officials are ill-equipped to deal with local community engagements – where park users generally have limited knowledge on how JCPZ operates; where many broader social ills coalesce in the park, to which there is seldom a short fix; in a city still marked by stark social and racial inequalities.**

## Multiple, fragmented institutions engaging with communities



★ Forms of community engagement

Community engagement is not one person's, one section's responsibility – even though there is a section of CJMZ called 'Stakeholders and Public Relation Management'. Whilst there are four Stakeholders Liaison Officers (SLO), each in charge of two regions, community engagement operates also in 'Core Business', for instance through complaints to the park or regional manager. When a park is being developed, it is the responsibility of Infrastructure and Planning Development to engage. When the park is finally developed, the Environmental Education starts its process. When there is an event in the park, communities engage with Events Management.

Is this multiplicity an advantage or an inconvenient? Community engagement is everybody's business – and therefore permeate the whole institution in its effort towards people-orientation. But park users get lost in this institutional maze... A dedicated, trained and resourced Stakeholders Liaison Officer should systematically and consistently help park users navigate the complexity of JCPZ operations.

# What City Parks officials experience when engaging with park users communities

## Over-commitment and exclusive appropriation...

"There are users who prefer to jog in the reserves or perform rituals and these Friends (of the Park) don't want that, they want to select users and dictate what happens in that specific space, that's where the whole fighting is coming from" (Conservation Manager, 2015)

## ... Or lack of involvement and ownership

"In areas where there are no facilities, we get endless demands. But then they get the facilities and they do not look after it, they get the facilities and shift responsibilities, they do not want to take ownership or have a sense of being part, saying it's ours, it's always seen as a City Parks asset but when it's not there, they want it. They do not come handy to us, you know" (Stakeholder Relations, 2015)

## ... Distrust built over the years...

"They employ their own labour in the Nature Reserve to spy on us and they run to the media, I tell them I don't need you, you need me, you are just a volunteer I can get other volunteers" (Manager, 2015).

"The Friends help us a lot; they are like our friends... And remember, rich white people you find that in that group there's engineers, town planners, lawyers. You find that next to the reserve they want to build something, these people will know first-hand, we don't read the notices of these developments but they do, and they would read and submit objections. I like them because of that. They are our whistle blowers. Whenever there's some development notice they will call and tell me to go there and see what's happening" (Manager, 2015)

## The importance of building trust

## ... And occasionally, partnership and use of complementary skills and resources

## Where does the money go...

"Every year the budget is cut and JCPZ is not a profit generating company so it becomes such a huge challenge. The money from fundraising and events goes into the bank and disappears, we get a lot of money but it doesn't come back to us. Sometimes people do not get that" (Regional Manager, 2015)

"It is not easy to tailor- make these developments with the community, there's planning, there are implications and budgets and they are always demanding... And you find that most of these communities don't even contribute to rates and taxes of the City but they are busy vandalizing and demanding facilities, saying JCPZ is 'supposed to'" (Stakeholder Relations, 2015)

## Where it comes from...

"The community gets frustrated by these issues; they don't know who to go to and how to go about reporting them. When we come to engage with them, it's a challenge, they see Johannesburg logo and they attack, for them the City is one thing, one department, even if the issue is for Joburg water for example, they see the City logo and they spit fire" (Environmental Education officer, 2015).

The challenge is when people can't differentiate between Capex budget and operational budget, when we say we don't have Capex budget to address this problem right now, that's where people will have a problem, they want things to be done instantly and it can't be I promise you. (Manager)

## ... Capex is not Opex...

## ... And issues in parks cannot always be solved by City Parks

"Community raise their issues in petitions, that's how they feel they can get attention and how are we supposed to stop crime?" (Stakeholder Relations, 2015)

City Parks is not Joburg Water...

Unrealistic requests? Not understanding what CJPZ is about, nor how it works, nor what it can and cannot do

# What City Parks officials experience when engaging with park users communities (2)

## Challenges of transformation

### Integrating parks...

"We have a mandate and part of it is to bring previously disadvantaged people in, and you find that the Friends of the Park are saying, bringing too many people here make people walk off the trails and them creating new trails, they are against this" (Manager, 2015)

### ... Overcoming abuse and building mutual respect...

"We had a meeting previously and people started banging tables, I left the meeting, I told them to go to hell... I told them I don't need you, you need me...  
Remember these areas used to be predominantly white so when they want something they would get it, so now when they want something we ask why, and they don't want to be asked why" (Manager, 2015)

### ... Transforming the nature of conservation?

"There would be new users saying we want to do boot camp, and those old Tanis users would say, no boot camp here...  
And that is why there's always fighting. Because all these spaces evolve, like Kruger Park used to be for Nature, games; now there are hotels, golf courses, airports!  
So they don't want these areas to be developed. If you see this park bare as it is you would be scared to go in, but if it is nicely developed it becomes inviting" (Manager, 2015)

"Some of these issues you just... you know, people are meant to understand but they tend not to, that's why they vandalize these facilities just as a way of saying we want attention but it doesn't work like that" (Stakeholder Relations, 2015)

### ... Training Friends of the Park in township areas

### Volunteer policy based on distrust?...

" All Volunteers are prohibited from engaging with the media with regards to any JCPZ interests and are bound by a confidentiality agreement to not disclose any information which may become privy to due to their volunteer activities" (CJPZ Volunteer policy Annexure F:9 )

## Formalising partnerships, a good idea?

"Partnerships with the private sector used to work so well e.g. giving some of the maintenance tasks to businesses, or asking volunteers to do it.  
But the politicians are against it...  
You know people want to be employed so they feel that the businesses are taking away their employment opportunities" (Manager, 2015)

### Participation as job creation?...

You know, people need jobs, they will do anything to make sure the cousin gets the job.  
There was an instance where the community challenged to stop the construction of a cemetery development, because the people employed were from a different ward, a ward that did not qualify...  
There are no longer petty issues there are serious issues" (CID officer, 2015).

### ... Delegation to the private sector, to volunteers?

"There are some informal agreements that we do to get things going, for example the community would ask, if you do this and that for us, we will help with the clean-up. And it works ...  
If I try and make these relationships formal, it takes forever. People always think someone wants to benefit something. They don't understand the pressure, people don't like writing proposals and committing themselves in contracts" (Manager, 2015)

### ... Formalisation can be cumbersome

# Designing a park – not a participatory process: a recipe for unsustainable management?

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PARK

JCPZ has embarked in an ambitious and forward looking drive to develop parks in previously disadvantaged areas, where open spaces were seldom developed as parks. The City is committing some capital budget for this purpose, and parks have multiplied at a great pace in Soweto.

In doing so, JCPZ has a unique opportunity to involve residents and communities in the design, development and future management of urban parks. Unlike in the Northern suburbs, there is no tradition of park users committees – yet open public spaces need community management.

The process of developing a park, which could be a key opportunity to design parks according to local needs or dreams, and construct a community of park users, is however not conducive to community engagement.

Once a park is approved and budgeted, the design is given to an outsourced, external designer who has limited institutional memory, does not necessarily take future management costs into consideration, and seldom has time to familiarise herself with the site and the community.

Community engagement on the design is limited, occurs generally at the end of the designers' contract. Users are consulted via their councillor on what they would like to add to the design', but no feedback showing how the design has (or not) incorporated their wishes or claims is given.

Participation and Community engagement is mostly conceived in terms of job creation – an important, but short term objective.

Interrogating design and management, constructing communities and training future Friends of the park, does not yet seem to be part of the picture.



★ The star indicates moments of community engagement

## JCPZ could lead the way with innovative forms of community engagement

### Ways forward for Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo

- ▶ Invest in long term engagement with communities – foster continuity, build a trust relationship, be honest, share documents, provide clarity on what is negotiable and what is not, what you can do and what you cannot. Be accountable and persistent in meetings.
- ▶ Train and resource Stakeholders Management officers, so that they are enabled to more systematically and continuously assist Friends of the Park to navigate institutional complexities, and build local expertise around regional parks.
- ▶ Revise park development and design processes so as to use the opportunity to integrate sustainable management in park design, and construct stronger park users communities
- ▶ Accept that partnerships require power sharing, and reflect on what functions should be retained by JCPZ and which ones can be devolved or shared. Revise the Volunteer Policy accordingly, not only in terms of duties of the volunteer, but also in terms of what can be gained for him/her. Incorporate into the Service Partnership Agreement more clarity on power sharing and decision-making processes (in particular around how funding is to be spent, plans to be developed, etc.).

### Ways forward for Friends of the Park

- ▶ Enquire and learn how JCPZ functions, to better understand its constraints and opportunities, its mandate and strategic priorities (beyond your own park).
- ▶ Learn to respect City Parks officials in spite of existing frustration – turn towards an attitude on 'how to make it work'; constructively engage with development or management proposals, without unduly obstructing progress; propose alternative rather than use your power of blockage.
- ▶ Assess where FoP could bring complementary skills and resources to JCPZ.

### For more details

Bosaka, P. (2015) *Changing Practices of the state; Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo officials' views on opportunities and challenges of community engagement*. Honours Research report, BSc in Urban and Regional Planning, School of Architecture and Planning, Wits University.