

Social audits: powerful community tools to ensure government accountability



A core component of South Africa's constitution is the commitment to ensure public participation in governance, giving effect to a representative and participatory democratic state. But as the presidency's 15-year review in 2008 noted, there is an urgent need for strengthening innovative approaches to fostering participatory democracy. *Annette Verryn et al* report on a case study that illustrates the challenges for communities in ensuring government accountability and responsiveness.

The urgency in addressing this democratic deficit is underlined by the increasing number of service delivery protests countrywide, which have escalated in both intensity as well as in the level of violence exhibited, over the last decade. Unfortunately, public protests about service delivery, labour strikes, and service delivery protest have been some of the most visible indicators of active citizenship in the last 20 years.

During 2015, the HSRC undertook a countrywide study on behalf of the National Development Agency (NDA) aimed at profiling innovative approaches employed by civil society to strengthen citizen engagement in development. One of the initiatives profiled was a social audit undertaken by community members of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC) in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. This case study illustrates the challenges for communities in ensuring government accountability and responsiveness.

Understanding active citizen engagement

Citizen engagement is essentially a process where citizens claim the right to participate in informing decisions that affect their lives and well being. Importantly, it entails the redistribution of power from the state to citizens as a core element of a democratic governance system. It includes political action, community activism, mutual respect,

nonviolence and democracy in practice. There is compelling evidence of the development gains to be achieved through enhancing active citizenship, foremost of which is its contribution to deepening democracy.

Social audits represent one form of peaceful action aimed at raising awareness of state failures.

There are distinct ways in which citizens seek accountability from the state. One is through exercising political power through the ballot box, what Anuradha Joshi of the UK Institute of Development Studies calls the 'long route' of accountability. The 'shorter route' is where citizens directly engage with frontline service providers. Social audits represent one form of peaceful action aimed at raising awareness of state failures.

A social audit, according to the framework of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, is a

process through which organisational or project information is collected, analysed and publicly shared, and investigative findings are publicly shared and discussed. Through 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.

Social audit of sanitation in Khayelitsha

For years, sanitation has remained a pivotal issue on the political landscape of the Western Cape. In 2012, SJC, a non-profit mass-based advocacy organisation operating in Khayelitsha, successfully campaigned for the introduction of a janitorial service in Khayelitsha in respect of the communal flush toilets that were in various states of disrepair. In response, the City of Cape Town outsourced the provision and servicing of portable toilets to Mshengu, a private service contractor. Despite this development, Khayelitsha residents continued to experience problems with sanitation.

In response to the growing frustrations of the community, the SJC launched the Clean and Safe Toilets campaign, aimed at pressurising the government to fulfil its obligations while at the same time mobilising the community to take a leadership role in addressing the issue. The campaign was a partnership between SJC and Ndifuna Ukwazi (NU), a group of activists for justice and equality, headed by Zackie Achmat, which uses research and litigation in its social justice campaigns. One of the challenges it faced was the lack of empirical evidence of the scale and nature of the problem.

The SJC undertook a social audit to generate data by mobilising a team of 90 residents, independent observers and other civil society partners in July 2014 to conduct the audit across four informal settlements in Khayelitsha, namely BM section, PJS, Nkanini and BT section. The audit involved interviews with janitors and residents as well as physical inspections of the toilets. Photo-documentary evidence was collected together with more than 800 completed questionnaires.

A number of significant findings came out of the audit:

- While the City of Cape Town contract with Mshengu indicated that 346 toilets would be delivered, the audit found only 256 (73%) toilets had been delivered;
- While the ratio of families to toilets was expected to be five, in reality 26 families used one toilet (more than five times the ratio envisaged);
- While more than three quarters of janitors indicated that they worked during weekends, residents reported that only a third of janitors worked during weekends;
- 68% of the toilets were clean at the time of the inspection;
- 26% of the toilets were not in working condition, the common reasons being no water, could not flush, were blocked or had no sewage pipe;
- Just more than half of the janitors (52%) had the requisite tools and equipment to keep the toilets clean. This included brooms, bin bags, chemicals, brushes and buckets.

To disseminate the findings of the audit, a public hearing was convened and attended by more than 400 residents and a range of stakeholders, including local government representatives; Western Cape Premier, Helen Zille, and a representative from the presidency and the media.

A key outcome of the public hearing was that the City of Cape Town questioned the legitimacy of the findings as it felt that the audit was not objective, the methodology was unreliable, and the sample size not representative. Although City of Cape Town councillor, Ernest Sonnenberg, committed to returning to the community to respond to and discuss the full report, there was no evidence of this happening at the time the study was undertaken.

Social audits appear to be an important instrument for data collection and community mobilisation.

Lessons learnt from the active citizen engagement

The case study brings to the fore a number of lessons in respect of enhancing active citizen engagement. These include:

- Advocacy demands must be backed by empirical evidence; social audits appear to be an important instrument for data collection, as well as for community mobilisation.
- Engaging community members as enablers and facilitators reinforces the notion of community-based and community-driven development, and abandons the historical parachute approach to community development.
- Interventions must be designed to take into account the specific context. Hence, decisions about which mechanisms and what approaches to utilise must be firmly grounded in the reality of the current context. This includes taking account of who must be involved and how.
- Evidence in itself is not a sufficient guarantee that the state will be pressurised to act appropriately. The partnership between NU and SJC, for example, provided the City of Cape Town with ammunition to dismiss the evidence and the campaign as being politically driven and attention seeking. ■

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