



# REMODELLING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY

*The prospect of social audits in South Africa*

The HSRC was invited to participate as an independent observer of two social audits in Cape Town, the first trials of their kind to implement this methodology in South Africa. Researchers *Elmé Vivier* and *Diana Sanchez Betancourt* share their insights and reflections on the process.

**M**eaningful engagement between local governments and communities, especially the poor and most vulnerable, is a fundamental part of good governance. It is encapsulated in the constitution and National Development Plan (NDP), and further defined as a mandate of local government in the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 and Municipal Structures Act of 1998.

The NDP in particular establishes active citizenry as necessary for democracy, accountability and development. Engagement processes should therefore enable and realise citizen agency as an integral component of governance, where citizens are partners in decision-making and service delivery processes.

A number of participatory initiatives that explore new and innovative ways for citizens to engage in local government and service delivery processes are emerging across South Africa. One of these is the social audit.

## **Social audits to monitor public spending**

Social audits are a form of monitoring where communities analyse government spending of public resources and measure and report on service delivery. It is an audit of government contracts, financial records and other relevant

documents through physical verification and interviews with service beneficiaries. It culminates in a public meeting where the results of the audit are presented to members of the community as well as to local government representatives and officials.

Social audits have been implemented in various contexts around the world (e.g. Kenya, El Salvador, Bosnia and Herzegovina), and especially in India where they have been successfully scaled up through government support.

Importantly, a social audit is primarily concerned with the people who receive and/or experience services. Carried out by community organisations and volunteers, it is 'social' insofar as the people who implement it are also the people who receive or are somehow affected by the services.

**Participants learn how local government works... this helps build awareness and share knowledge.**



## Potential of social audits in South Africa

In the South African context, the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), a community-based organisation in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, has been experimenting with the social audit methodology under a broader campaign for better sanitation in informal settlements.

The first audit, conducted in April 2013, focused on chemical toilets. More than 60 participants inspected 256 chemical toilets and interviewed 270 residents across four informal settlements. A second audit conducted in October 2013 looked at refuse removal services, and the most recent audit (conducted over the week of 13–19 July 2014) monitored janitorial services. Each audit included a public hearing where members of government and relevant service providers were 'invited to listen to the reports, offer their views on remedial action, and respond to and engage with community members on the issues and concerns that were raised' (SJC 2013: 4).

Given the nature and process of the social audit, it offers a methodology to achieve both better citizen engagement and service delivery. Specifically, it has the potential to enhance access to information; empower communities and local agency; facilitate communication and improve service delivery.

### **Enhancing access to information**

The right of access to information is provided for in the South African constitution, which gives every person the right to access information held by the state or private entities that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights. The social audit relies on access to and analysis of detailed government information. This may include relevant budgets, service delivery agreements, invoices, employee contracts and payment records. In this way social audits contribute to building a culture of transparency, as citizens identify, source and engage with relevant information.

### **Empowering communities and realising local agency**

Through accessing and analysing government documents, participants in the social audit learn about how local government works and how a particular service is supposed to be delivered. This helps build awareness and share knowledge. As a result, audit participants and residents in the areas being audited become more informed about their rights and responsibilities, facilitating the realisation of local agency.

### **Facilitating communication between cities and communities**

The provision and management of basic services require interdepartmental co-ordination and communication with citizens. Although social audits focus on a particular service, they enable communities to identify backlogs within the service delivery chain – information that could be fed into processes across political and administrative structures, and across different line departments. Furthermore, communication between government and citizens could be enhanced, as the social audit provides new platforms for knowledge sharing between government officials and citizens and a space to build better informed citizens.

Overall, the examination of micro-processes and individual lived experiences brings to light issues that are often hidden within more formal audits. It assumes that citizens and residents are not merely people with needs but also people with

knowledge and resources (Boyle and Harris 2009). It therefore provides a platform for the co-production of knowledge between citizens and government, and an acknowledgement that different forms of knowledge should contribute to the evidence base for urban planning and development.

**It brings citizens into the service delivery process as owners and co-producers rather than simply beneficiaries.**



### **Improving service delivery**

Through a social audit, auditors are able to identify problems in the service delivery chain and provide practical inputs for making rectifications, thus improving services. It brings citizens into the service delivery process as owners and co-producers rather than simply beneficiaries. This has the further potential of enhancing the sense and exercise of shared responsibility for public utilities, which is essential for the sustainability of projects and services. It encourages residents to take co-ownership and co-responsibility for valuing and safeguarding service delivery infrastructure.

### **Going forward**

There is general agreement among scholars and practitioners that formal participatory processes in South Africa often fall short in achieving meaningful engagement. There is also recognition that the failure of the government to engage citizens and communities could undermine the provision of basic services and urban development processes. This is particularly concerning in a context where the majority of the population already lives in urban areas, the figures for which are expected to increase to nearly 80% by 2050.

The Cities Support Programme (CSP) is an interdepartmental initiative led by the national treasury that recognises the crucial role of municipalities in tackling the challenges of spatial transformation in the context of rapid urbanisation. According to the treasury, the CSP aims 'to support the spatial transformation of South African cities to create more inclusive, productive and sustainable urban built environments... [with] a special focus on enhancing service delivery, especially to informal settlements.'

Within this urban and institutional context, social audits offer an opportunity to explore and refine a new way to engage with citizens. The goals of the social audit are to improve government transparency and accountability, and ultimately performance.

Since an audit enables communities to point out gaps within the delivery chain, through it they can potentially identify practical ways to improve public programmes, projects and processes. It is also an opportunity for the poor and marginalised to become active role-players in the delivery of services, and for citizens and governments to work together to co-produce knowledge towards a common goal of better service delivery. ■

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