



THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS: A CASE STUDY OF A SOCIAL AUDIT IN EMALAHLENI LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

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After 20 years of democracy the state continues to face difficulties in the delivery of basic municipal services as low-income communities, such as the pilot project that Planact is working on with the Springvalley community illustrates. The community remains marginalised in the existing local municipal development processes.



PHOTO: PLANACT

DUE TO THE unsatisfactory service delivery by local municipalities, citizens have participated in protests to exert pressure on their local governments to provide basic services. In spite of the South African government being seen as one of the democracies with a progressive constitution, there are many occurrences of unacceptable and slow-paced service delivery, which prompts local communities to engage in protest actions as a way of venting their frustrations (Reddy, 2010). Social accountability has emerged as a recent, alternative approach, with social audits being used as a particular method of

engagement. Communities in South Africa are starting to learn more about, and use, social audits as a recourse to hold government accountable, with the support of non-government organisations (NGOs).

According to the framework of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME), social auditing is a process through which project information is gathered, analysed and publicly shared and discussed (Dawson, 2014). Enabling a community to contribute to the development of their neighbourhoods through social audits, empowers them greatly. HRSC (2017) emphasises the positive

outcomes of this saying that through meaningful participation in the social audit process, communities develop an understanding of the issue, learn how to measure the problem, verify evidence and find ways to communicate the findings. Importantly, in this research process, community members are not passive recipients of evidence, but generators of evidence as well as advocates attempting to address the problem.

In the case of the Springvalley community, the community opted to exercise their constitutional rights by using social audit methodology to engage with the municipality around water service delivery. Springvalley is an informal settlement located at eMalahleni Local Municipality. Conducting a social audit by the Springvalley community brought about the need for the local municipality to answer any irregularities that were cited, which contributed to local municipal accountability.

The paper has two objectives: firstly, to explore the origin of social audits and to examine the challenges encountered during the social audit process in relation to social accountability. Secondly, the paper demonstrates how social audits can contribute to increased social accountability in service delivery. The paper concludes that collaboration between civil society and municipalities is an essential element of effective social accountability in service delivery. This paper uses social accountability as a conceptual framework and draws on data collected using qualitative and quantitative research. The paper intends to make an important contribution to policy discourse on South African local governance and social accountability.

CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM

Water is an essential element to our everyday lives and is cited as a human right. According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,

“everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water”. Despite this view, stated clearly in the Constitution, many marginalised communities in South Africa are experiencing a continued inadequate supply of water.

Such marginalised communities find it very difficult to engage with government structures, which emphasises the large gap between state and citizens (IBP, 2013). Despite the mechanisms in place for public participation (Municipal Systems Act [No.32 of 2000]), this often does not occur. This large gap between state and citizens prevents government from being held accountable for the challenges faced by most communities. As a consequence of all this, the communities become disgruntled and violently protest because they feel that their voices are not heard and that the government is ineffective, unresponsive and dismissive (Shaidi 2013).

In the communities in which Planact engages, it has been noted that citizens are increasingly getting to learn their rights regarding participating in government developmental processes and are becoming capacitated to do so.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Planact and Springvalley Development Committee (SDC) have been engaging the eMalahleni Local Municipality for the past four years on the issue of providing water to the informal settlement. Emphasising citizen participation that focuses on government performance and accountability, Planact and the Springvalley community conducted a social audit following their dissatisfaction with water service delivery to the informal settlement. This process is centred on the principles of equity, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and community empowerment (Gahlot 2013).

The South African government recognises that active citizen participation is a necessity for

democracy and transformation (see Sections 59, 72 and 118 of the Constitution). Planact has observed that when there is adequate public involvement between communities and government, this creates a healthier democracy, while in contrast, without public involvement in legislative processes, protest action often occurs (Sekyere & Motala 2016). Citizens' understanding of their rights and their ability to participate in municipal processes including the monitoring of public service delivery has strengthened active participation and contributes towards the country's developmental goals (DPME 2013).

The Constitution (1996) calls for instruments that allow citizens to meaningfully engage in decisions about their development and in debates about the laws that govern them. Eglin and Ngamlana (2015) note that in South Africa, good governance is not a new concept as it is present in various pieces of legislation (including Chapter 7 of the Constitution [Act No. 108 of 1996]; the Municipal Structures Act [No.117 of 1988]; and the Municipal Systems Act). Explicit in the legislation is the mention that to achieve good governance, a strong relationship between the decision making and implementation processes has to be in place. According to Bekink (2006), once a municipality adopts a delivery system, that municipality is obliged to be accountable for all its activities and the assurance of good quality service provision; unfortunately, this accountability has been found wanting in many local municipalities that Planact has engaged with in the past. In practice, a disjuncture between service delivery plans/policy and implementation often occurs.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND SOCIAL AUDITS

It is noted that over a long period since the new dispensation, a number of tools have been developed by several organisations and government

institutions which are intended to assist communities in monitoring service delivery, government responsiveness and citizens' experiences in these processes. It is further noted that these tools mainly focus on planning, and monitoring and evaluation of outcomes; in contrast, social audits are often described as mechanisms that focus in monitoring public affairs and on meaningful community engagement to enhance accountability (Baltazar and Sepulveda 2015). It is therefore acknowledged that social accountability often refers to citizens as individuals exercising their rights, and social audits refers to citizens as users of the goods and services provided. It is in this context that this paper prefers to refer to citizens as the users of the goods and services provided.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The World Bank Learning Group defines public participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect them (World Bank, 1995). From this perspective, participation could be viewed in terms of consultation or decision making in all segments of the development phase, from implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Participation is a prerequisite for development in contemporary urban planning (Planact, 2016) and it fosters solutions which respond to the priorities and needs of affected individuals and vulnerable communities. Madumo (2014) affirms that, participation is not a technocratic driven approach but could be viewed as a transition from planning for the people to planning with the people. According to Creighton (2005) public participation is a dialogue and collaborative activity through which the people's concerns, needs, and values are acknowledged and integrated into the governmental decision making. It should be noted

that, as a two-way dynamic process, communication demands the participation of both parties (citizens and state) for it to be effective (Madumo, 2014). Planact views participation as an inherent good and believe that recognition of their views and accountability are generally what citizens seek in engagement with government. In a South African context, however, two-way communication with government does not easily occur.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The term social accountability has been defined differently by various stakeholders. According to Ackerman (2005), social accountability is defined as a methodology that involves building accountability that focuses on community engagement and citizen participation in challenging state accountability. In this regard, the citizens' voices are amplified, creating a mechanism for participatory monitoring and meaningful citizen-state engagement and effective service delivery informed by a contribution towards policy (Saldivar et al. 2013). While we recognise that marginalised communities are indeed users and consumers of particular services, the organisation firmly believes that they are more than that. In our view, a social audit, therefore, is a powerful tool in enabling citizen participation to improve government performance and accountability (Berthin, 2011).

SOCIAL AUDIT

Social audits have gained prominence in recent years as an intervention methodology that can improve social accountability in local governance, and also create a collaborative relationship between civil society and municipalities. The term social audits originated in the United Kingdom and Europe in the mid-1970s. One description of social audits is that they are evaluations that focus on the likely impact on community and the environment (Gahlot 2013),

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while another states that social audits are a form of public participation largely focused on state performance and accountability (Berthin 2011). From observation, this concept is qualitatively different from other forms of audits and citizen participation as it encompasses a holistic society in the decision-making process of public administration affairs. In such instances participation is viewed as an engagement between the government and citizens, which entails partnership that enables people to change outcomes and be satisfied with exercising their rights. According to Farzad, et al. (2012), social audits are a tool based on analytical inputs which correctly monitor the impact of government activities on the social well-being of the citizens. It is in this context that the paper will adopt the notion of social audits as methodical analyses of qualitative and quantitative data. Social audits are viewed as an effective campaign tool for holding governments accountable for the services provided (Samuel 2014).

Based on the social audit guide, the method consists of two phases: planning and preparing; and conducting a field audit on the specific issues. For a beneficial social audit to be achieved, a core group of individuals need to be available throughout the process (IBP 2013) to ensure some level of constancy during the audit period. The illustration below further explains the steps of conducting a social audit.

Figure 1: Steps for conducting a Social Audit” as per style guide



Source: (Planact, 2016).

Social audit practices have been widely used in India, where Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (MKSS), a local civil society organisation (CSO), introduced social audits as a tool to monitor expenditure irregularities and corruption on minimum-wage regulations by the government (Baltazar & Sepulveda, 2015). Social audits have been institutionalised in India to monitor the provision of several public services and policies. Government officials in India are in support of this process, and this ensures the successful attendance by key officials for the public hearing (Baltazar & Sepulveda, 2015).

SOCIAL AUDITS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Inconsistencies in delivery of basic services in marginalised communities continues to be a critical challenge in the new South Africa. Communities are constantly in battle with the government regarding the unacceptable quality of services provided. Social audits in South Africa began to occur in 2013. The Social Justice Coalition (SJC) launched the Clean and Safe Toilets campaign as a response to their dissatisfaction of the Western Cape government's lack of responsibility in addressing issues of sanitation. The main shortcoming of a social audit

is access to municipal documents. According to Constitution of South Africa, Section 32 (1996), everyone has the right to access any information held by the state, however this has not been the practice with most municipalities, as many organisations involved in social audits are continually faced with the challenge of accessing municipal documents. In our experience, obtaining a suitable document to audit a service against has proven to be a major challenge. The case study of Springvalley explicitly shows the disconnect between citizen-state engagement and access to official state documents.

INTRODUCING SOCIAL AUDITING TO THE SPRINGVALLEY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Monitoring and evaluation of the engagements with municipality forms part of the process within all

Planact's programmes. Based on other South African organisations' experiences of social audits, Planact felt that it was useful a methodology to monitor and effectively advocate for improved service delivery in informal settlements.

Springvalley is an informal settlement community in eMalahleni Local Municipality in Mpumalanga Province. eMalahleni, named for the isiZulu word for coal, is located at the western side of the province bordering the Gauteng province (see attached map); it is in the Nkangala district municipality. According to the 2007 census, eMalahleni municipality has a population of 435,226 with a household complement of 105,593. Springvalley is a community consisting of approximately 2,200 households (Planact, 2015). The community mainly comprises poor households and lacks access to basic services (Planact, 2015).

Figure 2: Map of Springvalley Community



Source: Google Earth Pro, (2017)

Despite the fact that the municipality has a legislative mandate to publish the contracts once they are allocated, the Emalahleni municipality does not make contracts available online and some of the other procurement documents were also missing.

Through the Participatory Governance Programme, Planact assisted in capacitating the SDC to ensure they are equipped with knowledge on how government works, especially municipal practices and processes. Part of the training was introducing the community to the South African Constitution, the municipal legislative framework (e.g. Municipal Financial Management Act [MFMA]), and the municipal systems (e.g. Integrated development Plan [IDP]; Performance Management Systems [PMS] etc.). This training was to empower communities to meaningfully participate in municipal processes such as the Integrated Development Plans and municipal budgeting.

Planact introduced the concept of the social audit to the committee as a methodology they could use to monitor and evaluate service delivery by the municipality and the private contractors they employ. Through training and watching videos of other institutions and communities that have used the social audit as a monitoring tool, the SDC was encouraged to adopt the tool, and subsequently a mass meeting was held with the community of Springvalley to explain the monitoring tool. The community agreed that this would be a helpful advocacy tool in the context of their ongoing campaign for improved water provision in their area, and they gave the SDC and Planact the mandate to use the methodology. As indicated in the social audit method, it is important to prepare and plan properly to ensure that the process succeeds. There were several activities that were done to prepare for the social audit. The community

of Springvalley identified that water provision to Springvalley had been outsourced by the eMalahleni municipality, to a private company – Pholabas. Pholabas was using tankers to deliver water to this area. There have been several issues with the delivery of this service, particularly insufficient and inconsistent water supply; the community does not have a reliable clear schedule for the delivery of water, hence, they never know when next to expect a delivery and the water delivered by the trucks is often found to be dirty, and community members are concerned that it may result in health hazards.

Because the service is delivered by a private company, the social audit team established that there must have been a procurement process through which this service provider was appointed, and a contract specifying the details of the service, which prompted the start of requests for documents from the municipality to be able to conduct the social audit with the community. Despite the fact that the municipality has a legislative mandate to publish the contracts once they are allocated, the Emalahleni municipality does not make contracts available online and some of the other procurement documents were also missing. Planact and SDC wrote a letter, signed by both the director of Planact and the chairperson of SDC, to the Emalahleni Local municipality (addressed to Mr Mashile [the head of technical services] and Mr Van Vuuren [the municipal manager]) requesting the following documents:

- a) Service delivery agreement between Emalahleni Local Municipality and Pholabas
- b) Emalahleni Local Municipality water services implementation plan
- c) Tender document
- d) Contractor's water delivery reports
- e) Payment schedule and invoices
- f) Municipal budget for informal settlements water provision.

There were numerous attempts by local activists to follow up and access information. A response was received from eMalahleni Municipality after a month, advising the social audit team to use the PAIA application rather. The PAIA application was drawn and submitted to the records department of the municipality and a period of 30 days lapsed with no response from the municipality. A number of follow-ups were made, and it became clear that the municipality was not willing to share the information as they argued that it involved a third party, referring to the service provider. An attempt was also made to speak to the service provider directly. The meeting revealed that the service provider's contract had expired two years ago (2015). The municipality had initiated a procurement process to appoint a new service provider but for some reason has been unable to award the contract. As a result, the municipality had requested that Pholobas continue to provide water on a month-to-month basis. Eventually, through the assistance of an International Budget Partnerships (IBP) official, the audit team managed to get documents that gave some information about the water service provision.

This social audit was a community-led process, as such the community was fully engaged, with the support of civil society organisations. A training of trainers was conducted by SJC, NU and IBP with assistance from Planact. The training equipped the participants with capacity to support the implementation of the most challenging components of the social audit process. The training session also equipped the participants with practical lessons on developing questionnaires and data analysis using the previous work done by SJC. A number of questionnaires were developed by the team to facilitate the social audit process:

- ✦ A questionnaire to interview residents was developed with 22 questions;

Despite the legislative and policy frameworks requiring the participation of citizens throughout the delivery cycle, the reality on the ground reveals a disconnect between policy intentions, government practice, and the experiences of citizens (Dawson, 2014).

- ✦ A questionnaire to interview the driver of the water tanker was also developed with 8 questions; and
- ✦ A verification form was also developed to help the team to verify and collect evidence about the water tanks and water stations.

Fieldwork was divided according to the sections in the settlement with more teams focusing on the residents and two teams focusing on physical verification and the driver interview. The fieldwork was done in a period of three days with 678 household interviews. During the data analysis stage, the team worked together to verify the data and analyse the findings; Planact, SDC and the volunteers identified a number of things that needed to be rectified, clarified and dealt with by both the municipality and the community.

The public hearing was held on the 12th of March 2016 in the Springvalley community. Invitations were extended to the Emalahleni local municipality, in particular the municipal manager and the director of technical services and the Nkangala District municipality, however none of them attended. Residents of the settlement were there, with the SDC and CPF managing the proceedings. Some of the team members presented the findings to the residents. The residents were given the opportunity to give comment and ask questions to the team and the municipality in absentia. The social audit team then took the social audit report to the responsible department as a means of engaging the local municipality.

ANALYSIS

Service delivery protests erupt due to a collapse of communication between municipalities and communities, while strengthened community engagement in municipal processes improves service delivery (Kanyane 2014). Despite the legislative and policy frameworks requiring the participation of citizens throughout the delivery cycle, the reality on the ground reveals a disconnect between policy intentions, government practice, and the experiences of citizens (Dawson, 2014). This disconnect is evident in the Springvalley case, as the social audit has helped Planact and SDC and the volunteers to realise a number of things that need to be rectified, clarified and dealt with by both the municipality and the community.

One of the findings from the social audit revealed that the municipal documents indicate that water should be delivered three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, but the trucks are seen in the community everyday even though they do not go to all service stations. The residents said they receive water three times a week, however not necessarily on those days, thus the municipal plan does not reflect the reality on the ground. There were several questions asked to the residents regarding the maintenance and monitoring of this water service and the majority of the residents stated that they have never seen any municipal official monitoring the water service delivery in Springvalley. The municipal documents show that councillor B.D Nkosi is responsible for confirming the delivery of the water, and yet he remains unknown by the residents.

The challenges that the core team faced during field work were:

- The weather, as the social audit was conducted in summer, and it was very hot and walking in the settlement was challenging.
- The interview environment, which was not conducive to interviews, as most people stay in shacks which become very hot during the day, so it was not easy to sit inside for interviews. It was equally challenging to sit outside because as there was no shelter.
- There were a lot of empty houses as a lot of community people were not at home during the times we conducted the field work.

Conducting this social audit in Springvalley has proved that there are alternative ways to hold government accountable and simultaneously empower communities. The social audit methodology has increased Planact' understanding of the community and municipality's challenges, and this has in many ways also served to shape the organisation's development programmes. Planact's involvement with Springvalley and other communities has led the organisation to be cognisant of the need to prioritise citizen-state relationships, therefore, it is recommended that the state actively promote and incentivise citizen involvement for effective service delivery and accountability (Dawson, 2014). The value of the social audit in holding local municipality accountable has proven to be a success, and as a result of it, the community of Springvalley has a permanent water solution.

CONCLUSION

Social accountability mechanisms can contribute to improved governance, accelerate development, and create effectiveness through better service delivery and empowerment. These mechanisms

Improving levels of accountability from government authorities requires deep levels of commitment from both government bureaucrats and politicians

promote transparency and accountability in the service delivery processes. Absence of sufficient accountability mechanisms usually lead to frustration which can be expressed violently, as seen in the service delivery protests which have swept through South Africa in the past few years.

Debates on how much citizens should be involved in development processes continue to happen within government institutions and some development practitioners, comparing the value between the time taken to complete projects with the citizens' involvement and the possibility of completing a lot, however possibly not what citizens most need.

Improving levels of accountability from government authorities requires deep levels of commitment from both government bureaucrats and politicians. It is with this understanding that it is

imperative that local municipalities provide and create spaces of meaningful engagement with citizens and community-based organisations to test and experiment on policy processes that affect community service delivery challenges. The introduction of social audits to communities like Springvalley, provides them with an opportunity to play a meaningful role as citizens of South Africa because they are drawn into activities that give them sense of belonging. Local officials can also use social audits as a means to look at how to improve components of good governance, within government institutions. Empowering citizens through capacitating them to conduct social audits as one of the strategies for meaningful collaboration, begins to shift the power relationships between the government and its citizens and in this way, patterns of structural inequality are changed.

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