



MEANINGFUL CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: THE POTENTIAL AND SHORTFALLS OF TECHNOLOGY

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A central tension in local governance since the White Paper on Local Government is that a detailed, highly progressive, highly participatory set of laws and formal processes has led to so much disappointment in practice. Some have advocated for technology to address this tension, even as a panacea. A common argument is that the administrative and communication burden of running highly inclusive processes is beyond local government capacity, and technology can solve precisely those burdens.



HOWEVER, institutional incentives combined with a view of citizens primarily as individual consumers have created a predictable route of failure: own-label, poorly built municipal apps that have little impact or are simply unused. The purpose of this In profile is to describe an alternative approach that emphasizes collective action instead of individual clientelism and puts communities rather than tender specifications first. It analyses the limits of technology in the context of a structurally unresponsive state, but also considers the impact

that alternative approaches may have, and possible means to replicate or broaden that impact.

FOCUSING ON COLLECTIVE ACTION

Grassroot, and the way it is used by community leaders, illustrates a different approach to this problem. Grassroot focuses on collective action, mostly offline (i.e. in person), through making it simpler and easier for community members or

leaders to engage in such action using simple mobile phones.

'Grassroot' refers to both an entity, which is half field-based and half a technology start-up, and to the mobile application it has developed and deployed. The 'app' works without a smartphone or data, using menus like recharging airtime or sending a please call me. It has reached over 100,000 users and over 1,000 actions a month are called through it. Grassroot focuses on community leaders' own practices, working with them to solve problems they identify, rather than solving problems that communities are assumed to have.

For example, to call a community meeting, instead of someone with a megaphone on the back of a bakkie, there is a thirty second set of menus on a phone, just like sending a 'please call me'. The meeting call function can work on any phone, even a non-smart phone, and even if the user has run out of data. The time and cost involved in organising a car, paying for petrol, and so on, are put back into collective action itself. For example, in Freedom Park in Soweto, those saved resources were used to buy bread for community members taking part in a march on Luthuli House to demand housing. In many communities, such a change leads to an increase in the frequency and attendance at public deliberations, in turn increasing the frequency and unity of joint action, in pursuit of action or engagement with government.

TSHEPISONG CASE

One detailed case comes from Tshepiso West, a community in the west of Johannesburg. With roughly ten thousand people, the community faces a familiar litany of issues: irregular provision of sanitation services; underutilised education resources; low-quality and insufficient housing; and a lack of formal recognition of the area as a township ('land proclamation').

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In mid-2017, the community began to adopt Grassroot. Using it to repeatedly organise gatherings of different sizes, record actions, and issue alerts, the community established a semi-formal structure, built on block committees. Community-wide organising takes place through a Grassroot group of almost 2000 people, with each block and different sub-groupings mobilising on specific issues through their own groups. Using this greater coherence, community leaders have engaged on a range of issues with the state. The groups engaged with the local school to convince it to put unutilised classrooms to work to open a Grade R. They established direct contact with the outsourced service provider for removing waste from the settlement's pit toilets and arranged to alter the collection schedule.

The community also engaged the City of Johannesburg more intensively through petitions, letters and in-person visits. The group attended IDP Forums, where community leaders asked city officials, 'Do you even know that we exist?', and forced the officials to respond they did not. Moreover, the officials present could also provide no feedback on issues raised in last year's IDP meetings. Nonetheless, the community organised large petitions and submitted them to multiple levels within the City and received a formal acknowledgement from the Speaker's office. They were referred to the petitions committee and promised a response which they never received. They have now begun marches to the ward councillor's house, and other forms of direct action.

In many ways, this community exemplifies engaged citizen action. Grassroot has enabled that action, but it has been generated by the community.

Unfortunately, such action receives barely any response from local government. In a survey of 100 community members, 40-50% had tried every method of engaging government – phone calls to call centres, letter writing, petitions, and in-person visits – and over 80% of those said they had received no response. More than 80% said they would try again, but with realistic expectations of success. Any new technology that is merely about individuals reporting problems to the city must answer why it will not be simply another means for citizens to talk into a void, or it will be a waste of resources.

Table 1: Engagement in Tshepisoong

| Channels to be used | % Tried | % No response | % Would try again |
|-------------------------|---------|---------------|-------------------|
| Made phone calls | 44% | 66% | 64% |
| Written letters | 24% | 79% | 77% |
| Talked to councillors | 52% | 76% | 74% |
| Met with municipalities | 30% | 79% | 78% |
| Tried all these options | 46% | 83% | 79% |
| Contacted the province | 27% | 80% | 76% |

A second case is a community called Mzondi, in the east of Johannesburg. The settlement was established recently, in 2016, when people in the Ivory Park area occupied an unused piece of public land. They established a rudimentary organisation when they took occupation, with a committee structure and registers of occupiers. They divided up some of the tasks of constructing a basic infrastructure, such as tapping nearby electrical wires and digging trenches for water pipes. The settlement is right on the boundary of the cities of Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg, leading to disputes about which of them the community should engage. In May 2017, Ekurhuleni deployed the Red Ants to evict the community, leading to violence and the death of a community member (whose name the community adopted as their own).

Community leaders in Mzondi have adopted Grassroot to coordinate and organise, using it twice a week or more to summon meetings and record or follow up on actions. Through this organising they were able to launch a crowdfunding campaign to build their own flush toilets and used Grassroot’s LiveWire service to attract press attention for it, eventually raising over R70k. They then initiated discussions twice a week on the use of the funds, to maintain transparency and deliberation while avoiding conflict, to the greatest extent possible. They have, as might be expected, found their principal stumbling block in engaging the City of Ekurhuleni, to connect the toilets to a main line, if possible.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE AND APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY

These two cases could be repeated several times over. In all, Grassroot has been adopted widely and grown quickly, with almost 100,000 users now and over 15,000 tasks called through the platform. Two thirds of users report that its adoption has made a significant difference to their lives, with meeting attendance more than doubling and the frequency and strength of action increasing. Much of the increase in time, resources and cohesiveness has been channelled into attempts to engage local government, through both informal and formal channels. These attempts have generally been frustrated, as in the case studies, through inertia, lack of organisation, local state capture, and lack of feedback.

Grassroot has attempted to engage local government to use the platform themselves, however, local government IT departments are often jealous of their turf, conservative, and strongly predisposed to writing tenders for their own apps. In one example, a department began using Grassroot to organise

community safety groups. Despite no software being installed on a municipal computer, when the IT department was informed of this, the department was rebuked for daring to not use a tendered, own-built app. Such an example has not been an unusual experience, for us, or for others working on similar initiatives.

When apps are built by municipalities, they tend to be focused on individuals as consumers, and presume the problem is reporting rather than accountability for responsiveness. Many communities have stories of reporting service delivery failures, receiving a text that the fault has been logged, and a day later receiving another text that the fault has been fixed, when nothing at all has been done. Such a situation is arguably the inevitable result of treating citizens as consumers, and presuming that problems are ones of information rather than of power.

There is a striking similarity in why and how local government is failing both in its ability to innovate on IT and, more seriously, on the promise of the White Paper and subsequent laws.

There is a series of deep problems in the managerial culture of local government, which might be characterised as 'if we didn't write a tender for it, we don't accept it'.

Technology can support collective action by communities seeking to realise the 'dream' of the White Paper by vigorous participation in developmental government, but unless and until those problems in local government are addressed, it will fulfil a small part of its potential, and generally tend to a proliferation of waste rather than innovation.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES FOR REPLICATION

On the one hand, this profile may sound like a counsel of despair. Local government doesn't

respond, as is known from case after case, for reasons deep in its managerial culture. Even when it approaches technology, which seems to change so much else in our society, the same old patterns and the same old failures reappear – the dream continues to be deferred.

On the other hand, the profile should not be read quite so bleakly. Some of the lessons here are the same as those learned in programmes having little to do with technology: that the viable route to durable long-term change lies in breaking out of individual 'clientelism' and emphasising collective action. Even in the technology components, the lessons only repeat what are by now widespread good practices: put the user first, which means the person acting within and with their community (not the tender specification) and solve the real problem, not what one believes the problem to be. If there is anything innovative in this case, it is only the rigor in applying such lessons.

It may then be asked how this example can be replicated, and part of the answer may be the more systematic construction of an infrastructure for collective action. While the traditions for doing so exist, in the last two decades they have been substantially defunded in favour of court and media-focused strategies. Such a situation may change, as such strategies' inadequacy in the post-Zuma era becomes increasingly apparent. At the same time, the last few years have seen the emergence of larger scale, cross-community, bottom-up organisations of the poor, such as Abahlali baseMjondolo. The possibilities of the White Paper may then depend, not on somehow convincing a lost local state to reform itself, but in the convergence of old traditions and new forms. The appropriate role of technology in that will be as a humble servant, focused on what ordinary people need to act together.