



IN PROFILE: (RE)CLAIMING LOCAL DEMOCRATIC SPACE THROUGH MEDIA LITERACY TRAINING IN HELENVALE, PORT ELIZABETH

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The Eastern Cape Communication Forum (ECCF) works towards improving citizens' access to credible information so that they may creatively shape communication on key development issues in the province. One of the tools used to achieve this goal is Media Literacy Training (MLT). This *In Profile* summarises the implementation of two MLTs in the township of Helenvale in Port Elizabeth in 2014 and 2015. The MLT process proved to be beneficial to improving citizens' perceptions about their own capacity to engage with issues emerging within their local democratic space, and has the potential to provide key insights to local government and civil society organisations.

BACKGROUND

Helenvale is characterised by poverty, gangsterism and other socio-political complexities, found in varying degrees in other South African communities. A coloured township, Helenvale is located approximately 30 minutes' drive from the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole (NMBM) city centre. It is also a historic site of displacement, with many of its residents having been forcibly removed from other areas in the NMBM.

Developed to accommodate 6000 people, the area now provides tenancy for 20 000 – 69% of which are below the age of 35 – and is critically underdeveloped. Only 12% of the population have completed general education (grade 9 or higher) and 4% have no schooling at all; 29.9% of households earn less than R800 a month (significantly less than the national average income of R8 800); 46% of inhabitants claim to have no income; and 49% are unemployed (significantly more than the national average of 37%) (StatsSA 2011).

Not much has changed since the onset of democracy, and Helenvale has remained socio-economically marginalised. As a coloured area in a metro dominated by black-majority areas,

Helenvale residents mainly elect councillors not from the ruling party, consequently antagonising the metro and neighbouring communities. Aside from the historical displacement and the fierce socio-economic constraints gripping the area, media representation/reportage on Helenvale reinforces and reproduces the existing high degree of political antagonism. Further, in 2013 the rate of crime was six times the national rate, and the township remains the poorest within the NMBM. Through the regional and tabloid press of *Die Burger* and *Die Son*, the area receives a great deal of attention with coverage on shootings, gang activities and public protests. As a result, representations of Helenvale in the mainstream news paint a very bleak picture.

THE ECCF AND MLTS

The socio-political nexus in which the ECCF operates consists of the following dominant actors: citizens; CSOs; community/commercial media; and the state, as represented through local government communicators. Through its work with these actors, the ECCF has found that 'the relationship between media and good governance is most pressing in transitional democracies [like South Africa], where the role,

expectations and norms that guide this relationship are still disputed amongst the actors involved in the public communication of politics' (Votmer in Norris 2010: 138). The ECCF has established that if residents already feel marginalised and/or neglected by state actors, this impacts negatively on how they experience public communication through media/state.

Media literacy is defined as 'the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communication in a variety of contexts. The aim of media literacy is to increase people's awareness of the many forms of media messages encountered in their everyday lives' (Livingstone, 2011:4). Most implementation of MLTs takes place in schools, however the ECCF employs media literacy tools informed by citizenship theory, thus taking the value of the tool beyond the classroom and into the community.

The ECCFs approach is founded on an understanding of the value of a multi-stakeholder approach in 'completing the circuits of democratic communication' (Dreher 2012: 159), eliciting debate and fostering democratic sensibility amongst citizens. The organisation therefore makes use of a different, more collaborative, community and context-driven model when implementing its MLTs and thus defines an MLT as:

Capacity building that works with citizens on the ground to improve their knowledge on community media; the importance, role and impact of media on their daily lives as well as an understanding of tools and methods that can be used for media engagement while developing or further enhancing the relationship between citizens and local media available in their area. In all trainings, participants also gain an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens with regards to media consumption and participation. (ECCF 2014)

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The first step in the model was to listen to the needs of the community through conducting a needs assessment. In this case, the needs assessment revealed limited knowledge on the functioning and use of media, and tensions between citizens and media, emanating from longstanding resentment about negative media representations of the community. It was thus important to take cognisance of unequal power distributions in the area and amplify marginalised voices by engaging as many contextual actors as possible. For this reason, the first MLT included community journalists, field experts, and local government and CSO actors.

The second step was stakeholder mapping and collaboration. This led to the identification of the Safety and Peace through Urban Upgrading (SPUU) initiative at the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) as a suitable partner. The SPUU focuses on violence and crime prevention in Helenvale through urban upgrading and the implementation of social initiatives. Some of these initiatives focus on the use of media and communication tools to provide skills and empowerment to marginalised community members and youth.

For MLTs to succeed, participant-led goals must be incorporated into the intervention. The MBDA expressed that the envisioned outcome of the SPUU project would be supporting a youth group in developing a Helenvale-centric newsletter and draft business plan for the media production. For this reason, they were eager for a deepened media

literacy and media management training geared towards preparing the MLT group to achieve this.

MEDIA LITERACY TRAINING

ECCF has conducted two media literacy training sessions, in 2014 and 2015. The most recent of these included some participants from the preceding year, six of whom have since started their own media forum to keep the momentum going. During the training sessions, the following was explored:

- ✦ Awareness of media consumption.
- ✦ Theory around media and society.
- ✦ Communication skills.
- ✦ Interpretation of media messages.
- ✦ Media management.
- ✦ Media production.
- ✦ Media business plan development.

Discussion involved debate about the tension between citizens and the media, and how participants had experienced strongly negative reporting about their community that had made them hesitant to engage with the media. In the form of an action theatre, participants were asked to engage in role play and acting as both journalist and community member, thus expanding their perspectives on the process involved in media production. Participants also had a strong interest in the field of social media and the ethics of its use, and were engaged in exercises aimed at deconstructing ideas around media representation and what it means to be an active citizen.

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These interventions revealed that while youth in Helenvale have a basic awareness of media, they also lack knowledge of community media and information on how to participate or engage with it in an effort to become active citizens and claim deliberative democratic spaces. As such, the MLT also focused on practical aspects of media literacy such as:

- ✦ Visiting local media houses where, through interactions with community journalists, participants were able to acquire first-hand insight into the practices of local media.
- ✦ Producing various forms of media content, with the assistance of community journalists; this included opinion pieces on community matters, photography relating to the topic of their community and radio interviews.
- ✦ Preparing feedback to give to their respective plenums to allow for a transfer of learned skills. In this way, participants had the opportunity to *listen* as well as be *listened to* in an open and encouraging environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The MLT sessions revealed that despite many youth spending a great deal of time engaging with media, they are not aware of the gravitas of this. Even though young people are often deeply embedded in a culture of media consumption, there is a lack of critical engagement and questioning of the value and relevance of media in a broader sense. As such, the bottom-up approach adopted by the Eastern Cape Communication Forum is significant for bringing to the fore the experiences and context of the group of participants, as this encouraged them not only to claim discursive space, but also interrogate questions around the role of media in democracy, and in turn, the role of active citizens when using media.

Since the first MLT in 2014, the ECCF has continued to strengthen relations with students from the Rhodes School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS), integrating them into the MLT as mentors. While this has been a positive development, it is recommended that direct involvement of local government and civil society actors in such trainings can further enhance critical engagement on democratic issues by making participants feel part of a broader community. For example, in previous MLT sessions in Mdantsane, East London, the ECCF successfully engaged the

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and the civil society organisation Ground Up.

The ECCF thus continues to pilot innovative aspects within their MLTs, however, it is acknowledged that in order to successfully facilitate the reclamation of democratic space by citizens, deeper engagements with civil society organisations and local government as well as further practice-led research is recommended to build a firmer framework for context-driven MLTs in the province and South Africa as a whole.

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