



FIXING JOHANNESBURG: WHAT ROLE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS?

Introduction

As part of our Johannesburg Matters project, the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) convened prominent civic organisations in late September 2026 to discuss what role their organisations could play in Johannesburg's recovery.

The discussion opened with presentations from Yunus Chamda of the Joburg Crisis Alliance, Julia Fish, managing director of JoburgCAN, and Ferrial Adam, executive director of WaterCAN, followed by a wider discussion among participants.

One message came through strongly: Johannesburg has considerable knowledge, expertise and organisational capacity outside municipal government. Civic organisations know what is happening in many communities, often identify service delivery failures before the City responds, and in some cases have developed practical solutions to municipal challenges. However, participants were equally clear that civil society cannot become a substitute for government.

Chamda reflected on what had happened to civil society organisations after South Africa's transition to democracy. "In 1994, many civics just disbanded because there was this euphoric belief that now that we have a democracy, government will take care of us," he said. That experience contained an important lesson for Johannesburg today. "No matter who governs, civil society must remain strong, independent, and organised," urged Chamda. CDE executive director Ann Bernstein recalled that her unit at the Urban Foundation, which had worked closely with the civics before the 1994 democratic elections, urged them to remain independent. The vast majority did not, which she described as a big mistake.

What civil society organisations could offer the City

Johannesburg's many civic organisations possess detailed knowledge about what is happening in communities. Chamda

described them as the City's "eyes and ears on the ground". The City often only "sees what it wants to see", he said, whereas civic organisations are able to hear more clearly what residents are actually saying. Adam had a similar view, describing community organisations as 'first responders' and 'early warning systems'.

This could be important for a new mayor seeking to demonstrate a readiness to respond and wanting a new City government to identify, communicate and resolve service delivery problems quickly. The challenge, in the minds of many of the civil society leaders, was how to build a better, closer relationship with the City without compromising the independence that allows them to hold government to account.

Readiness to help the City was important, Fish reasoned. "We know the City is not going to be able to fix everything on its own," she said. "It's going to take a whole-of-society approach to do these things, especially if we want it on an accelerated trajectory." Participants provided examples of what a more productive relationship could look like.

- In Rivonia, a residents' association concerned about dirt, safety and overcrowding at a local taxi rank did not argue that the rank should be removed. Instead, it pitched a plan to the City's partnerships platform for more entrances, fencing, lighting and ablution facilities. The aim was to give the people who use the space dignity, and to design facilities around the way residents actually use it.
- It is well known that the broken billing system in Johannesburg is a large part of why the City lacks revenue for service delivery. JoburgCAN has offered to bring together expertise from banking, insurance and other parts of the private sector to help develop a single digital platform, accessible both to the municipality and to its customers.

That does not mean outsourcing the responsibilities of government. Indeed, participants warned that community groups are already carrying responsibilities that properly belong to the municipality. As Fish put it, "the city works for those who can afford to bypass the municipality".

Rethinking participation

Current mechanisms to facilitate 'participation' are hopelessly inadequate, many participants stressed.

Processes linked to formulating the City's integrated development plan (IDP) were criticised. The IDP is supposed to provide a mechanism through which residents can influence municipal priorities. Participants argued that in practice the process is technical, inaccessible and mostly asks communities for their views only after the important decisions have been made. Rather than drawing residents into the governance of the city, a tick-box exercise of this kind further erodes the relationship between the City and its residents.

In Adam's view: "People are invited to public meetings. They sit in a room if they actually attend, or join online, but then you're given between 30 seconds and a minute to say something. That is not engagement. That is not public participation."

For example, the budget process starts in August, but organisations are typically consulted only in the new year, ensuring that residents can only comment on a largely completed plan. It is too late for their perspectives and insights to matter. Adam argued that participation should move beyond a formal, badly scheduled, once-off engagement, and instead should be a constructive relationship.

To facilitate such a relationship, residents need access to information and, when organisations report problems or make proposals, the City needs to respond. Bernstein suggested a digital public dashboard through which residents can report problems, backed by commitments to respond within set timeframes.

Participants also warned that gains made through engagement have too frequently been reversed. One recalled that the Johannesburg Business Forum, which had begun to work productively with the City, was shut down with a change of administration. Informal traders, who won a Constitutional Court case after the 2013 Operation Clean Sweep removals, spent years negotiating a trading policy with the City. Adopted in 2022, it has not yet been implemented, and traders are again being removed. Adam argued that the City targets the most vulnerable because doing so makes it look as if it is acting.

Business and organised labour

Some participants challenged business to play a broader role in the City's recovery. Adam argued that business cannot "only come to the party when there are contracts and where there's going to be public partnerships and concessions". Another participant noted that business activities were not transparent: a business-led plan for Johannesburg had been drawn up, it was claimed, without consulting any of the civic organisations in the room.

CDE's position, Bernstein said, is that outside capacity should be welcomed. This could be where it is urgently needed, for instance a team of experienced electricity engineers to work with City Power, along with other areas where private sector capacity could help rebuild Johannesburg. But there must be no secret deals: such arrangements must be public, including how they are paid for, with regular report-backs and conflict of interest checks before anything is signed.

Fish expressed concern about selling-off vital parts and functions of the city to the private sector as that "goes against the kind of democracy that we are trying to build".

The role of organised labour in the City, many participants agreed, could create serious challenges for a new, reform-oriented administration. One participant argued that unions shield a poor work ethic and make it harder to address poor performance. They asked whether civil society needed to begin "confronting the destructive role of unions in municipal management and the lack of service delivery".

Adam described unions as simultaneously weak and strong: they wield considerable power, but do not use it to hold anyone accountable on the issues that matter. She suggested reframing the discussion with organised labour around the interests of its own members: "We need to say to the unions, it's your workers that are going home to no water. It's your workers that are going home to no electricity."

Bernstein agreed that common ground with unions would need to be found, while confronting the problems created by people appointed into positions for political reasons as well as the politically facilitated R10 billion wage agreement, which will cripple the City's finances.

Corruption and leadership

Participants regarded corruption and political interference as fundamental obstacles to fixing Johannesburg. As someone put it, corruption is "the biggest elephant" in any discussion about the city's future.

"We have to stop patronage. We have to stop the issues of interference in the administration," Fish argued. Many believed that corruption was widespread and deeply entrenched, and would be difficult for a new administration to confront. Others argued that determined leadership, backed by the right institutions, could change the trajectory quite quickly.

Adam put the leadership question simply: "If you have poor leadership, then all the shenanigans will go on. But if you have a robust leadership that says, if you do this stuff from now on, you are out. That kind of leadership will change the internal climate quite quickly. I have faith that that can work."

Wayne Duvenage of OUTA argued that leadership would need institutional backing. "You cannot fight corruption diplomatically and quietly," he said. The leaders appointed to run City Power, Johannesburg Water and other key institutions, he argued, would need "the backing and support ... of a very strong integrity programme," because these are dangerous positions. That would allow officials to speak up and corrupt networks to be rooted out. Duvenage and Chamda both saw the City's own workforce as part of the solution. Most employees, Duvenage argued, do not want to work for a broken institution and would come forward if leadership gives them a reason to. Chamda described meeting City officials deeply demoralised by political interference and asked how civil society might encourage good people inside the administration to stand up.

Adam described the Ethics and Forensic Services Department within the City of Cape Town, which she said operates independently and meets weekly with every department to review upcoming tenders. According to her, the unit vets the companies involved and maps the connections between municipal procurement, officials and organised crime, and people have been dismissed as a result. Adam proposed that Johannesburg's next administration establish a similar unit.

Elections

Bernstein urged organisations to use the weeks before the election to press parties and mayoral candidates to commit publicly to merit-based appointments and an end to political interference in appointments, contracts and procurement. If there is another coalition government, these commitments should be written into a coalition agreement that is made public. Members of the Joburg Crisis Alliance said they had drafted a similar pledge.

Participants were under no illusions about what is at stake. One described this year as the worst she had seen from the municipality in a decade; whoever wins, she argued, will inherit badly damaged infrastructure and little money to fix it.

After 4 November

Participants anticipated two broad scenarios for Johannesburg after 4 November: a government willing to undertake reform and work constructively with civic organisations, or what participants called an 'extractive' administration that continues existing patterns of poor governance accompanied by looting.

If Johannesburg gets a reform minded administration, organisations in the room argued that they should be ready to support reforms and provide expertise where they can. "If there is a change to a participative government that's going to do what it can to fix and fight corruption," Duvenage argued, "then we need to get behind that."

If the next administration resembles more of the same, the approach should necessarily be radically different. Participants discussed using council meetings, public pressure and organised activism to hold political leaders accountable. As Duvenage put it, under an extractive administration, "we have to put them under massive pressure". This, he stressed, would mean exposure and discomfort rather than "a destructive combative war".

For some, the important point was not to wait for the election result before beginning to think about either possibility. "Civil society has to prepare itself for the outcome," Chamda argued.

The Joburg Crisis Alliance has already begun working through post-election scenarios, which it plans to put to a summit before the end of the year. The objective, Chamda explained, is that there should be "no waste of time early in 2027 where we start thinking about what to do", but instead a clear response depending on the city government that emerges.

Immediately after the election, the Crisis Alliance will also focus on restoring the credibility of ward committees, which were described as captured, and engaging the 270 members of the new council. That is an important shift from reactive to proactive activism. Rather than responding separately to each new failure, participants argued for thinking about the kind of City they want and working backwards from there.

"This is the moment for new ideas," Adam said. Civil society, she argued, needs "to stop asking how we can make the existing participation system look more successful and start asking whether the system itself needs to change."

Concluding remarks

The next administration should not approach civic organisations in Johannesburg simply as an audience to be consulted after decisions have been made.

There are practical changes a new Johannesburg government can make: involve organised civic actors earlier in planning, earlier in the budget cycle rather than at the end; establish structured channels through which community information reaches officials and receives a response within committed timeframes; make municipal information available by default and easier to use; and draw on outside technical expertise around specific problems where doing so can strengthen the City's own capacity.

The discussion also exposed the limits of civic capacity. Civil society is not a monolith, with different organisations holding many differing views. Organisations often work in silos. Business, civic organisations and government do not always communicate effectively with one another. And outside organisations cannot compensate indefinitely for a municipality that fails to perform

its basic functions. Civic energy, however valuable, is no substitute for a capable and honest government.

The next elected government will be responsible for governing Johannesburg and delivering basic services. Nevertheless, rebuilding the city will require it to make far better use of the many individuals, large companies and civic resources that already exist across Johannesburg.

Whoever governs Johannesburg after 4 November will need to unlock that energy, knowledge and capacity, while being open to the scrutiny that comes with it. A new City government that works with organisations in civil society where appropriate, listens to their concerns and possible solutions and allows itself to be held accountable to all residents will be far better placed to rebuild Johannesburg.

CDE's Johannesburg in Brief

Johannesburg in Brief is a series of publications reflecting discussions on critical issues affecting Johannesburg and other South African metros. These discussions form part of CDE's ongoing engagements with people and organisations concerned about the state of Johannesburg, with the aim to reflect on the city's mounting governance and infrastructure crises, and to think practically about what it will take to rebuild the city. Previous publications include:

- **Metro Trading Services Reform Programme with Ashor Sarupen, Deputy Minister of Finance** (3 August 2026)
- **Local Government White Paper with Pascal Moloi, convenor of the 2025/26 White Paper review process and former City Manager of Johannesburg** (May 2026)
- **City Improvement Districts with Katlego Dikobe, general manager of the Gauteng Precinct Management Association** (March 2026)
- **Water Services with Sean Phillips, Director General of the Department of Water and Sanitation** (December 2025)



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