HOLDING THE STATE TO ACCOUNT THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING

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In South Africa, citizens[1] are losing faith in the ability of public institutions to respond to their needs. Across the country, communities, especially those made vulnerable by precarious living conditions, struggle to gain access to basic services. Allegations of rampant corruption call into question the values of officials in all spheres of government. While formal structures for participation may be available, these do not allow citizens to have a significant voice.

PUBLIC SERVANTS ARE perceived as answering to their own self-interests rather than their constituencies. The result of the state's lack of accountability and responsiveness is a loss of trust. Within this context, it is necessary to investigate emerging opportunities for citizens to participate directly in decision-making and monitoring processes and to exert influence over the actions of local government. In so doing, ways in which to enhance responsible and responsive local governance can begin to be explored.

One of these emerging opportunities is community-based monitoring, which allows citizens to determine the parameters for measuring local government performance and to demand action when their (reasonable) expectations are not met. After a brief contextual analysis that highlights the key accountability challenges at local government level, we consider what constitutes community-based monitoring and how the concept relates to an overarching concern with responsible and responsive governance. Then, examples of state-

and civil society-driven community-based monitoring processes are used to suggest that the transformation of local governance requires not only a capacitated citizenry, but also a capacitated state. The final section summarises some of the key lessons that the examples have to offer. We conclude with comments on how to enhance accountability and responsiveness in South Africa.

BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY

Section 153 of the Constitution (1996) sets out the objectives of local government, which include providing democratic and accountable governance, providing basic services, promoting social and economic development, promoting safe and healthy environments, and encouraging community involvement in the matters of local governance. Schedule 4B of the Constitution stipulates the basic services – such as child care, primary health care, electricity and water and sanitation – that fall under the domain of local government. In addition, Schedule 5B suggests that municipalities are responsible for public spaces, roads, refuse removal and street trading. In 2009, the National Housing Code also introduced the notion of municipal accreditation, which provides municipalities with the authority to administer aspects of the National Housing Programme within their jurisdiction. While some critical functions remain outside municipal jurisdiction, local government is responsible for coordinating planning processes, which must (according to Section 153 of the Constitution) be structured in ways that prioritise the community's basic needs. The White Paper on Local Government (1998) echoes the Constitution, stating that local government in the country should be developmental in nature and should, therefore, be 'committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find

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sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs'.

Given South Africa's history of exclusion and disenfranchisement, the functioning of local government is also central to the country's justice and transformation agenda. In line with this, the South African Local Government Association notes that because 'poverty is experienced locally, municipalities are confronted daily with the consequences of apartheid. As a result, a large part of the burden of addressing this falls upon local government, as it is the provider of primary services which are essential to the dignity of all who live in its area of jurisdiction'.[2] Taken together, these policy provisions[3] suggest that local government has a critical role to play in ensuring citizens' quality of life, through both delivering basic services and creating opportunities for citizen engagement in planning, decision-making, implementation and monitoring.

Despite progressive stipulations, however, current trends suggest that local government is not yet able to perform the functions of a developmental state and to translate policy into practice. Findings from the 2011 census[4] indicate that 26.7% of households in South Africa do not have access to piped water inside their dwelling; 17.9% of households rely on piped water situated outside their dwelling, while 8.8% do not have access to piped water whatsoever. A report by the World Bank (2011: 67) suggests that even when access to water is secured, it is often of poor quality. Census data also shows that only 57% of households in the

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country have access to flush toilets connected to sewage systems. A shocking proportion (19.3%) of households use pit toilets with no ventilation, 5.2% of households do not have access to toilet facilities at all. Statistics regarding provision can mask whether the service is accessible, affordable, in working order, deemed appropriate (according to community norms and standards) and sustainable – all of which can underlie community frustrations and anger with the service provided.[5]

Other services, such as housing, healthcare and education, are also performing badly in relation to indicators such as access, quality, and citizens' experience of staff (World Bank 2011). The inadequate delivery of basic services has placed significant strain on the relationship between local governments and their constituents, and has resulted in growing antagonism and animosity. According to Powell and De Visser (2014), a record number of community-based protests (218) took place in 2014. Nearly half (45%) of these were directly related to grievances with municipal services. Recent protests have turned increasingly violent, with 80% of protests in 2014 involving violence from communities and/or authorities. These trends show clearly that citizens use community-based protest action as a way of articulating frustrations, expectations and demands. As such, these protests also indicate the inability of formal participation structures to elicit meaningful engagement with citizens in local governance.

While the language of participation is firmly enshrined in South African policy, the dichotomy

between rhetoric and reality remains substantial. In relation to its 'Back to Basics' programme the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) notes that '[slow] or inadequate responses to service delivery challenges are…linked to the breakdown of trust in the institutions and councillors by communities. Social distance by our public representative is a major cause for concern. This reflects inadequate public participation and the functionality of ward councillors and committees' (CoGTA 2014: 5). Frustration over inadequate delivery is compounded by 'widespread instances of rent seeking and corruption amongst public representatives, reflecting a broader breakdown in the values and principles that should be guiding the people we have elected or appointed to lead the local government system' (CoGTA 2014: 6). Furthermore, the state's internal monitoring processes tend to favour quantitative outcomes and have, as such, allowed form to triumph over function. As Van Thiel and Leeuw (2002) suggest, internal performance measurements may result in organisational paralysis and measure fixation. This is especially true in the case of South African, where meaningful community engagement is stifled by local officials' compliance mentality. As the National Development Plan (NPC 2012: 437) notes, 'participation is often a formulaic exercise ... and citizens have little confidence in the value of engagement'.

This brief analysis suggests that local government in South Africa aspires to be developmental in nature but, in reality, falls short on at least two counts: (i) its failure to ensure appropriate and sustained access to basic services, and (ii) its inability to establish platforms for substantive citizen engagement. As a result of these shortcomings, citizens lose trust in the public institutions that deprive them of the ability to have some of their most fundamental rights realised. It is in this context that

we consider how accountability and responsiveness may be enhanced.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY MONITORING

The steady decline of trust in public institutions is not unique to South Africa. There is 'a growing crisis of legitimacy [that] characterises the relationship between citizens and the institutions that affect their lives. In both the North and the South, citizens speak about disillusionment with government, based on concerns about corruption, lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor and the absence of a sense of connection with elected representatives and bureaucrats' (Gaventa 2002: 1). In order for this crisis to be addressed, the state needs to be aware of, and responsive to, the needs of its citizens. Gaventa (2002) suggests that accountability should be understood not as a concept on its own, but rather as intrinsically linked to notions of participation and rights. On the one hand, accountability is ensured through collective decision-making processes while, on the other hand, accountability requires an ability to demand action from the state.

In response to the global concern about responsible and responsive governance, community-based monitoring emerged as a tool with which to position citizens at the heart of performance-measuring processes, and to ensure that government acts in accordance with their needs and expectations. Essentially community-based monitoring is about elucidating citizens' everyday experiences of local government, and emphasising the importance of this data for state policy and practice. According to Holzer and Kloby (2005: 523), 'citizen inclusion in measuring the performance of government adds value to the process and better informs policy decisions. Citizen participation in the formulation of socially relevant measures, data collection and presentation of results helps managers and elected officials design and measure services that matter to the community'.

Community-based monitoring is different from its internal governmental counterpart because it promotes horizontal accountability as well as vertical accountability (see World Bank nd). In addition to answering to higher ranking officials within the institution, community-based monitoring obliges local government to answer to its citizens. For local government in South Africa, which aspires to be developmental in nature, horizontal accountability is critical, underpinning relationships of trust and opening up opportunities for collaboration between the state and civil society. Indeed Kelly (2005) suggests that it is dangerous to assume that good government performance – measured according to internal indicators of success – equates to accountability to the people. Internal indicators need not correlate with the expectations of citizens. Indeed, the assumption that good performance is equal to accountability perpetuates the compliance mentality referred to above, and allows local government to ignore the complex everyday experiences of communities living in their jurisdiction.

Of course community-based monitoring is not only used to achieve developmental outcomes. The increased use of private sector language to describe the functioning of local government (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000; Kelly 2005) has resulted in a greater concern with the efficiency and effectiveness of the state in securing 'customer satisfaction'. Here community-based monitoring serves as a tool with which to gather information about the quality of services delivered and staff behaviour (World Bank 2004). However, measures of efficiency and effectiveness – which describe an ability to get the highest results at the lowest costs – are insufficient for capturing the diverse needs and expectations

of citizens in South Africa. In a country plagued by a legacy of marginalisation and disempowerment, the use of the term 'customer' to describe the role of citizens in relation to local government is largely problematic. First, the notion of 'customer' is highly individualised and, therefore, assumes that citizens only engage with the state about personal grievances. Second, the term infers passivity, as 'customers' are thought to consume public services instead of participating in decision-making and implementation processes. In line with this critique, Denhardt and Denhardt (2000: 552) note that 'administrators should see citizens as citizens (rather than merely as voters, clients, or customers); they should share authority and reduce control, and they should trust in the efficacy of collaboration'.

Moving beyond the restricting discourse of citizen-as-customer, the type of community-based monitoring advocated here is grounded in citizen agency, and in the acknowledgement that transformation can only occur if communities are the driving force of development. This form of monitoring also tests the orientations of local government officials, and promotes a particular value-driven approach to governance. Such an approach is referred to as a public service ethos (Rayner et al. 2010) and positions local government as an actor committed to achieving outcomes that are in line with the public interest. While an empowered citizenry is critical for realising transformative objectives, a receptive local government – willing and able to respond to the demands of its constituents – is also necessary, if community-based monitoring processes are to exert influence over state action.

Community-based monitoring can be undertaken in a variety of ways, and by a variety of actors. Popular monitoring methods include social audits, the administration of citizen report cards, and public hearings (for a more comprehensive review, see

DPME 2010). National, provincial or local government departments may initiate community-based monitoring processes. These can also be driven by non-governmental organisations, community-based organisation or informal community groups. Irrespective of the stakeholders instigating the process, and the methods used, a number of cross-cutting factors affect the success of community-based monitoring initiatives. According to the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), these include a) political will and recognition, b) capacity building, c) support to civil society organisations, d) the consideration of relationship-related issues and e) the visible use of results (DPME 2010).

These success factors suggest that community-based monitoring processes aimed at affecting tangible change require partnership, collaboration and capacity on the part of both citizens and the state. The following section explores how communities and local government can be empowered to participate in collaborative and transformative monitoring initiatives.

EMPOWERING CITIZENS THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY-DRIVEN MONITORING PROCESSES

As mentioned above, community-based monitoring takes citizen agency as its starting point. This particular approach to performance measurement assumes that communities are best placed to identify critical issues related to public services and infrastructure in their living environments. While that is indeed the case, the ability of citizens to articulate, monitor, and communicate these challenges may be severely limited by a lack of access to information and a shortage of skills related to data collection and analysis and performance monitoring. As the DPME (2010) notes, community capacity building is critical for implementing community-based monitoring

processes. The work of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), in partnerships with Ndifuna Ukwazi and the International Budget Partnership, is an example of strategies for capacitating communities through and for civil society-driven monitoring processes.

In 2014, the SJC – a social movement based in Khayelitsha, Cape Town – conducted a social audit of the City of Cape Town's janitorial service for communal flush toilets in the informal settlement. It was the result of prolonged engagement with the City over sanitation challenges. The report – entitled 'Our Toilets Are Dirty' (SJC and Ndifuna Ukwazi 2014) – suggests that the social audit was used to highlight the dire implications of the City's continued lack of responsiveness, and to demand action. An accompanying documentary[6] captures the process used by the SJC to conduct the social audit. In training sessions, community members were taught how to understand government budgets and policies, and how to collect and interpret information for the purpose of formulating questions directed at the City. Once training was completed, community auditors collected information on citizens' experiences of the janitorial service. The data was then analysed and eventually presented to the City. The entire process emphasised community empowerment through information sharing and capacity building. Indeed, the movement recognises that social audits 'are as much about empowering communities to understand government budgets and documents as they are about the audit findings and efforts to hold government to account. The process is as important as the end result' (SJC and Ndifuna Ukwazi 2014: 21).

The social audit has informed SJC's subsequent work on social accountability. In 2015 the SJC supported Khayelitsha residents in producing submissions to inform the City of Cape Town's 2015/2016 budget, particularly in relation to the City's capital budget for sanitation infrastructure in its 204 informal settlements. While not concluded at the time of writing, this process already illustrates that local government struggles to process and respond constructively to demands made by civil society actors.

An informed, active, empowered and capacitated community is critical for enhancing responsible and responsive governance, but efforts of civic actors may be stifled by a state that is unable to adequately respond to civil society-driven monitoring. The following section unpacks some emerging lessons that may direct our thinking about the importance of local government's receptiveness and capacity.

CULTIVATING STATE CAPACITY

The DPME's recent pilot project on community-based monitoring offers a number of lessons related to the importance of institutional design for enhancing responsible and responsive governance. While the DPME's pilot project does not focus on municipal services, the project nevertheless speaks to the role of local government in supporting systematic processes that work towards enhanced accountability and responsiveness.

In August 2013, the DPME released 'A Framework for Strengthening Citizen-Government Partnerships for Monitoring Frontline Service Delivery', in which it recognises that the state's internal monitoring processes paint an incomplete picture of government performance in the country. It suggests that public accountability may be significantly enhanced through the systematic uptake of community-based monitoring and, furthermore, promotes co-production

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and collaboration between diverse stakeholders. In September 2013, following the release of the framework, the DPME initiated a three-year, four-phase pilot project aimed at implementing a facility-focused, community-based monitoring model. The piloting team worked with four service delivery departments (South African Police Services, the South African Social Security Agency, the Department of Health, and the Department of Social Development) across nine municipalities in order to gain a better understanding of the skills, systems, resources and relationships that government officials (from all spheres) require to make service delivery work in ways that respond to the particular needs of local communities.

Subsequent reports by the DPME[7] provide details of the various phases. First, community surveys are undertaken in order to ascertain 'burning issues' related to service delivery in the community. During this stage, a number of community members are trained to administer surveys. A second phase involves feedback on the findings of community surveys, discussions of the root causes of the service delivery issues, and the presentation of proposed improvement plans. Representatives from management, staff and organised community groups are invited to participate in this stage of the process. Finally, once the state has communicated its response plan, there is agreement on the actions to be implemented and the subsequent monitoring process, to ensure that agreements have been honoured. According to Jonathan Timm[8] of the DPME, the 'sense-making' discussions (which formed part of the feedback and response formulation stage) were particularly valuable for challenging local officials and facility staff members to interrogate their practice, to uncover the complex issues underpinning everyday challenges related to service delivery, and to conceptualise creative and resource-efficient ways

of responding to citizens' demands. Timm noted that community surveys served as catalysts, not only for facility staff and management, but also for communities who – following the surveying process – mobilised to influence state action. Throughout these pilots, local government was recognised as a critical role player that ideally hosts the process and advocates for local priorities. Timm suggests that, through their participation in co-produced, collaborative community-based monitoring processes, local governments can enhance their capacity to address local needs by increasing their access to other spheres of government.

For the purpose of this paper, the DPME piloting process offers key insights into what is needed on the part of the state to enhance accountability and responsiveness.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

The examples set out above are meant to be illustrative rather than definitive. The social audit conducted by the SJC presents a highly localised experience of community-based monitoring, whereas the DPME's framework and pilot focus on public services that sit outside the local government sphere. However, despite these limitations, the cases provide meaningful lessons for enhancing responsible and responsive governance at local level. These lessons include:

1. CITIZEN VOICES NEED TO BE HEARD TO IMPROVE RESPONSIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The current state of local governance suggests that transformative outcomes cannot be achieved if the everyday experiences of citizens are not considered. These experiences are critical to the functioning of local government and must therefore

be recognised and responded to. The literature and case studies cited indicate that a variety of tools and methodologies for articulating and communicating citizen experiences exist and can be used to instigate change.

2. CAPACITY ON THE PART OF BOTH COMMUNITIES AND THE STATE IS CRITICAL

The SJC's work on social auditing illustrates the importance of capacity building at community level. Citizens who are denied accessible, affordable and quality services need to be equipped with tools that allow them to produce useful data about their settlements. Spatial and budget literacy, the ability to conduct a survey and reporting competencies empower citizens to engage as active agents with the state. The DPME's community-based monitoring pilot project shows that an active and empowered citizenry is not enough. To be truly transformative, citizen-led monitoring must occur relative to a receptive and capacitated state. Across spheres of government, structures and systems must be put in place to ensure that service providers can process citizens' experiences, and can work in collaboration with civil society actors to formulate and implement meaningful responses to critical challenges.

3. COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING IS A RELATIONAL PROCESS

A range of actors have important roles to play in community-based monitoring processes, including collecting and communicating to stakeholders data that articulates experiences and demands, as well as formulating and communicating responses to these demands. Therefore, community-based monitoring is arguably a relational process, which requires cooperation: between the state and communities, within the state, and within a community.

4. INFLUENCE IS BEST ACHIEVED THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT

The examples cited above suggest that only through collaboration can significant influence over the orientations and actions of local government be achieved. While civil society actors may use the outcomes of community-based monitoring to point out the faults of local government and to demand action, their influence over existing systems and structures is limited in the absence of a receptive and responsive state. For civil society-driven monitoring initiatives to exert influence over the state, local government officials need to be drawn into the process, and roles and responsibilities established, from the outset.

5. COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING IS A CHANGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

While community-based monitoring may be understood as a set of tools and methodologies for articulating the experiences and expectations of citizens, it also requires a deeper understanding of the interplay between values, systems, practices and capabilities and how changes in one aspect require concomitant changes in other aspects. Put differently, community-based monitoring is not simply about adopting new tools and techniques. Certain skills, capacities, values and relationships may need to be instilled in order to use these tools and techniques effectively. As the DPME pilot process demonstrates most aptly, it is not business as usual but 'business unusual' that must ultimately be converted into routine accountability, at which point it becomes the norm.

6. LEARNING WITHIN AND ACROSS SECTORS

This analysis of the state of local governance indicates that South Africa still has some way to go before it can be considered a developmental state.

But, despite the country's challenges, the examples cited in this paper suggest that progressive actors are questioning the status quo. The work of these actors, whether in civil society or the state, offers critical lessons that can inform South Africa's transformation agenda. Therefore, opportunities for learning within and across sectors need to be systematised, so that their hard-earned insights can inspire and inform improved practices and governance relations elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

If South African citizens are to regain trust in institutions designed to uphold their rights, then they need to participate in transformation processes. This paper has shown that community-based monitoring is a means of enhancing accountability and responsiveness at local government level. Citizens who are capacitated to document the challenges faced in their communities, and to connect these to potential solutions, are empowered to demand action from the state. However, an active citizenry is not enough to ensure significant and sustainable transformation in governance relationships. Rather, capacitated communities must be met with capacitated local governments, which are willing not only to listen but also to process and respond to the demands of citizens. To address the trust deficit in South Africa, what is needed is a set of parallel processes through which communities and the state are capacitated to play their respective roles in improving the state of local governance.

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NOTES

[1] Throughout the paper we understand citizens to be all the inhabitants of the country, irrespective of their place of origin or legal status.

[2] http://www.salga.org.za/pages/Municipalities/About-Municipalities

[3] See also Municipal Structures Act (No. 117 of 1998), Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000).

[4] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03014/P030142011.pdf

[5] This was borne out by community anger at sanitation provision in Mhakaza (Cape Town) and Moqhaka (Free State) in the period leading up to the 2011 municipal elections (dubbed 'the toilet elections' at the time) and, more recently, in places like Kosovo and Khayelitsha in Cape Town.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP_jxgdKYaM

[7] See http://www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/keyfocusareas/cbmSite/Pages/default.aspx

[8] Personal correspondence (28 May 2015)