

UJ Sociology, Anthropology & Development Studies

W E D N E S D A Y

S E M I N A R

Hosted by the Department of Sociology and the
Department of Anthropology & Development Studies



Meeting no 11/2016

To be held at 15h30 on Wednesday, 04 May 2016,
in C-Ring 315, UJ Kingsway campus

**Learning to listen: Institutionalizing citizen-based
monitoring in South Africa**

- Draft in progress. Do not copy or cite without authors' permission -

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Learning to Listen

Institutionalizing citizen-based monitoring in South Africa

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Abstract: This paper reflects on efforts by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and partner organisations to institutionalise citizen-based monitoring (CBM) in the South African government space. It highlights the importance of a “listening” approach, both in the development of a CBM method as well as for building the skills and capacity to support the institutionalisation of citizen-based monitoring.

Nkutlwe ke go utlwe. This seTswana expression - roughly translated - means *Hear me, I hear you*. It captures the central role that listening to diverse voices played in a two year action learning process that DPME, together with the Seriti Institute, implemented across 34 government facilities in all nine provinces. The purpose was to develop knowledge, insights and a method to enable service delivery departments in government to strengthen participation of citizens in monitoring service delivery. This paper will explore how this listening approach influenced the citizen-based monitoring method that was developed by DPME, while also providing background to DPME’s efforts to institutionalise citizen-based monitoring in government.

Why was this needed?

The intensive work at police stations, health facilities, SASSA local offices and paypoints and Department of Social Development service points was anticipated in a policy framework approved by Cabinet in August 2013, titled “A Framework for Strengthening Citizen-Government Partnerships for Monitoring Frontline Service Delivery.”

The 2013 framework presented the following problem statement: “The participation of citizens in monitoring government service delivery is ad hoc and in many sectors not present. It is currently not valued as a way to enhance the efficiency and productiveness of service delivery.” (DPME, 2013).

It identified the experiences of citizens as a “critical component of measuring the performance of government and for the delivery of appropriate and quality services.” It noted that the emphasis of “government’s monitoring was on internal government processes and the voice of the citizen as largely absent.”

“This is a risk as the picture is not complete. It is therefore necessary to support the uptake of systematic ways to bring the experiences of citizens into the monitoring of services. CBM does not duplicate or replace existing public participation structures or processes (e.g. Community Development Workers, Ward Committees etc.), but rather offers the potential to strengthen the monitoring capacity of these, providing tools and methodologies to strengthen public participation in monitoring. Citizen-based monitoring activities may also take place outside of existing public participation structures.” (DPME, 2013)

The following passage from the National Development Plan adds a more developed context:

“Service delivery protests stem from citizen’s frustration that the state is not responsive to their grievances. This is unfortunate, as citizens are often best placed to advise on the standard of public services in their communities and to suggest possible interventions.

There are two main forms of accountability. In the standard hierarchical model, junior civil servants are accountable to their superiors; the public service is accountable to its political principals, who are in turn accountable to the electorate. In the bottom up approach, citizens hold public officials accountable at the level at which the services are delivered. These approaches are mutually reinforcing. Bottom up approaches are effective where there is a commitment to citizen engagement. Citizen groups cannot be expected to have the time or resources to fulfil a (competent) monitoring role, but can highlight shortcomings. Civil society can also play a role in scrutinising government data, while government can encourage such scrutiny by ensuring data is made available in suitable formats.

The Department of Performance Monitoring has primary responsibility for the first form of accountability – each minister is held accountable to the President through a performance agreement, the implementation of which is monitored by the department. This hierarchical accountability would be enhanced by an improvement of everyday bottom-up mechanisms of accountability that would enable citizens to communicate their grievances and seek redress at the point of service delivery. Routine accountability would enable citizens to provide on-going insights into service delivery.” (NPC, 2012)

This need for more robust mechanisms for citizens to participate in the service delivery process is identified in a 2008 study of public participation by the Public Service Commission. This work found that public participation in South Africa was largely a public relations exercise and urged government to take a bolder and more experimental approach. (Public Service Commission, 2008)

Furthermore the Twenty Year Review: South Africa 1994-2014 identifies the need to enable “citizens to provide direct feedback on the quality of services through citizen-based monitoring, and ensuring that frontline public servants and their managers are given adequate authority to address issues as and when they arise. More emphasis needs to be put on engaging citizens in their own spaces rather than only expecting them to use forums and structures established by the state.” (The Presidency, 2014)

What is Citizen-Based Monitoring?

The 2013 framework provides the following definition: “Citizen-based monitoring (CBM) is an approach to monitoring government performance that focuses on the experiences of ordinary citizens in order to strengthen public accountability and drive service delivery improvements. It requires citizens to be active participants in shaping what is monitored, how the monitoring is done and what interpretations and actions are derived from the data.”

Again from the framework:

“Many definitions of citizen-based monitoring are possible and citizen-based monitoring can be applied to a range of contexts – from frontline service delivery monitoring for improvements and public accountability; to assessing the impact and relevance of policy and legislation. The framework acknowledges that many of the approaches are shaped by a participatory research and learning tradition that reaches back to the 1970s; drawing on various international methods, including Participatory Action Research (Paolo Freire, Fals-Borda and others) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (Robert Chambers and others). (Estrella & Gaventa, 1997). Citizen-based monitoring also draws on the customer satisfaction approaches used by the private sector. It is shaped by a body of international and local experience and there are numerous established citizen-based monitoring methodologies and instruments. These range from client satisfaction surveys, grievance mechanisms (ombudsman, hotlines etc.), citizen report cards, web and SMS-based reporting tools, to facility level monitoring by community members. What is common to all these approaches is that the citizen is central to the monitoring process.”

“Citizen-based monitoring can employ collective and / or individual-driven accountability mechanisms. Some of the tools for monitoring and citizen feedback are targeted to individuals (surveys, call centres, complaints systems) while other instruments are more collectively-oriented (social audits, public hearings). Different approaches suit different contexts and require different capacities and resources.” (DPME, 2013)

It is clear from the framework that a variety of methods and approaches conform to the definition of citizen based monitoring. Government departments are encouraged to experiment and adapt these to ensure that citizens are able to effectively participate in monitoring performance.

As the policy champion for citizen-based monitoring, the framework required that DPME build capacity to provide support and oversight to service delivery departments to implement CBM. DPME adopted a “learn through doing” and immersed itself in the complex realities of four service delivery departments. This two year project was known as the citizen-based monitoring pilot.

Learning through listening

The approach was to start small with a small number of sector departments: the South African Police Service, the Department of Health, South African Social Security Agency and the Department of Social Development – and work through several implementation cycles at various facilities. Each cycle of implementation was followed by an intensive review where the team reflected on their multiple experiences and perspectives. The core team, made up of DPME officials and Seriti Institute staff, brought a considerable diversity of skills and perspectives. Similarly team members were exposed to very different parts of the service delivery environment – from senior government officials, frontline managers, staff, community leaders and ordinary citizens. These competing perspectives from the field were given equal voice in the reviews. This continuously improved the collective understanding and evolved a robust method forged in the South African service delivery reality.

This reflective or listening approach was used in the field as well. After each day’s activities the team came together to share their insights and experiences. These meetings often included officials from provincial Offices of the Premier. As with the more formal structured reviews, this Nkutlwe ke go utlwe approach to sharing information and insights enabled problem-solving and adaptation of the method. For many junior officials not used to sharing their views this was an empowering experience. One junior official from a provincial office remarked: “I have never experienced a senior official and an intern having a real discussion about how to solve a problem. This is an eye-opener.”

These reflection or listening sessions were key to building a shared understanding of the underlying principle of voice that citizen-based monitoring is based on. Shaping the team engagements according to participatory values played an important role in developing the facilitation skills required to work with community and government officials. This was supported by formal training in participatory methods.

Through this listening and learning approach a generic CBM method has been developed. It is a three step approach¹:

Step 1 – Collecting feedback on a particular service through community implemented citizen and staff surveys **Step 2** – Using this feedback to develop a set of published actions and commitment through a

¹ DPME has published the first version of its Citizen-Based Monitoring Toolkit. Any reader interested in a more in-depth examination of the method should access this – and other publications – on DPME’s website www.dpme.gov.za/cbm.

participatory process involving community members, local leaders and government officials. **Step 3 – Monitoring and reporting on the actions agreed to achieve the commitments.**

The listening approach was central to the CBM work with facilities and the communities they serve. However in the earlier cycles of implementation the conventional “teacher tells” approach dominated. Discussions were between the powerful and the CBM facilitators were easily drawn into the expert role, leaving community and officials alike as an audience. This challenge in facilitation was made visible through the reviews and strategies were developed to shift established patterns.

These strategies involved several things that are usually not regarded as important. For example how a room is set up for a meeting. The conventional approach is to set up a table up front for the VIPs, with the less important people arranged as an audience. This automatically communicates how discussion will take place. The CBM method experimented with different ways to set up a room and to facilitate a community meeting. These reconfigurations allowed for greater equality in physical and symbolic position and created new dynamics in discussions. Language was also a critical enabler/ inhibitor of participation. The facilitators consciously sought to allow space for different languages to be heard, challenging the hegemony that certain languages automatically reproduce. These approaches are documented in more detail in the CBM toolkit. (*See footnote on p3*)

CBM take up in government

Based on the work done through the CBM pilot, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has started to roll out the CBM method in nine pilot stations, with the aim being to build capacity and knowledge to expand the implementation in 2017/18. The first implementation took place towards end of 2015, at Wolmaransstad Police Station in the North West. The method will be implemented in another eight police stations around the country in 2016/17. A similar approach to the CBM pilot will be followed, with reviews taking place after each implementation in order to evolve version of the method that is fit for purpose for the SAPS environment. This adoption of the iterative listening approach in the highly hierarchical policing environment is significant and could unlock innovation and new capacities for problem solving.

The CBM pilot identified a number of systemic challenges facing SAPS through its focus on the specific experiences of frontline managers, staff and the communities they serve. These have included turn-around time in vehicle maintenance, allocations of resources for rural stations and the unintended consequences of targets. It is expected that the expansion of the CBM method to other police stations will allow SAPS to test practical solution to these challenges, while building healthy relationships with their communities.

DPME will continue to provide close support to SAPS officials and work with them to develop a SAPS compatible version of the method. The Nkntlwe ke go utlwe approach to capacity building and customizing the method was key to the pilot phase of CBM and will be used by DPME in its support to service delivery departments. (Timm & Masemola, 2016)

The strategy to institutionalise citizen-based monitoring

With the completion of the CBM pilot, DPME is now better capacitated to play the support and oversight role with regard to the institutionalisation of citizen-based monitoring, as defined in the 2013 framework.

DPME has developed a five year strategy to guide this role. Key to this strategy are the findings of an implementation evaluation conducted on the pilot as part of the National Evaluation Plan.

The strategy adopts the following recommendations from the evaluation:

- i. This implementation evaluation does not recommend a wholesale ‘scale-up’ of the intervention in pilot form, but rather a considered and targeted roll-out of the model’s successful process elements customized to selected service departments. The first service departments for roll-out should be those that have shown interest and willingness to participate throughout the process and where there is a demand, such as the South African Police Service (SAPS).
- ii. For the next five years DPME’s role should shift from implementer of the CBM pilot model to that of policy leader, custodian of the methodology, knowledge partner and institutional repository for CBM good practices, approaches and methods, as well as a skills developer and facilitator within the state. A strategy that emphasizes refining the most effective methods and building institutional capability to implement CBM within departments under the guidance of DPME is proposed.” (PDG, 2015)

The five-year strategy is built around three key strategic areas, namely:

a. Creating demand for CBM in government departments

This first thrust will involve various tactics to create demand in service delivery departments to ensure they have effective citizen-based monitoring mechanisms. Key to this is Sub-Outcome 14.4 of the Medium Term Strategic Framework’s (MTSF). This sub-outcome is focussed on “Promoting Active Citizenry and Leadership” and sets a target that “All departments delivering services to the public should have at least one citizen based monitoring programme in place by March 2018”. This is to “Promote citizen-based monitoring of government service delivery”. DPME is responsible for this target. (DPME, 2016).

The Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT), which DPME administers across government, will be used to drive compliance with this MTSF requirement. A standard that will measure compliance will be developed over the 2016/17 year and will be implemented in 17/18. As set out in the 2013 framework, citizen-based monitoring includes many possible tools and approaches. DPME will ensure that key principles are met, regardless of the tool used.

b. Supply of CBM tools, knowledge and capacity

The five year strategy gives equal attention to both the supply and demand sides of institutionalising CBM. On the supply side DPME will continue to work with departments in the development, implementation and refinement of citizen-based monitoring tools and methods. This work will respond to requests for support from service delivery departments, as illustrated by the work DPME will be doing with SAPS in 2016/17. This will allow the DPME CBM team to continue its exposure to the practice of citizen-based monitoring at the service delivery interface.

Again the MTSF provides a lever for this work, in this instance Outcome 12 (An efficient, effective and development oriented public service). Sub-outcome 12.6 notes that to “*improve service delivery it is important that the state pays attention to the needs and concerns of citizens.*” To do this the MTSF commits government to a focus “*on citizen feedback to drive improvements in service delivery, and ensuring existing mechanisms for citizen participation are used effectively.*” The MTSF sets a target of implementing citizen-based monitoring in at least 50 facilities by 2018. This target is the responsibility of DPME. (DPME, 2014). Similar targets are included in South Africa’s Third Country Action Plan for the Open Government Partnership.

c. Responding to systemic problems identified through CBM activities

A third strategic thrust will focus on interventions to respond to systemic problems identified through citizen-based monitoring activities. These could include issues such as delegations of authority to frontline managers, unintended consequences of target setting and performance management and increased participation in budget processes. This work would obviously integrate with many other initiatives both within and outside DPME. The same Nkutilwe ke go utlwe approach will underpin these interventions.

Conclusion

The early indications of uptake by departments who participated in the CBM pilot – SAPS in particular - affirm the value of what this paper calls the listening or Nkntlwe ke go utlwe approach. In contrast to the conventional compliance driven approach to policy implementation, the CBM experience points to the value of allowing participants at all levels of a system to shape the solutions to the challenges they face.

Writing in the annual *State of Local Governance 2015* publication Kitching and Van Donk make the following observation:

“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. 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. (Kitching & Van Donk, 2015)

Over the next years DPME will direct its efforts in citizen-based monitoring to building this capability in government, so that the State is increasingly able to hear - and respond to - what is most important to the people.

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