

Demystifying social audits: do collaborative social audits matter in service delivery?

Introduction

This article discusses how collaborative social audits can improve the performance of municipalities in South Africa. It draws on the case study of three informal settlements in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality to demonstrate the benefits and challenges of the social audit mechanism. It concludes that collaborative social audits matter, are important in improving the performance of municipalities, and have policy implications.

Collaborative social audits

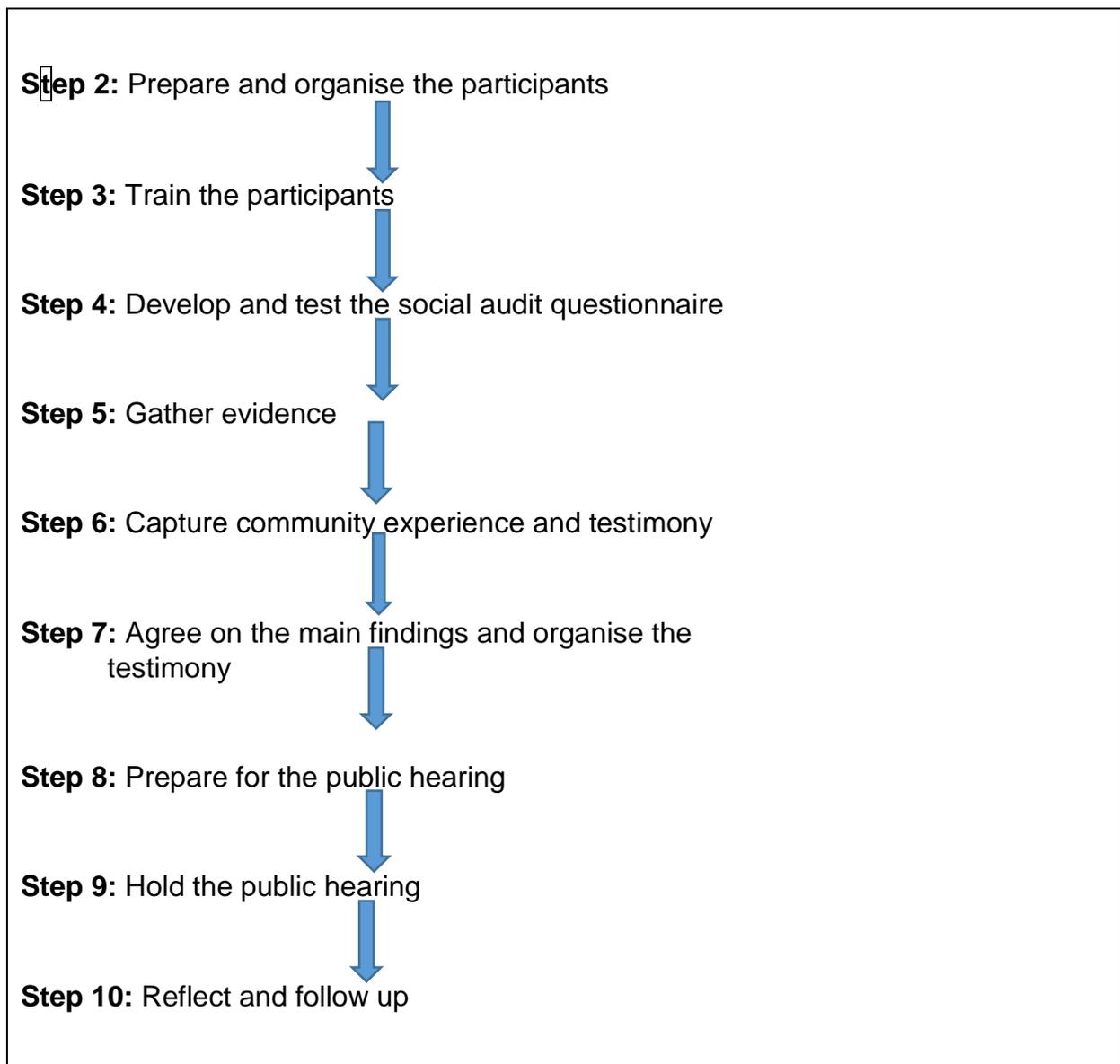
In January 2017, Planact introduced a social audit across the Harry Gwala, Emlotheni and Home Seekers informal settlements. The settlements agreed that a social audit would assist them to exert pressure on municipalities to address their needs in a systematic manner. They identified poor sanitation (specifically chemical toilets) as a challenge across the three communities despite the municipality providing a contractor to provide, clean and service them. The communities were concerned with the poor quality of some of the toilets and inadequate maintenance. With the support of the International Budget Partnership (IBP), Planact sought and gained the collaboration of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in the social audit, thereby qualifying the audit as a collaborative social audit. In the context of South Africa, it could be considered the first collaborative audit of its kind. This article can therefore be considered a demystification of this type of audit. Understanding the role of collaborative social audits is important not only for communities but also for policymakers. The latter have a constitutional mandate to improve social accountability in local governance because it affects service delivery.

What are social audits?

The United State Agency for International Development (USAID) defines social auditing as ‘a process by which an organization accounts for its social performance to its stakeholders and seeks to improve its future social performance’ (USAID 2008:1). Implicit in this definition is the relationship between accountability and performance. Social audits therefore promote accountability through effective mobilisation of the affected stakeholders (communities in case of service delivery). Indeed, a credible social audit of a particular service should be characterised by active involvement of the beneficiary community. The social audit mechanism ideally puts the beneficiaries first and establishes the relationship between complaints and the rules that have been violated which warrant punishment (Shankar 2010). In local governance, it reveals gaps between municipal policies, processes and practice, thus may help municipalities improve their performance. Important in Shankar’s definition is the element of punishment enforcement. From a development perspective, punishment is critical in enhancing the impact of social audits in that it serves as a necessary consequence of poor service delivery hence can reduce violation of municipal policies and processes in future. In essence, punishment partly helps in addressing Gaventa and Barrett’s (2010:347) concern regarding citizen engagement – ‘so what difference does it make?’ In this article I ask a related question: do social audits matter? I argue that collaborative social audits do matter and may improve service delivery. The case study of one social audit conducted in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality demonstrates this assertion. The social audit process provides space for meaningful interaction between communities and municipalities, and a credible social audit ensures the involvement of the concerned community in the various stages shown in the diagram below.

Step 1: Hold mass meetings and establish a mandate





Source: International Budget Partnership, *A guide to conducting social audits in South Africa*, 2015

What has been municipalities' response to social audits?

Social audits in South Africa are a new concept and few organisations have experimented with them. The concept of social audit was first introduced at a Freedom of Information conference in 2002, however, its implementation started in 2013 (International Budget Partnership 2014). The Social Justice Coalition (SJC), a non-governmental organisation based in Cape Town, were pioneers who conducted a social audit on portable chemical toilets in Khayelitsha informal settlement. In South Africa, social audits cannot be considered popular as yet and few case studies have been documented, hence the rationale of this article. In addition, the South African local governance has not yet integrated social audits into its programmes as a mechanism to improve municipal performance and service delivery. Contrary to the experience of South Africa, in India, social audits were pioneered in the 1990s and have been institutionalised and adopted as a vital component of improving service delivery. For instance, the Pradesh government made it part of its programme and set up the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency to conduct social audits on different programmes, resulting in improved government performance (Singh and Vutukuru 2007).

In the South African context, worsening the situation is the apathy of certain municipalities to social audits which manifests in the reluctance of some officials to cooperate with communities and non-governmental organisations conducting social audits on service delivery. Illustratively, Sandra Liebenberg, a professor in Human Rights Law at Stellenbosch, commented that the City of Cape Town sought to discredit the social audit on sanitation conducted by the Social Justice Coalition and Ndifuna Ukwazi in Khayelitsha informal settlement (Liebenberg 2014). Liebenberg's observation suggests that some municipalities lack understanding of the role of social audits in improving service delivery and citizen engagement in local governance. As another illustration, the community of Spring Valley supported by Planact experienced difficulty in conducting a water provision social audit because the Emalahleni Local Municipality was reluctant to provide the required documents and failed to attend the public hearing (Planact 2016) which is Step 8 in the guideline for conducting social audits. It can therefore be argued that some municipal officials have inadequate knowledge about the benefits of social audits. Similarly, few communities and community-based organisations fully understand the role of social audits in development, but a positive factor is their keen interest in learning about social audits. These factors therefore serve as the rationale underpinning the attempt to demystify the concept and share the experience of Planact on piloting collaborative social audits.

The pilot collaborative social audit in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

How was the social audit introduced to the municipality?

In March 2017, subsequent to the decision of the three informal settlements (Emlotheni, Home seekers and Harry Gwala) to conduct a social audit in collaboration with the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality (EMM), the support of the municipality was sought. The informal settlement leadership, supported by Planact and the international Budget Partnership, met with the EMM Divisional Head for Water and Sanitation Operation. The Divisional Head seemed to have less information about the concept of social audit as manifested in his questions which sought clarification on a number of issues. Planact and IBP explained the purpose of the sanitation social audit in the informal settlements, which was to monitor the service and advocate improvement where necessary. Despite the fact that the Divisional Head of Operations shrewdly questioned the social audit team, he eventually made a commitment to support the social audit process. Subsequently, the actual process of conducting the social audit commenced. On receipt of the formal request for the public records, the municipality provided most of the documents required to conduct the social audits, including tender documents, specifications and service standards.

Source of information: *Report on the meeting between the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality-Water and Sanitation Department and the social audit team (June 2017) prepared by Mike Makwela and Shumani Luruli (Programme Coordinators at Planact).*

Methodology

In preparation for the social audit, Planact trained forty volunteers on the social audit mechanism over a period of one week. Subsequently, the social audit team (comprising Planact and the volunteers) collected data using instruments (semi-structured questionnaires) compiled with the assistance of Planact. The team also conducted physical verification of toilets. Data was collected from 1,088 households randomly selected. The process of data analysis drew on patterns across the data set. Structured questions were analysed using a basic quantitative analysis.

Findings of the social audit on conditions of chemical toilets

A comprehensive social audit report covering the findings will be available in due course on Planact's website. However, selected findings are noted below.

The contractor (service provider) did not comply with the service specifications in many respects.
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- The toilets lack facilities for the disabled, thus, inaccessible to this category of beneficiaries.
- Approximately 16 per cent of the 1,088 households lack access to chemical toilets.
- Some of the toilets were poorly built and placed on bricks, therefore might collapse at any time.
- Most of the toilets lack locks, therefore do not provide privacy and safety to the user.
- The toilets are generally unclean and lack adequate servicing. The contractor does not provide community leaders with a schedule of maintenance and servicing of the chemical toilets, and servicing is conducted on an *ad hoc* basis.
- Workers lack employment contracts, uniforms and janitorial equipment.
- Workers do not receive salary advice slips.

Source: Social audit report prepared by Shumani Luruli (Programme Coordinator),2017.

How were the findings presented to the municipality?

Due to competing political assignments in the informal settlements, a public hearing was not held. A public hearing would have afforded an opportunity to a large number of community members to participate in the presentation of the social audit findings, present their experiences to the municipality's officials and hopefully obtain responses to the findings. Despite this hurdle, the leadership of the informal settlements determined to formally present their findings and experiences to the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. Eventually, within two months, the community supported by Planact secured a meeting with the Divisional Head of Operations in the Water and Sanitation Department. The community delegates presented the findings to him and some of his colleagues.

The Divisional Manager applauded the social audit team for carrying out the social audit exercise which revealed some of the issues that his department had either overlooked or were not aware of. These included the poor state of the chemical toilets, lack of facilities for disabled residents, poor working conditions of janitors and contractor's violation of the contract especially with regard to servicing and janitorial equipment. He assured the social audit team that he would facilitate recourse as soon as possible.

As per the rules of social audit regarding promoting two-way flow of information, the Divisional Manager expressed the concern of the municipality regarding the failure of communities to collaborate with municipalities in service delivery. He commented that the high density (structures) in the informal settlements impedes the municipality's efforts to provide services. Venting his frustrations as the head of the relevant department, he wondered how the communities expect upgrading of streets if some of the shacks extend to the very sites where access streets should be constructed. He therefore advised the community to reblock their settlements to allow the municipality to put in proper infrastructure. Although this was a hard criticism, the social audit team considered it valid because the mushrooming of new structures has repercussions. Despite being part of the social audit team, Planact found it important to emphasise the point to the community representatives because of its importance in the development of the community.

This narrative demonstrates that collaborative social audits are of mutual benefit. Collaborative social audits are not just about criticising state institutions but promoting both downward and upward accountability. As if he had been looking forward to this opportunity, the Divisional Manager continued to attribute the violation of the Municipal Sanitation Policy ratio of 1:5 households to the informal settlements leadership which permits mushrooming of shacks which were not covered during planning stage. He argued that the disproportional ratio emanates from these anomalies which disrupt the municipality from servicing the settlement. Ultimately, the Divisional Manager made a commitment to follow up on the social audit findings and ensure they are addressed.

What have been immediate benefits of the collaborative social audit?

Subsequent to the presentation of the social audit findings to the municipal officials, the municipality issued the service provider (contractor) with an instruction regarding addressing the anomalies presented to the municipalities by the community. The municipality adhered to the commitment it made to remedy the situation. As a result of pressure and close monitoring by the Division of Water and Sanitation the following results were achieved within one month.

- In one of the settlements, the contractor replaced the toilets that were not locking with new ones that lock from the inside and outside.
- The contractor recruited additional janitors to clean the chemical toilets and issued them with contracts of employment. Previously, employees were not issued with employment contracts.
- The contractor supplied its workers with protective clothing (something previously neglected) and a commitment was made to take them to the doctor for inoculation.
- The contractor embarked on social responsibility by donating school uniforms to deserving children in one of the settlements.
- The municipality is currently engaging the community regarding provision of permanent infrastructure and services.

Planact continues to support the community in the process of advocating permanent solutions to the challenges of poor basic services. This process involves different state institutions.

What are some of the lessons learnt?

- Social audits can improve the quality of service delivery in South Africa.
- Poor monitoring mechanism in municipal service delivery affects the residents of informal settlements.
- Some municipal officials are not familiar with the social audit mechanism, therefore training is necessary to bridge the gap and promote collaboration.
- Whilst municipalities have not been able to create a good reputation during the post-apartheid era, there are municipal officials sympathetic to the needs of the informal settlements.
- Poor coordination of the various departments involved in service delivery negatively impacts service provision in informal settlements.
- Municipalities sometimes do not have adequate information about a project implemented in a certain settlement, thus they need to actively engage with communities to help them understand their needs.
- Collaboration between municipalities, communities and non-governmental organisations in development issues could result in coordinated and improved developmental outcomes.

Policy implications emerging from the collaborative social audit

- a) Planact recommends that municipalities recognise social audits as a monitoring mechanism to improve accountability in service delivery. Whilst the collaboration of municipalities is important, it is recommended that they only provide support to communities in the form of accessing information and attending public hearings or relevant public meetings to keep the audits neutral and transparent.

- b) Since the Divisional Manager –Water and Sanitation in EMM mentioned that establishment of a division to monitor provision of service in informal settlements is currently underway, it is expedient that the division also supports social audits in informal settlements.
- c) Future tenders regarding provision of chemical toilets in informal settlements should include a clause compelling contractors to take into consideration the needs of the disabled.
- d) Tender bids should include a clause advising contractors/service providers to register their employees and provide them with contracts of employment, salary slips and conditions. This was also observed by the Divisional Head who indicated the importance of including such a clause. However, he mentioned that the municipality does not necessarily regulate the relationship between the employer (service providers/contractors) and employees.

It might be necessary to review the National Sanitation Policy (2016) to make changes in some of the above processes related to provision of sanitation.

Conclusion

Social audits may improve social accountability and service delivery in local governance. Municipality should provide the necessary support and collaborate with communities and non-governmental organisation conducting social audits on service delivery.

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