

E-DEMOCRACY THROUGH MOBILE MONITORING

BY ROMI REINECKE, DEBBIE COULSON AND HANNAH THINYANE

The councillor promised her ward an end to the humiliation of the bucket system and the building of suitable sanitation facilities. It's why she voted for him. And while it has taken four years, today the building material for 40 toilets, one of which will be hers, has arrived. Of course, Eunice cannot be certain all 40 toilets will be built to the planned specifications and timeline; that's why she's monitoring the municipality's service delivery. Eunice has her phone ready and is counting the bricks and bags of cement that will become toilets for her street under her watchful eye and with the help of a mobile application, MobiSAM, and a local newspaper.

The MobiSAM project, based in Grahamstown, is piloting an innovative and multi-faceted approach to "e-democracy" at the local government level. Grahamstown is situated in Makana Municipality in the Eastern Cape, one of the top five worst-run municipalities in South Africa in recent years. The development challenges faced by the municipality are great, with almost 25% of households living below the poverty line. But despite the poor development indicators in Grahamstown and

South Africa, the rate of mobile phone penetration in the country rates among the highest in the developing world, near to 100%.

Through the use of a mobile polling application, the MobiSAM project promotes active participation from ordinary Grahamstown citizens who depend on critical public services provided by Makana Municipality. With this platform, citizens can generate real-time data on the rate and quality of service delivery that strongly impacts on their daily life.

The use of mobile phones to promote citizen engagement with the public sector has received increasing attention from media researchers since the turn of the century. Today, global events have renewed optimism around the mobile phone and the accessibility of internet connectivity to facilitate citizen participation, deepen democracy and create social change.

But, as Herman Wasserman (2011) states, the use of mobile phones to transmit broad-based e-democracy remains promise rather than reality. While mobile phones have successfully been used to mobilise publics during a brief political campaign or event on the continent, they have been unsuccessful in sustaining increased levels of state accountability to its citizens.

For real deepening of democracy in Africa, citizens' "surveillance of government also has to happen inbetween the 'ritual of elections'... through ongoing social movement and civil society campaigns," Wasserman explains.

It is this sustained citizen engagement in the everyday business of local government that the MobiSAM project encourages. Funded by the Ford Foundation, and with sufficient resources to engage in a thought-through theory of change, MobiSAM has partnered with Grahamstown's mainstream media: the local paper and its online website.

The MobiSAM data produced by participating citizens can be pooled geographically and visualised in the local community media, while keeping communities informed and encouraging active participation in governance processes.

The MobiSAM project uses the social accountability monitoring methodology, developed by South Africa's Centre for Social Accountability. With a successful track record in South Africa and other SADC and East African countries, this approach provides civic actors with a rights-based and evidence-based framework for understanding and participating in government service delivery processes.

The MobiSAM project entails five distinct phases over three years: a preparation phase, the introduction of MobiSAM into the community, the use of MobiSAM to monitor selected local service delivery schemes, the facilitation of

evidence-based citizen participation in enforcing accountability in delivery, and a final analysis of MobiSAM's impact. The initial phase of the project, currently underway, includes an analysis of relevant legislation governing municipal service delivery, a baseline study on the last five years of Makana's service delivery performance and compliance with legislative provisions and a study identifying the 10 most-used mobile devices in the area to ensure optimum access. After analysing current municipal budget and planning documentation, service delivery projects will be identified and a MobiSAM community co-ordinator will recruit and train facilitators in each service delivery area.

The MobiSAM project's partnership with local media expresses some powerful ideas and understandings on the role of journalism in a democratic society, including participatory citizen journalism, public journalism, development journalism and the complex relationship between local government and local media.

The MobiSAM project resonates with the public journalism movement by reporting on major public problems in a way that increases public understanding of issues, and stimulates citizen participation through advancing knowledge of possible solutions in enforcing accountability through broad-based advocacy.

In a developmental state context, journalism can be said to be obligated to provide constructive criticism of government by actively informing readers how the development process is affecting them and promoting citizen participation in social change projects.

Finally, the use of forms of content generated by citizens through digital media platforms allows mobile phones to be leveraged by citizens in order to contribute to news making with real-time, widespread coverage beyond the capabilities of traditional journalistic professionals.

The changing roles of journalism in Africa's contemporary context of new technologies and expanding development provides rich ground for a continued reflexive awareness of ongoing tensions around what journalism is and for whom it is produced.

References

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