

Levering m-governance innovations for active citizenship engagement

Introduction

A core component of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is the commitment to ensure public participation in governance, aimed at giving effect to the principle of a representative and participatory democratic state, with sections 59, 72 and 118 of the Constitution calling for public involvement in legislative processes. Central to the Constitution are values of non-racialism, equality and protection of individual and societal rights. Consequently, South Africa has established a number of channels aimed at giving effect to enhancing citizen engagement in governance and through which the Freedom Charter clause 'the people shall govern' may be realised.

In spite of these channels for active citizen participation, effective communication between the state and its citizenry remains a challenge for policy-makers (DoC 2015). This undermines the objective of the Freedom Charter to ensure participatory democracy and governance. Indeed, post-1994 South Africa has seen increasingly violent protests for diverse reasons. Although violent protests in themselves are a form of active citizen engagement, they highlight the ineffectiveness and low community

infiltration of 'created spaces' for public participation and channels of communication between the state and the citizenry (Smith 2000–2009).

Current policy-derived instruments aimed at enhanced citizen engagement face great challenges. For example, newly created 'spaces' for public participation are irregular and largely reactive community meetings initiated by local municipalities, traditional authorities and councillors. They are typically convened at short notice without any broad or inclusive communication strategy and are largely top-down in approach. In some local municipalities, 'mayoral hotlines' have been established. However, these convey compliments and complaints from constituents rather than forming a bidirectional avenue of communication about local government plans and intentions. Even the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP), initially formed in 1994 on the principles of participatory and inclusive development, has failed in terms of promoting increased citizen engagement through participation, paying little more than lip service to the ideals and principles that originally underpinned its formulation and acceptance (Hart et al. 2012; Jacobs and Hart 2014).

To complicate matters further, the newly constituted Department of Communication (DoC) has focused largely on unidirectional media communication with citizens and has allocated most of its resources to this (DoC 2015). Little is being done to step up bidirectional avenues of communication to encourage and increase community participation in governance. One exception in this regard is the limited support of locally based radio and television stations which sometimes have call-in programmes and talk shows that are bidirectional.

Seeking out improved means of citizen engagement

Unfortunately, violent protests have become the dominant channel of communicating with government or getting government to pay attention to grievances of the citizenry – especially around labour disputes and increasingly at the level of basic service delivery. This is completely at variance with South Africa's Constitution and other legislative frameworks, which seek to ensure that citizens play an active role in democratic and governance processes. The increasingly adverse consequences of the ineffectiveness of post-1994 created spaces for public participation motivated the National Development Agency (NDA) to commission a study into what is required to enhance active citizenry engagement in democratic and governance processes in South Africa.

This study, which was conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) between August 2014 and April 2015, surveyed a total of 19 organisations covering 8 provinces. The geographic spread consisted of 10 urban/peri-urban community organisations and 9 rural community organisations. In terms of the typologies of the structures, the study sample included 8 community development forums; 3 community development

foundations; 3 non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and 5 community-based monitoring (CBM) structures. In spite of differences in legal/organisational structure, the boundaries in relation to purpose and function were often blurred in that legal structure did not necessarily inform an organisation's function or purpose.

The study found that most of the existing structures for active citizen engagement are saddled with enormous challenges that undermine their effectiveness as channels of communication between the state and the citizenry (HSRC 2015). Two key challenges stand out:

- It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to establish physical structures for public participation that are apolitical, due to the sharp political polarisation evident in most communities post-1994.
- Many active citizen engagement structures and related activities experience difficulties with the scale of penetration into communities and in keeping community stakeholders informed about new developments. This low infiltration is attributable to poor communication strategies on the part of the organisations driving citizen engagement (NGOs, civic structures, local government) and results in the lack of access to relevant information by community members.

The impact of these challenges is that effective and cordial channels of communication between the state and communities have largely been non-existent among the majority of organisations surveyed in this study. Mobile phone innovations could resolve some of these challenges by creating a more neutral platform for engagement between government and citizens. Mobile technology could also offer fast real-time reach to any community member irrespective of location.

This policy brief focuses on the opportunities to give leverage to mobile phone innovations as a means of mitigating these constraints to effective and timeous communication between government and citizens. The brief considers the benefits that could accrue to both citizens and government; examines international evidence of mobile governance (m-governance)¹ innovations; presents key research findings from the study by the NDA and the HSRC; and makes policy recommendations for the way forward.

Could mobile phone innovations be a means to improved governance?

Mobile phone technology offers a unique opportunity for governments to rapidly expand their capacity to interact more widely and directly with citizens, and thereby to produce benefits and deliver outcomes for citizens. Mobile phone technology mitigates most of the challenges that inhibit the effectiveness of existing physical structures established to enhance active citizenry engagement. The extensive mobile phone penetration in most developing countries with poor or non-existent telecommunication infrastructure creates the opportunity to mitigate the digital divide, which is a major challenge to the ability of governments to give leverage to innovations in information and communications technology (ICT) for active citizen engagement (Uhm 2010). Although telecommunication infrastructure may be poor in developing countries, high mobile phone penetration creates access to cutting-edge technology in some of

¹ M-governance refers to the use of government services and associated applications through means of mobile devices (cellular phones, notebook computers, personal digital assistants) and wireless connectivity. E-governance, on the other hand, performs a similar function but requires notebooks or personal computers with more complex and expensive software and hardware.

the most deprived areas. Mobile phone technology further offers seemingly apolitical mechanisms for soliciting active citizen engagement.

The delivery models of m-governance include government-to-citizens (G2C), government-to-government (G2G), government-to-business (G2B) and government-to-employees (G2E) (Uhm 2010). Although G2C is the most applicable in terms of fostering active citizenry, the other three models of m-governance also represent forms of active citizen engagement. Quite simply, the public sector, businesses and employees also consist of citizens with different types of needs that equally require engagement with government, using less political and more neutral platforms.

M-governance services fall into four main categories: informational and educational services; interactive services; transactional services; and governance and citizen engagement. Each of these four categories entails different levels of interaction between government and the citizenry. The use of m-governance platforms to inform and educate the citizenry is usually one-sided in nature and includes limited interaction, with information flowing from government to citizens and requiring no feedback from the latter party. Interactive services and transactional services elevate m-governance to higher levels, facilitating two-way interaction between government and the citizenry.

Citizens' engagement through m-governance platforms is an ideal mechanism for ensuring 'connectedness' and active participation of the citizenry in democratic and governance processes. A number of mobile tools such as Short Message Service (SMS), mobile phone software applications (APPs) and social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) have become powerful and prevalent communication

channels for government and citizens to engage, positively impacting on democratic and governance processes, as witnessed in the Arab Spring events, Hong Kong pro-democracy protests and other similar international experiences this decade. These mobile technologies could be positively and proactively harnessed by the South African government to foster inclusive development and growth.

Benefits for government

M-governance provides a potentially wider reach than any other medium for interaction between government and the citizenry. For instance, SMS and APPs have extensive reach, faster speed of interaction, and the ability to forward information and data to friends, co-workers and family. Mobile technologies offer flexible options for the hearing impaired and voice options for the visually impaired. National wireless hot spots enable citizens to access government information and services while interacting with government anytime and anywhere, especially in instances of public safety and emergency management (OECD/ITU 2011).

Benefits for citizens

Mobile phones are more affordable for citizens than is computer hardware needed to access information-technology-based e-governance platforms. Given its popularity, social media represent an easy and unique opportunity to engage government on relevant issues through mobile phone technology. Mobile phone technology has been used to benefit citizens in health-service delivery, providing real-time information on disease outbreaks and medical emergencies in remote, unreachable areas in many developing African countries (Crown Agents 2014). Suspicious and criminal activity can also be alleviated through

mobile phone applications that facilitate communication between government agencies and the citizenry (Hellström 2010). In countries where m-governance mechanisms are well structured and operational – for example, in the European Union and Australia – all citizens have the opportunity to enter into dialogue with their parliamentary representatives and relevant government agencies on issues of interest, thereby encouraging public input into policy formulation using mobile phone applications (OECD/ITU 2011).

International evidence of the value of m-governance

The International Telecommunication Union of the United Nations cites a few examples of current m-governance international practices (OECD/ITU 2011):

- Singapore's Mobile Government Programme (M-Gov) provides more than 300 mobile government information and services through a central SMS platform known as OneSMS. M-Gov has platforms for the disabled and citizens with special needs to access prompt police and emergency services. At the end of 2009, more than 3.3 million mobile government transactions had been conducted by citizens (UNDESA 2010).
- Turkey's SMS Judicial Information System enables citizens and lawyers to enquire about and receive SMS responses to legal information, such as dates of court hearings, ongoing cases, and suits or claims against them.
- In Kenya, Nairobi's People's Settlement Network uses mobile phone applications to organise citizens and rally against illegal evictions, drawing government's attention to the need for immediate action in favour of the victims.

- Through mobile websites and smartphone² applications, the government of South Korea receives real-time civil complaints and policy suggestions from its citizens.
- In Turkey and Norway, government revenue authorities use mobile phone applications to help citizens to query and pay their taxes via SMS, along with a reminder of the next tax-payment deadlines.

Mobile platforms in South Africa

Mobile phone applications are used extensively by the business sector (e.g. banking, advertising: SMS, Twitter and Facebook); a few public sector institutions (South African Revenue Service: SMS and Twitter); academic institutions (Twitter and registration status via SMS); as well as individuals in South Africa (communication and social platforms). However, the government of South Africa and state agencies have yet to adapt m-governance technologies as a means of soliciting and maximising active citizen engagement in governance and democratic processes. The study identified a few telecommunication innovations used in South Africa in respect of active citizen engagement:

- The Presidential Hotline, which is mainly telephonic access to the president's office to report on grievances that require immediate attention and intervention.
- The South African Local Government Handbook, the Provincial Government Handbook and the National Government Handbook contain contact details of local, district, provincial and national government offices. These directories are accessible on the website

www.localgovernment.co.za, and enable citizens to reach the relevant offices when the need arises.

- Cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg provide the mayor's contact details on their websites. In addition, some local governments have mayoral hotlines where service complaints and praises can be submitted.

However, only two mobile-based platforms were identified:

- The South African Revenue Service (SARS) has a mobile phone application for smartphones that can be used for e-filing purposes to file tax returns in each financial year. This enables tax-paying citizens to actively contribute their quota to national development. SARS also uses SMSs to communicate feedback to citizens on progress made with filed tax returns and any queries that emerge.
- The M4Girls project – a partnership between the Department of Education, Nokia and the non-profit organisation Mindset Network – provides mobile phones loaded with educational material to female students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their proficiency in challenging disciplines such as mathematics. It also enables beneficiaries to network with peers, thereby expanding education (OECD/ITU 2011).

To date, mechanisms for enhancing active citizenship engagement consist mainly of committees and structures largely influenced by the political dynamics of the electoral landscape as well as the constraints referred to above: challenges with the scale and penetration into communities, and poor communication strategies that make it difficult for communities to access relevant information or to respond to information. For example, organisations opposing e-tolls in Gauteng province have effectively used

mobile phones in communicating with the public, while the government has ignored this communication channel, relying on more traditional forms of media when attempting to provide information and updates. The various constraints undermine the apolitical nature and effectiveness required for civic engagement structures to achieve legitimacy, credibility and accountability with the citizenry, as well as their ability to serve as neutral and effective channels for public participation (HSRC 2015).

Recommendations

The post-1994 state has not been very successful in responding timeously to citizens' grievances and concerns. This situation has to be addressed as soon as possible to mitigate the frequent violent protests in South Africa that arise from weak citizen engagement, and to ensure that citizens play an active role in democratic and governance processes.

- South Africa should take advantage of its 81.9% mobile phone penetration (Stats SA 2014) to enhance easy, fast and real-time two-way exchange of information between government and the citizenry. This will allow for immediate and constructive expression of community grievances and prompt responses from government to address issues of concern.
- Government needs to invest in and roll out national wireless hot spots in rural as well as urban areas, and provide support to assist the citizenry to operate social networking and mobile government APPs and SMSs on their devices. The cost implications of such investments must be thoroughly examined, as must the potential for public-private partnerships with the telecommunication industry. Some partnerships already exist in major cities, from which usage and cost benefits could be projected for other areas. Infrastructure and resources

2 A smartphone is a mobile phone with an advanced mobile operating system that combines features of a personal computer operating system with other features useful for mobile or hand-held use.

for developing the software for APPs used by government might be needed, but this would be a beneficial investment to the country as a whole and would outweigh the social and economic costs and suffering brought about by poor and often non-existent communication that leads to violent protests.

- Pilot studies should be conducted to investigate the opportunities of innovations in m-governance, and to see that adequate checks and balances are in place to ensure that mobile platforms remain a channel for constructive communication and criticism and not a means for online recruitment for violent groups, as is being experienced in some developed countries today.

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